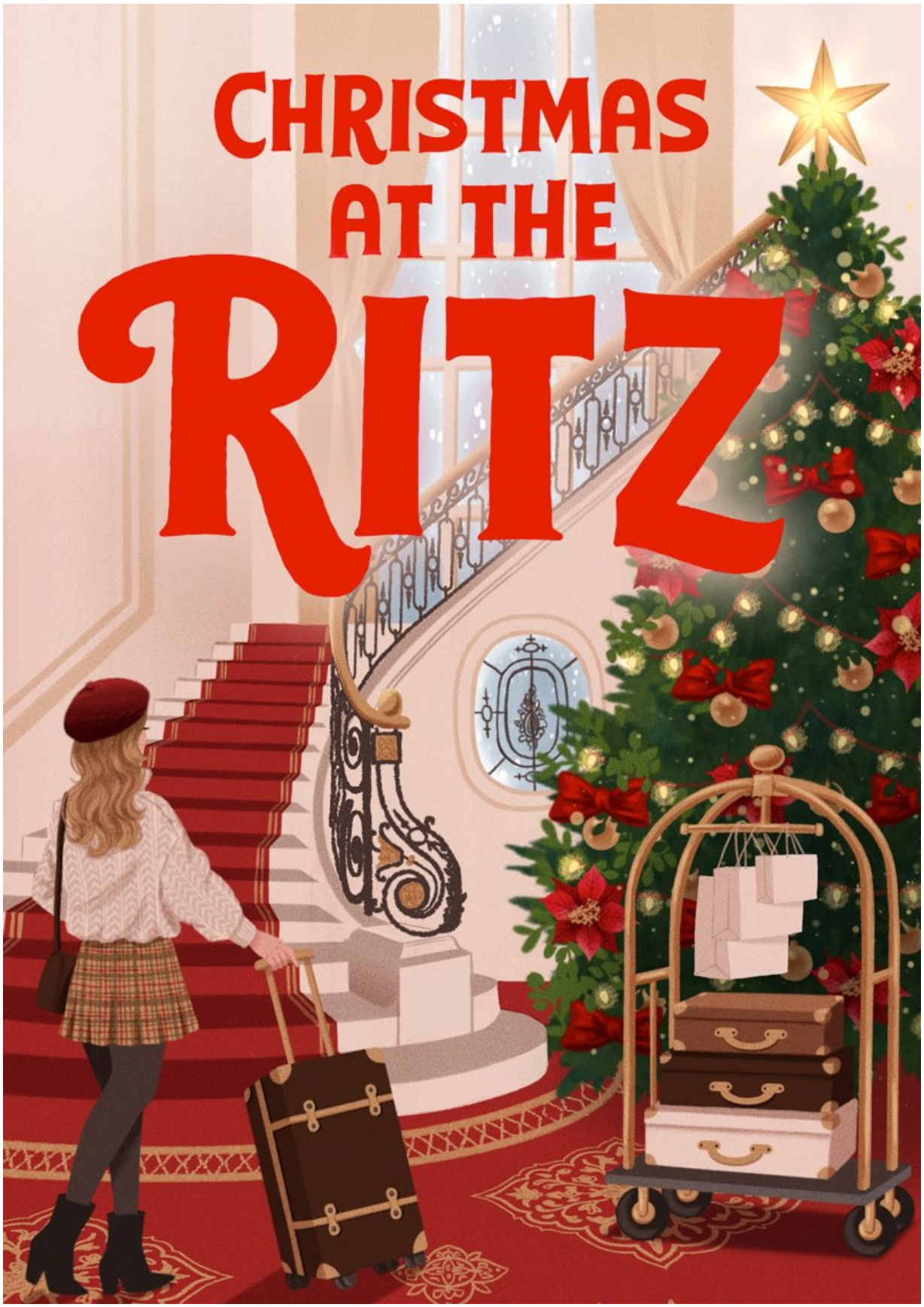

CHRISTMAS AT THE RITZ
JULIE CAPLIN


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RITZ

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For my daughter Ellie and her friends, Sophie and Katie – fearless, feisty and fab women who deserve to find someone who will book the clown.

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Chapter One

BELLE

‘Isabelle.’ The yell of her full name from her boss startled her. Clearly a crisis unfolding and it was only nine-thirty a.m.

Belle, as she was more usually known, grabbed her tablet and hurried into Elspeth Drummond’s corner office with its commander-of-the-universe view over the city of London.

‘I’ve got to go to New York,’ Elspeth barked without looking up, scrolling through her phone. ‘Book me flights. For tonight.’

Belle nodded, already ticking the ring-the-travel-department box in her head.

‘Reschedule the decorators. Make sure they come in while I’m away.’

Belle winced, having already rescheduled them twice.

‘No idea when I’ll be back, but unlikely to be this side of Christmas. Charles Donovan has had a heart attack. They need me to run the New York branch for the foreseeable.’

‘Okay,’ said Belle, already relishing the challenge of sorting everything out for Elspeth as she made notes on the tablet. Working as Elspeth’s executive assistant at one of London’s leading management consultancies was every bit as fulfilling and satisfying as she’d hoped when she’d nailed the job interview five years ago.

‘Get John to deputise for me at the Christmas lunch,’ Elspeth went on. ‘You can distribute the annual chocolates to everyone in the department. Pick up my Balenciaga dress from the dry cleaners. I’m taking it with me. The ticket is in my purse somewhere.’ She rummaged in her handbag and tossed it on the desk. ‘Get my personal shopper at Selfridges to phone me in the next fifteen minutes. Call the florists, tell them I won’t need any flowers until further notice. Oh, and see if you can cancel the Fortnum’s hamper delivery, now that I’m going to be away for Christmas.’

‘Yes,’ said Belle. There was absolutely no point reminding her boss of all the aggro involved in getting the bloody thing delivered in the first place, because the deadline had passed. Luckily, Elspeth had a contact on Fortnum’s board of directors and Belle had shamelessly used the connection. She’d learned that it definitely helped having friends in high places.

Elspeth continued to bark orders, and just when Belle thought her brain might burst with all the information being fired at her, Elspeth’s phone chimed.

‘Damn, my taxi’s here. I’ll be back late afternoon. If I think of anything else, I’ll text you.’

Belle nodded, knowing that this was no idle comment. Her phone would be pinging with messages for the next few hours.

And with that, Elspeth flashed past her, high heels tapping, in a blur of flying cashmere scarf, an elegant wool coat slung around her shoulders, for all the world looking like Business Batwoman dashing off into the fray.

Belle returned to her desk, rolled her shoulders and took a deep breath. Working for Elspeth was never dull.

With her boss’s departure and calm restored, Belle pulled out her secret supply of Nespresso pods and made herself a coffee using the machine in Elspeth’s office.

Three coffees in, Belle flopped back against her office chair. Phew! Almost there. Flights booked. Leaving Heathrow at eight p.m. Dry-cleaning on its way in a taxi. Flowers cancelled. Fortnum's delivery couldn't be cancelled, but it could be diverted. Someone in the office was going to get lucky. And finally, the decorators rebooked and they could start in two days' time. Corporate Christmas gifts had been sourced for various clients, which to be fair, Belle already had in hand because she knew from previous experience that Elspeth would suddenly remember at the very last minute. The 'touchy-feely stuff', as Elspeth liked to call it, always came low on her priority list. Although it paid off for Belle, as she usually had to buy her own gift card and Elspeth doubled the amount to load on it out of sheer guilt.

As bosses went, Elspeth wasn't the worst. She was exacting but fair, and a brilliant mentor. Her bark was very much worse than her bite … although she did bite sometimes. Belle had learned quickly that mistakes were barely tolerated but trying to hide them was far worse. Elspeth prized honesty and integrity – claiming it was her Scottish blood. For that reason, Belle enjoyed working for her. She gave credit where it was due and appreciated hard work. And working for her was very hard work.

By the time Elspeth swanned back into the office carrying a dozen Selfridges bags, everything she'd asked for had been done. 'Thanks, Belle. At least it will be a bit quieter without me.'

Belle nodded with a polite smile as Elspeth sat down behind her desk and began studying her laptop screen. Feeling dismissed, she went back to her own desk. It wouldn't be quieter but there'd be fewer interruptions, she thought as she opened up a file she needed to work on.

Outside, the day faded away and by four o'clock, dusk held the city in its grip, thousands of lights illuminating the streets and buildings. Elspeth was cutting it fine to get back to her apartment across the river, pack and get to Heathrow. Traffic at this time of day would be murder.

She went to the door of Elspeth's office to remind her of the time and heard her on speakerphone.

'Can you nae get one of your minions to book a hotel for me?' drawled an arrogant voice in a thick Scottish accent.

Belle, who'd been about to enter, paused.

'Of course I can, darling. I'll tell her to book you a suite at The Ritz. It's the least I can do to make up for abandoning you.'

Belle bristled and stepped away from the door, not needing to hear any more. She'd wait until Elspeth had finished talking to whoever the entitled little so-and-so was.

Two minutes later, Elspeth called her in.

'Belle, a few last-minute things. I had completely forgotten my nephew is going to be in town over Christmas.' She rolled her cuff back and looked at her expensive watch. 'Can you book him into The Ritz? He's arriving tomorrow. Use my credit card. A deluxe room. Suite. Whatever they've got. Not a standard. And he's coming from Scotland, so can you book his travel arrangements from the Isle of Harris through to King's Cross for the day after tomorrow.'

'Right,' said Belle, her face impassive while she recalled the arrogant voice on the phone.

'I feel terrible that I won't be here, and because the decorators will be there, he can't even stay at my apartment. He was supposed to be staying with me for three weeks. Can you meet him at the hotel when he arrives? Keep him company.'

Belle stared.

'Not like that,' said Elspeth irritably. 'I don't want him to be on his own. I haven't seen him for a few years – he spends all his time in the back of beyond, and this is the first time he's been here for Christmas – and now he's going to be on his own. He always used to spend Christmas with us – his parents, too. I feel terrible for abandoning the poor boy. I promised him

the full Christmas turkey lunch and Christmas crackers. Make sure he's okay and look after him.'

Belle stared at her boss, noting the tender concern in Elspeth's eyes, which to be honest she wasn't sure she'd ever seen before.

'His mother will kill me unless I promise her that he'll be well looked after. And you don't want to mess with my sister Jeanie. You think I'm terrifying'—her eyes twinkled—'Jeanie makes a velociraptor look cuddly.'

'You're not terrifying,' said Belle calmly. 'You're bloody picky, irritating and very bossy.'

Elspeth grinned at her. 'And that's why you've lasted so much longer than everyone else. Belle, dear, I don't know what I'd do without you. Have you had a raise this year?'

'Yes, but I'd never say no to another.'

Elspeth pulled a disgruntled face. 'I suppose I'll have to promote you again. How about a bribe: if you look after Finlay, I'll make sure you get that secondment in New York that you're so bloody keen on.'

'Really?' Belle suddenly perked up. She'd applied twice before, but both times it had gone to one of the other directors' team members.

'Yes. I'll put my foot down and insist you get it this time.' Elspeth snorted. 'Even though I'll have to find a new bloody team member that doesn't quake in their itty-bitty boots whenever I lose my rag.'

'Flattery and bribery aren't going to get you anywhere.' Belle knew her boss's deflective tangents of old. Except, she'd really, really, really love to go and work in the New York office for six months.

'Come on, Belle. You know you want to go to New York. It's a great deal, and I'm the one that will lose out. I'm not asking you to sleep with him or anything.'

'I am dating someone,' said Belle.

'Since when, and why haven't I heard about it?'

'Since last Friday, and because you're my boss.'

‘Hmph. What’s he like?’

‘We’ve only had the one date.’ Belle gave a careless shrug because she knew the second date would be as dull as the first and she was still thinking about cancelling it.

‘No sparks, then.’

‘Life isn’t about sparks,’ said Belle soberly. ‘Sparks cause trouble and mess things up.’ She’d seen the fallout first hand.

‘Now,’ said Elspeth with one of her lightning changes of subject, ‘Where are we on the Maxwell proposal? Have you finished the growth projections?’

‘I have,’ said Belle. ‘They’re ready for you to go through one last time.’

‘Did I tell you you’re the best assistant I’ve ever had?’

‘You’re only saying that because you want me to look after your nephew.’

Elspeth grinned. ‘I’ll read the proposal on the flight, and if there’s a problem, which I can’t imagine for a millisecond, I’ll email you from the plane. Send it off first thing tomorrow, and good work. We’re a week ahead of schedule. Thank you. Right. I’d better go. I’ll message Finlay on my way to the airport and get him to contact you. And whatever you do, for God’s sake don’t sleep with him.’

‘Er … I don’t think so,’ said Belle, outraged.

‘He’s not the settling-down kind. Spends all his time living in the wild. Not for you, at all.’

‘Thanks for the heads-up,’ said Belle, a touch tartly because eww, why would she sleep with her boss’s nephew, who was years younger than her and sounded like a jerk?

‘Now, is there anything else I’ve forgotten?’

Twenty minutes later, Belle ushered her boss out of the office with a fond but exasperated smile. Elspeth was all the things she’d accused her of being – picky, irritating and bossy – but she also inspired loyalty by the

bucketload because she was an absolute legend. Hopefully, Belle could ditch the hapless nephew pretty quickly – some kid wouldn't want to spend time with her anyway. She was thirty, for God's sake. She was sure she could put in the bare minimum of appearances to fulfil her part of the bargain. After all … New York!

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Chapter Two

FINN

Finn hefted the straps of his backpack onto his shoulders and strode down the platform, blinking as he accustomed himself to the full razzle-dazzle of London. King's Cross Station was already in full seasonal sparkle, which made his mouth curve into a rueful smile. Quite the contrast to the solitary life he'd been leading on the Isle of Harris, where he'd spent the last two months writing up his research and finalising the first draft of his latest manuscript – only just meeting the deadline. Thank goodness for Aunt Elspeth, who'd been an absolute lifesaver, getting his travel booked so that he could carry on working. It was a shame she wouldn't be around in London, she was his favourite relative, but he could hardly complain as he hadn't been in the country for the last five Christmases.

He headed down to the underground – deciding against grabbing a cab because London traffic was beyond tedious. As always, the tube was packed, and he had trouble wedging himself and his rucksack into the crowded space. Luckily, the people thinned out when they reached Euston and he sat himself down and mentally ticked through his to-do list while he was in London. He was delivering a lecture about his trip to the Galapagos Islands at the Royal Geographic Society, there was a signing event for his latest book, and there was a lot of planning and organising still to do before the next expedition, which was only a few weeks away.

Flashing a smile at the woman opposite, who'd been sneaking looks at him for the last couple of minutes, he scrolled through his contacts on his phone and sent Adam, his logistics manager, a quick message to see if he was around this week.

When he emerged blinking into the weak, winter sunshine at Green Park, it was a relief to see the instantly recognisable bulb lights of The Ritz sign almost directly above. He'd been travelling nonstop for over twenty-four hours, and he could murder a decent coffee.

The exterior of the hotel was swathed in greenery and fairy lights, signalling that Christmas had well and truly come to town. He ambled through the famous colonnade, admiring the heavy garlands of ivy, pine and eucalyptus, and went up the steps, guarded on either side by statuesque Christmas trees, to the sumptuous hotel lobby. His feet sank into the velvet pile of the richly coloured carpet but, as he approached the curved wooden reception desk, his travel-weary body protested at the thought of standing in the lengthy queue to check in – if it hadn't been The Ritz, he'd have assumed a tour bus had just arrived. He huffed out an impatient sigh but then contented himself with studying the opulent interior and the huge Christmas tree, placed directly beneath the rotunda, that was strewn with tiny, golden fairy lights. He smiled to himself. Sublime to the ridiculous. Forty-eight hours ago, he'd been in a tiny croft, warmed by the log burner, with a view of a sullen grey sea. Now he was dazzled by the gilt-and-plasterwork trim around the arched doorways, the Art Deco lights, the red velvet furniture and the sheer size and grandeur of the lobby. Make the most of this, he told himself. In just over a month, he'd be knee-deep in mud, covered in insect bites and carrying his life in a backpack through the jungle.

He wriggled out of said backpack and selected one of the deep, high-backed armchairs – might as well enjoy all the creature comforts while he waited for the queue to subside. Pulling out a battered paperback book from

the deep pocket of his equally battered wax jacket, he settled in and began to read. He might have read *My Family and Other Animals* half-a-dozen times before, but it never failed to entertain him. It had been the start of everything for him and the very first time that he'd realised an interest could become a way of life.

With so much going on around him it wasn't that easy to concentrate on the book, and he found himself distracted. A little girl of about eight, in a red coat with a black-velvet collar and cuffs, circled the enormous Christmas tree, gazing upwards at the golden bows. Every now and then, she reached up to touch one of the big red, glossy baubles as if she couldn't quite believe their size. He lost count of how many times she circled the twenty-foot tree, as if each circuit still wasn't enough to take in the splendour and sheer magnificence of it.

As he watched her smiling, the magic of Christmas reflected on her innocent face, a tall elegant-looking blonde with amazing legs in lacy black tights and a tight black skirt, caught his eye as she stalked into the lobby. Despite the scowl on her face, she was arresting with flawless skin and honey-blonde hair. She wasn't conventionally beautiful, her features were a little bit too sharp – pointed chin, an angular nose and high cheekbones – but she crackled with pent-up energy, as if she could do fifty things at once and not break into a sweat. He smiled to himself: he would bet his last penny that this was his Aunt Elspeth's assistant, Belle Woods. Anyone working for his indomitable aunt had to be a force to be reckoned with.

He was about to acknowledge her with a wave, when her phone rang and she yanked it out of a smart leather handbag. Aspinal, he noticed. Definitely his aunt's protégée. He recognised the brand because he'd been approached by them for a modelling job a few years back. The money had come in very handy and helped fund an early expedition to Costa Rica.

Her cool drawl and surprisingly low voice cut through the general noise of the hotel.

‘Hi, Maddie. No! I’m at The Ritz.’ He winced. Her words dripped with impatient indignation. Most people would get a kick out of being here. It was the last word in elegant luxury. What was wrong with her?

From his position in the big armchair, he heard excited squawks from the other end of the phone.

‘Don’t get too excited,’ she said. ‘I’m here to meet my boss’s nephew.’ He saw her roll her eyes. Charming. ‘Yes, that one. And I really could do without it.’ She paused, and like everyone else, craned her neck to gaze up at the tree. ‘Although you should see the Christmas tree, it’s something else.’

Ah, definitely his aunt’s assistant, Belle.

‘Yes, nephew. Well, if you think it’s an easy ride, you’re more than welcome to swap places. Personally, I’ve got far better things I could be doing than babysitting some entitled brat.’ For some reason, the crisp enunciation along with the dismissive words bugged him.

He was the last person who needed babysitting – and hello? entitled brat? Who was she calling entitled?

Down the line, the other female voice burbled with enthusiasm, which was quickly cut off by his Aunt Elspeth’s assistant, who drawled with scornful repudiation. ‘No, he won’t be a hottie.’

Ouch. She seemed very sure of that. Finn watched her shake her head.

‘He’s fresh off a Scottish island, probably been up to his knees in cow shit, and all wide-eyed and legless about the big bad city—’ She broke off, listening intently to her friend. ‘I’m not even sure how old he is. I think he’s young. And you should have heard him on the phone.’ The woman affected a dreadful Scottish accent and Finn winced again – he’d deliberately amped up his usually mild Edinburgh accent into a thick parodying brogue when he’d spoken to his aunt that day, to underline to her that he wasn’t being serious. ‘“Can’t you get one of your minions to book me a hotel? And my ferry tickets and my train tickets”, because I’m a self-entitled, useless prick,

who can’t do anything for myself. Honestly, Maddie, what sort of man gets his aunt to book him a hotel and gets her to pay for it and can’t even book his own travel? A bloody manbaby who needs to grow up and realise that the rest of us have real lives and real jobs, that’s what.’

Wow, what a man-eating dragon. He wasn’t used to being so summarily dismissed, and it irked. Especially her assumption that Aunt Elspeth was paying his hotel bill. Wrong. Talk about judgemental when she’d only heard a snippet of their conversation. He’d in fact been teasing his aunt for being so high-powered that she had minions and was incredibly grateful to her for freeing up his time so he could continue with his work and meet his deadline. Without knowing anything about him, Belle had made some huge assumptions.

He held his book up in front of his face and told himself he should be amused rather than annoyed. No one who knew him would ever have described him the way she did.

‘Honestly, the last thing I want is to play babysitter to Elspeth’s wee nephew who lives in the middle of nowhere, probably changes his pants once a week and thinks he deserves everyone waiting on him hand and foot.’

Finn straightened, now she was just plain rude. As far as he was aware, he’d never had anyone waiting on him hand and foot … not yet. His grin was suddenly sly.

Belle paced, staccato taps on the marble floor that edged the carpet. ‘I’m supposed to be showing him round London,’ she complained. ‘But I can tell you now, I’ll be dumping Little Lord McFauntleroy as quickly as I can.’

Finn raised an eyebrow.

‘He’s bound to want to do touristy stuff, like see Harrods and go to Oxford Street for the Christmas lights, which I’ve done a million times.’ There was a pause as the person on the other end of the line was obviously

making suggestions. ‘Oh God, no – I’m not taking him to a bloody pantomime.’ Another pause. ‘Don’t you even dare. Absolutely not! Hogwarts in the Snow. God, spare me, I can’t imagine anything worse.’

Her face was such a picture of horror and disgust, Finn’s mouth twisted. She was one stuck-up bitch.

‘It’s just going to be such a drag,’ said Belle again with another weary huff. ‘And I really wanted to get ahead with some work while Elspeth is away. But no, she has insisted I’m at his beck and call…’ Her words died away as she disappeared down the corridor towards the ladies’ toilets.

Annoyed by Belle’s blithe assumptions, Finn sat for a moment. She deserved to be taught a lesson about judging someone before she knew the full picture.

Frowning in thought, he rose from his seat. The crowd around the reception desk had thinned and it looked as if he would be able to check in.

By the time he was halfway through the process, Belle reappeared from the hallway, striding back towards him with all the cockiness of a honey badger – a creature he’d learned you should never mess with. The small fuse of mischief had been lit within him, though. Just because you shouldn’t mess with one didn’t mean you couldn’t. A smile curved his mouth. There was a way he could take her down a peg without being unkind or cruel and he could have some fun along the way.

The cool blonde surveyed the reception area and her eyes scanned over him, completely dismissing him. That amused him. Okay, he wasn’t vain but … he got more than his fair share of female attention. At six-foot-three, his height often drew the eye and he’d been ribbed by his mates on more than one occasion about what a ‘handsome bastard’ he was.

He summoned a cocky smile. ‘Are you Belly?’ he asked, deliberately mispronouncing her name. This was going to be fun.

She whirled around, frowning. ‘I beg your pardon? Belle,’ she corrected crisply, and lifted her head to adjust to his height. ‘You must be…’ Her

voice died away and her bright blue eyes widened. He heard the small intake of breath and felt it with a corresponding hitch in his own chest. ‘Erm … Finlay.’

And just like that, he wanted to be the one who released all that repressed energy he just knew was balled inside her.

‘Call me Finn,’ he said faintly, surprised by how hard it was to find his voice. And then, because everything about her was gorgeous, he grinned. Because, why not?

‘N-nice to meet you, Finn,’ she said, and it was gratifying to see the indecision in her eyes as she met his gaze head-on. They stared at each other for a full five seconds, which might not seem very long, but in the moment was more than long enough for both of them to feel the fizz of connection arcing between them.

Then, as if the sun had gone out, her face morphed into an impassive mask, and she lifted her chin with the pugnacious determination of a Valkyrie about to go into battle.

Ouch. Cold. And yes, maybe a kick to his pride, but that cool rejection got under his skin.

He thickened his natural Scottish accent. ‘Aye. Finn, that’ll be me. All the way from bonnie Scotland to the big bad city,’ he said, now channelling *Outlander* as he held out a hand. And when she offered her own, he took and pumped it vigorously. And yes, he felt a bit guilty because her hand in his was soft and delicate and he very nearly knocked her off her heels. He was surprised by the quick and totally unexpected instinct to wrap his arms around her, pick her up and apologise. However, those feelings were quickly doused by the tight smile she gave him, like he was dog poo on her shoe, as she extricated her hand and flexed her fingers, giving them a little shake. ‘Welcome to London.’ Her pink lips peeled back in a faux smile.

‘It’s verra guid to be here,’ he said, instantly realising that he’d set himself quite a challenge keeping up the thick brogue.

She nodded formally. ‘I’m sorry your aunt had to go out of town, but if there’s anything you need, please do let me know.’ Her voice oozed polite insincerity.

‘I’ve a list of places I cannae wait to see,’ he said, thinking quickly. What was the worst place he could imagine for Belle? ‘D’ye ken the zoo?’

‘Sorry?’ she said politely.

‘The zoo. You’ll take me.’ He grinned at her, thoroughly amused by her quick horror-stricken expression. Yes, this was going to be so much fun. ‘Aye. I’ve a yen to see a giraffe. Big fellas. Tall. Ye ever seen one?’

‘Erm, yes.’ She stared at him as if he was from a zoo. ‘I have. In a zoo.’ She dredged up a fake smile. ‘I’m sure that can be arranged.’

‘Grand. Oh, and the lights. And … well, I’ve a wee list. My aunt said ye’d be at my disposal.’

Belle narrowed her eyes, the blue in them now positively glacier-like.

‘Something like that,’ she said stiffly.

‘Will you put the itinerary together, or will I? Elspeth said you’re very organised and would know what to include, and I’ve a few ideas of my own.’

This was a flex. What Elspeth had actually said was, ‘Belle can arrange a few things for you, if you’d like. She’s a cracking assistant, very efficient. Although she’s desperate for the bloody New York secondment and I’m going to have to say yes, which will be such an inconvenience. So, if there’s anything you want to do, just ask her.’ Finn suspected Belle must be the sort of promotion-hungry employee that his cut-throat, business-shark aunt loved to foster. It would be fun to tease the woman just for one day.

‘Your room key, Mr McAllister,’ said the receptionist, handing him his card. ‘You’re on the seventh floor.’

Finn picked up his backpack.

‘Is that all your luggage?’ Belle asked, giving the backpack a perplexed frown. ‘Elspeth said you were here for a few weeks.’

Finn nodded. ‘Aye. I like to travel light.’

‘Right, well, is there anything you need?’ She was clearly itching to be off, and it made Finn all the more contrary, although he was suffering severe caffeine deprivation and was hungry.

‘Aye,’ he said, starting to enjoy himself enormously. ‘I need to get my razors sharpened.’

‘Sorry?’

The way she said it, so snotty and so clearly not sorry, amused him no end and what had been a quick throwaway line, now became a means to further amusement. He wondered how far he could go and what would be her breaking point. Suddenly, it was a challenge for him. And Finn McAllister never backed down from a challenge.

‘Ye do ken what a razor blade is?’ He gave her a supercilious look before gently explaining, ‘For shaving?’ When he could. Hot water often couldn’t be spared, but it made him feel less hot and grubby when they were on expedition. ‘I need to go to Taylors of Old Bond Street and get my cut-throat sharpened.’ He grinned wickedly at her, as her eyes widened. ‘Can you get me a cab?’ he said, playing up the Scottish bumpkin, even though he’d spent three years at university in London.

Belle frowned. ‘Old Bond Street is just across the road. You can walk there.’

‘Oh, okay. Let me dump my bags and you can take me there.’ He was quite proud of his imperious air.

She wasn’t rude enough to huff out a breath, but he could see it took considerable will power on her part.

‘What now?’ she murmured, glancing down at her watch.

‘Do you need to be somewhere?’ He looked down his nose at her. ‘Elspeth said…’

‘It’s fine,’ said Belle, and he didn’t feel the slightest bit guilty at the quick concern in her eyes. Of course, Belle wouldn’t want him phoning

Elspeth, even though he had no intention of doing so. She had a promotion to protect. ‘I’ll make sure you get to where you need to go.’

‘Come on, then,’ he said and led the way to the lift.

She looked back towards the door and the street. ‘Where are you going?’ she asked.

‘Woman, I’m nae gonna unpack my bag here and show my breeks to the world.’

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Chapter Three

BELLE

W*oman?* Belle fumed as she pressed her back against the mirrored wall of the lift, trying to resist the urge to slap him, especially when her stupid body was leaning towards him, wanting to kiss him. She drew in a quiet breath, steadying herself.

There was no denying that Finn McAllister was hot. Tall, so tall, rugged, and broad. Now they were in the lift, she had to stare down at her shoes, so as not to sneak peeks at him in the mirror. Fuck's sake, just one look at him had sent her system into a very uncharacteristic tailspin; it had taken all her acting skills to hide her initial reaction to him. Those piercing blue eyes. Gorgeous.

Unfortunately, Finn McAllister was also a complete nightmare. The most arrogant of arrogant bastards. So much worse than she'd anticipated. This was not what she'd signed up for. She tried to recall exactly what Elspeth had said. '*If you look after Finlay, I'll make sure you get that secondment in New York.*'

And what else had she said? Don't sleep with him. Which at the time had been ridiculous, but now… Well, not so much.

Although, he was so full of himself, he probably knew exactly how hot he was.

When he shook her hand with a firm grip, she'd had to ignore the quick thought of what it might feel like to be picked up by him. Her legs wrapped around his solid waist… What the hell was wrong with her?! She'd never gone for he-men, the muscular, manly types. Was she coming down with something? The flu? Some kind of delirium? Belle Woods *did not* have thoughts like this. She didn't have time for romantic fantasies, even if she'd believed in such things – which she didn't. Love brought too much aggravation and heartache. And she certainly shouldn't be having indecent thoughts about getting her boss's nephew naked. Though she bet that broad chest would be magnificent, and those legs – she sneaked a peek – oh, yes, they'd look very fine in a kilt. Oh dear, she was definitely starting to have *Outlander* fantasies. She and her flatmates, Maddie and Phoebe, were big fans.

Belle, get a grip, she told herself firmly. She was a sensible career professional. This was a job. Yes, just a job. One of the many tasks ascribed to her by her very demanding boss. She couldn't mess it up. *New York. Think New York.*

The lift slid to a halt.

'They fair know how to do Christmas right,' said Finn when they stepped out of the lift into the long corridor. He stopped to look at one of the large festive arrangements which had been placed on pedestals at regular intervals down the hallway. He tugged a piece of ivy from the display and rearranged it. 'Grows like a wee weed where I come from.'

Belle nodded, as if she was used to this level of grandeur and wasn't that impressed, and yet she was. She'd never admit it in a million years, but she was more than a tiny bit overawed. The gilt on the walls and the luxurious carpet on the floor made her feel like she was in a stately home or on a film set, and that she should not be here. Any moment, someone might leap out through one of the closed doors and insist she leave the building, because ordinary Belle Woods from suburban Guildford did not belong

here. She rather envied Finn, who seemed to take the luxury as his due. Of course he did. Especially when someone else was paying.

She was intrigued to see what his room would be like … and when he opened the door, her mouth dropped open. She'd booked the room, a suite, for His Royal Arseness. A suite, not a palace. Wow, this was another world. The room was decorated in the sort of ornate, delicate furniture she imagined you'd find in the Palace of Versailles or Buckingham Palace. Everything was opulent, from the plush carpet and the damask-silk upholstery through to the antique furniture and the vast crystal chandelier overhead. To her surprise, the elegant rooms managed to combine a certain air of homeliness with absolute luxury, especially with the full-sized Christmas tree standing in front of the window and the garland of evergreens, eucalyptus and pine cones hanging above the fireplace. The festive touches gave an additional welcoming feel. Looking through the double doors beyond Finn, she could see a vast bed, possibly the biggest she'd ever seen, topped with a crisp white cotton duvet and a pile of what she was sure were feather-down pillows.

Belle tried to stay cool, but she was itching to touch the fabric on the swags around the windows and stroke the velvet of the Louis-the-somethingth-style chairs. If her mother and sister could see her now, they'd be impressed. It was a world away from what she was used to.

'That will do fine,' said Finlay nodding in approval, but with that suave assumption that staying in this place was his right.

Will do! Will do! screamed an outraged voice in Belle's head, looking at the heavy crystal decanters full of spirits, the gorgeous, delicate wine glasses – red, white and flutes – along with the very expensive bone-china tea and coffee set on the long, antique mahogany sideboard. There was also a Fortnum & Mason biscuit barrel, a large round box of Charbonnel et Walker chocolates and a bottle of Dom Perignon.

Oblivious to all that, Finn walked through to the vast bedroom, Belle behind him, and they both properly took in the huge, carved bed – the kind you might imagine a fairy princess would sleep in, piled with posh Oxford square pillows and a duvet that looked as plump and soft as marshmallow. ‘At least they have a bed big enough for me.’ He winked at her before adding, ‘My wee granny would love it here, although the room is so large she’d probably lose her knitting.’

‘Mmm,’ said Belle, ready to choke on any words. The sheets on the bed probably had more thread count than she knew existed, and she could bet they were pure Egyptian cotton. She looked away: her imagination had gone into overdrive as she conjured up an unwelcome but persistent image of Finn’s naked body sprawled against those pure white sheets.

‘I tell ye. I’ll sleep well here. There’s room enough for a whole harem. You could have a fine old romp,’ he said, with the sort of relish that had Belle digging her nails into her palms. Her imagination was doing just fine, she did not need him putting more ideas in her head.

He bounced off the bed and disappeared into the bathroom, and she heard his voice echoing.

‘This is a fine bathroom. Ye could wash the coos in here.’

That was actually funny, and Belle allowed herself a small smile at the thought of a herd of Highland cattle trampling through The Ritz’s esteemed halls. She followed him into the vast marble bathroom, with its shower the size of a stable and a huge roll-top bath. She could smell the rich scent of the luxurious toiletries from the doorway, and she itched to stroke the velvety softness of the pure white towels piled on ornate wooden shelving, from which hung two sumptuous velvet robes with navy-blue piping and the Ritz logo monogrammed on the breast of each.

‘Ha! There she is,’ said Finn with a complacent grin as he spotted her reflected expression in the mirror. He turned and came very close to her. *Oh, bloody hell*, she thought, as he stepped into her orbit, *he even smells*

incredible. She wanted to bury her face into his neck and breathe him in. His blue eyes scanned her face and she saw something in them, but she couldn't quite place it – whatever it was, it messed with the beating of her heart.

'For a while there, I thought madam had no sense of humour.' Finn lifted a finger to her lips as if to make sure her smile was real, and before she could register the brief, shocking touch, he had gone again. When she caught up with him, he was rummaging in the bag he'd dumped by the door. 'Here they are,' he said holding up a small leather case. 'Shall we away now?'

It took a second for his meaning to sink in. 'What, now?' she asked expecting him to want to get settled. 'Don't you want to unpack?'

'No,' He sounded indignant. 'I want to see London.'

'There's … quite a lot of it,' she said, another reluctant laugh escaping.

He was already stuffing the leather case in the large pockets of his coat and heading for the door.

'So, where is this place you want to go to?' she asked.

'On Bond Street, or maybe it's Old Bond Street.'

'Don't you have an address?' asked Belle.

For a moment, he looked perplexed, almost too perplexed. A faint warning bell sounded in the back of her head. No one was this clueless, were they? But then again, when she'd first moved to London, it had taken her a while to grasp just how big the city was.

'Old Bond Street is just over the road,' she said, 'though it joins with New Bond Street closer to Oxford Street.' She paused. 'What's the name of the shop? I'll look it up.'

'Oh, you've no need to do that. It's Taylors of Old Bond Street,' he told her.

'Oh well, that's easy. Right. So Old Bond Street is just down Piccadilly and across the road,' she said briskly. Hopefully, they could be done and

dusted in under an hour and she could escape.

‘Down?’

‘Down the road and then across and up.’

‘North, south, east or west?’

She held up her hand, quickly thinking through the mnemonic. Never Eat Shredded Wheat. ‘East first,’ she said, translating the directions in her head, ‘and then north.’

He laughed and said with faint condescension, ‘You really are a city lassie, aren’t ye?’

She gave him a tart smile, remembering this was a job that she wanted to get over and done with. She had places to be and people to see.

‘Shall we go?’ she said, looking at her watch, wondering how long this was going to take. So much for the quick in and out, hello and goodbye, welcome to London, she’d planned. It was three o’clock now and she wanted to get back home in time to tune into a five p.m. Zoom seminar on women in management, set up by a women’s networking group she was a member of.

Five minutes later, they were on the busy thoroughfare of Piccadilly, horns blaring, cars bumper to bumper, with Finn standing in the middle of the pavement staring this way and that, craning his neck up to look at the elegant Regency buildings around them, while busy Londoners dodged around him tutting.

‘Come on,’ she said taking his arm to keep him moving, her hand grabbing a deliciously firm bicep.

‘Don’t ye ever take the time te stop and look up?’ he asked.

‘Not in the middle of the pavement. It tends to piss people off.’

‘But the buildings,’ he stopped again and pointed. ‘You want te get a feel for a place.’

Belle rarely looked up, she was too busy looking ahead to see where she was going. On the crowded streets of London, you needed your wits about

you.

She led him to the nearest crossing. The traffic was stationary, cars going nowhere fast, and Finlay stepped off the pavement to cut between their bumpers. Belle's hand shot out and grabbed him just in time, pulling him out of the path of a speeding cyclist who gave him the finger and yelled, 'Oi! Watch where you're going, mate.'

'You need to keep an eye out for cyclists,' she told him. 'Common hazard. They move faster than the traffic.'

'Thanks,' said Finn. 'Nae much traffic on Harris, or bikes for that matter.'

She nodded, unable to imagine it. She loved living in London and had lived in the city ever since she graduated from university and got her first job here. Thanks to the underground, it was an easy place to navigate around, but travelling beneath the city wasn't conducive to getting your bearings. When Belle had first arrived in the city, to get to know her way around the labyrinth of little side streets and cut-throughs, she'd walked from tube station to tube station, delighting in joining up the famous place names above ground. With a pang, she remembered the glee she'd felt as she'd mapped her away across Covent Garden, Soho, Westminster, Victoria and Knightsbridge. As a newbie to the capital, it had helped her to feel more like she belonged. These days, she could confidently navigate her way across the centre of the city, above or below ground, with ease. Like many, she knew that in some instances it was often quicker to walk than take a tube.

Old Bond Street was only a few streets down, or east, Belle corrected in her head, and as they turned onto the street, she pulled out her phone.

'You dinnae need that, lassie. We'll find it,' said Finn, with such an insistent and imperative wave of his hand that she put her phone back in her bag. 'I'm no in a rush.'

‘*You* might not be,’ she muttered. Finn seemed to think she was completely at his disposal – there was a difference between being available to show someone around and being at their constant beck and call, as he seemed to think she was.

Belle was in mission-mode, looking for the shop, but Finn stopped dead outside De Beers, the diamond house, and she had to backtrack.

‘Now that is something,’ he said, his nose virtually pressed against the window.

Belle sighed and studied the shopfront that she’d raced past. The window was a gorgeous mountain scene, dotted with tiny fir trees, little wooden chalets and huge drifts of snow which sparkled with loose diamonds. In the next window, tiny elves were collecting the diamonds and putting them into miniature baskets, which were loaded onto reindeer. The penultimate window depicted Santa’s workshop with half-finished jewellery pieces that glistened and glittered. The final window displayed a half-wrapped gift containing a beautiful diamond crown.

‘Who’s buying you diamonds this Christmas, Belly?’ asked Finn.

‘No one,’ said Belle. ‘If I want diamonds, I’ll buy my own.’

‘Ah, an independent woman,’ said Finn.

‘Who says women want diamonds?’ snapped Belle, irritated by his condescending attitude.

‘Plenty of songs. “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend” and all that.’

‘I think you’ll find those were written in the fifties. Things have moved on a tad since then.’

He gave her a touché sort of nod and they moved along the street.

The Cartier store just along the street had drawn a crowd, with people waiting and watching for something.

‘This looks fun,’ said Finn, crossing the road so that he could join the tourists holding out their phones.

The outside of the building had been decorated with a red-and-white illuminated outline of a stack of presents that stretched from the first floor all the way up to the fifth floor. The design was simple but striking, and then suddenly, the ribbons around the parcels lit up, present by present, overseen by two enormous, illuminated jaguars. Everyone gasped as one of the predatory cats lifted a paw and placed it on the top of the pile of gifts. Phones were lifted to capture the image, and as the final present lit up with a bright flash, the whole building was illuminated, with dozens of light bulbs outlining every window, ledge and cornice of the stately Regency building. The crowd ahhed appreciatively and exchanged satisfied grins with their nearest neighbours.

Suddenly everyone was a friend, united in the quick joy of a shared moment and, when Finn grabbed Belle's arm and squeezed it, she couldn't help giving him a bright smile. Even she felt the warmth of the camaraderie dousing the chill of the oncoming dusk.

As they walked on, Finn continued to stare, both upwards and through shop windows, and Belle followed suit realising he was right – she'd never taken the time to take in the entire grandeur and style of the area's original Regency buildings, with their white stone detailing around sills and lintels, wrought-iron balustrades and balconies, deep recessed windows with round-topped arches, or the classic many-paned sash windows. Suddenly, it irked her that Finn was the one to make her aware of all this. He didn't even live in London. She did.

'That's a guid one, dinnae see that in Stornoway,' he said when they paused outside Prada to admire the simple but elegant pure-white model of a retro car transporting a Christmas tree on its roof. Even Belle had to admire the clever simplicity of the design. It was extremely stylish and so imaginative. She often wondered how on earth people came up with these ideas.

A little further on, Finn stopped outside Yves St Laurent and grabbed her arm.

‘Can you imagine wearing that?’ he asked, pointing to one of the ice-white mannequins dressed in a scarlet, sequinned mini dress, trimmed with white marabou feathers and shiny knee-length leather boots in patent black.

‘Of course not,’ she said severely. When on earth would she ever wear anything as expensive and gorgeous as that? She took a second look at the dress. Absolutely gorgeous. Like she’d have the money for a Prada dress. Maybe one day…

It was she and not Finn who made them cross the road to check out the Tiffany display. The front of the shop was dressed in graduated shades of blue fairy lights that looked like a pair of drapes held back on either side by two of Tiffany’s iconic bird-on-a-rock emblems. She couldn’t help the sigh of pleasure at the sight. One of the windows glittered with crystal Christmas trees decorated with princess-cut rings, while another featured a tree decked with a selection of Tiffany charms, which immediately drew Belle’s attention, and she stood there with her nose practically pressed to the glass. She’d always hankered after a Tiffany charm bracelet and these charms were adorable; there were tiny ice-skates, little diamond crowns, glittering snowflakes, a turquoise-wrapped parcel with a silver bow, striped blue and silver mittens and even a little red-nosed reindeer.

This time, she realised it was Finn who was waiting for her to move on.

‘Sorry,’ she said, aware that she’d almost been drooling.

They moved on and, not having walked down here for a few weeks, Belle was a little dismayed by how, all of a sudden, Christmas had burst out of its jack-in-the-box. All around her, everyone was full of cheer and excitement. There was a lightness in the air. She scowled to herself, as if it might be catching. Christmas was her least favourite time of the year. Everyone got hung up on having a good time and there was an enforced jollity to it all that she loathed.

Eventually, having stopped to allow Finn to ooh, ahh and coo over practically every remaining shop window in the street, they reached the intersection where Old Bond Street became New Bond Street.

Belle frowned. There was no sign of the shop. Bloody man had got it wrong. Did it even exist? Were they even in the right city? 'How do you know about this place?'

'It's a man thing,' he said, not even looking at her. 'We all know.'

Her mouth dropped open. Had he really said that?

'Seriously?' she bit out. 'Might it have gone out of business?'

'No,' said Finn, scanning the street. 'I'm sure I woulda ken.'

Belle pulled out her phone, wishing she'd done so in the first place instead of embarking on a wild-goose chase. A few taps and to her surprise there it was. She looked closer and then rolled her eyes. The idiot.

'There's good news and bad news. It's still open. But not on Old Bond Street. It's now situated on Jermyn Street … and has been for a number of years. It's back the other way.'

'Aye, course it has. I clean forgot,' said Finn with a blithe *whatever* wave of his hand.

Belle fumed. He was bloody unbelievable. This was her time he was on, or had he forgotten that, too?

They retraced their steps – Belle barely acknowledging Finn as they headed back to Piccadilly – crossed the road and cut through Piccadilly Arcade. Despite her bad mood, even Belle's spirits lifted at the sight of the entrance lit up with five large golden stars welcoming her in. Entering the arcade was like stepping into a magical world with fairy lights twinkling around the curved glass windows of the wooden, Edwardian shopfronts. Dark green wreaths, heavy with fir and ivy berries, decorated each doorway and were secured with big red velvet bows. It was so quintessentially British, thought Belle, taking in the window displays of men's tailored

shirts, expensive handmade leather brogues, custom-blended perfumes, bespoke suits, personalised luggage and monogrammed silk ties.

Finn gave a dramatic shudder as they passed the final shop, full of mannequins wearing well-tailored suits. ‘I cannae be doing with wearing a suit.’

‘Are you more at home in a kilt?’ she asked, immediately regretting it because it instantly made her think of him *Outlander*-style, in kilt and white shirt.

‘Aye, a lot to be said for stridin’ wild and free over the heather in your kilt,’ said Finn, with a sudden twinkle in his eye.

Belle blushed because he brought the image to life too damn vividly.

‘I’ll take your word for it,’ she said hastily, wishing she didn’t feel so flipping hot.

‘There it is!’ said Finn, stopping dead and pointing across the road.

The shop had a very expensive feel about it, with things like pure-badger-hair shaving brushes, exclusive shower gels and birch-handled razors on the shelves.

‘Ah, the Bismark Straight Razor. No finer tool,’ sighed the elderly shop assistant five minutes later, and Belle, who was busy browsing, turned to see him brandishing an old-fashioned cut-throat razor. The sort of thing she’d never seen outside of films and imagined Indiana Jones might use. ‘It will be returned to you, razor-sharp.’ He allowed himself a small smile. Finn, obviously sensing her approach, turned round.

‘Everything all right?’ she asked.

‘Aye,’ he said and turned back to the shop assistant, who asked, ‘And where will your next adventure take you, Finn?’

She saw Finn still for a moment before he glanced back over his shoulder at her, and she immediately recognised the wary expression on his face. He turned back quickly and said something in a very low voice to the man before saying in a louder voice, ‘Thank you for all your help. I’ll be

awa' now.' And with that he ushered her out of the shop as if he were embarrassed to be seen with her.

'What was that all about?' she asked, bristling at being manhandled like this, as if she were an inconvenience.

'Ach, he wanted to talk razors. Nothing for you to worry about,' he said dismissively.

He might be tall, broad and handsome but Finn was full of himself. 'How did the man know your name?'

'I phoned earlier,' said Finn glibly. 'Now I'm starving. I need some food.'

She glanced at her watch none too discreetly. Finn noticed but didn't say anything.

'I wanna go to a McDonalds,' he announced.

'You do know London has some amazing restaurants. You can eat Thai, Indian, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Burmese—'

'Nah, I wanna guid old Scottish Maccy D with fries,' he said.

'You do know it's not Scottish,' she said hesitantly, because surely … but his face was so earnest.

'And I might be having a wee joke with you,' he said with a cheeky wink. 'Come on, I'm starving. Right now, I could eat a scabby haggis.'

'I'm pretty sure they don't sell those at McDonalds.' She consulted her phone. 'There's one at Piccadilly Circus.'

'Excellent. Will we see elephants there?' He accompanied the question with a suspicious tilt to his head and a certain something in his expression.

She narrowed her eyes. 'Are you for real?'

He grinned and winked at her. 'I'm teasing ye. Even I ken it's the place with all the neon advertising. No circus tents.'

'No circus tents,' she confirmed, and her lips twitched before breaking into a smile, because how could she not? The humour in those brilliant,

twinkling eyes was infectious and, for some reason, her heart did one of those silly bump-in-the road hiccoughs.

‘I ken. I was just pulling your leg.’

‘I gathered that,’ she said, dryly doing her best to ignore those internal flutters.

They walked along the busy street, Belle desperately trying to think of polite conversation to put some metaphorical distance between her and this man who was stirring the sort of fluttery feelings she associated with being a teenager.

‘So what is it ye do for my Aunt Elspeth?’ he suddenly asked as they were walking past Waterstones. He grabbed her arm and began to steer her towards the road, taking her attention away from the window displays. ‘Shall we cross?’

‘It’s probably safer to wait. There’s a crossing just up there,’ she said.

‘So there is,’ he said, speeding up towards it. Belle frowned, a nagging feeling in the back of her head that she was missing something but couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was.

McDonalds was in full festive swing. Maria Carey’s ‘All I Want for Christmas’ was blasting from the speakers and quite a few of the queuing customers were singing along. The staff wore elf hats to match the strategically placed *Elf on the Shelf* figures all around the restaurant. There were *Elf on the Shelf* Happy Meals, along with toy characters, all of which decorated the large Christmas tree in one corner.

The place was bustling with families clutching Hamley’s shopping bags. Belle, who hadn’t eaten a McDonalds for a long time, stood looking at the menus above the cashiers, a little bemused by the choices and the speed of the people taking the orders. They joined a queue that moved so fast she still hadn’t decided what she wanted when they got to the front.

‘I’ll take a Big Mac meal,’ said Finn, barely a glance at the menu.

Belle was still reading all the choices. ‘I’ll … I’ll have the same,’ she blurted out, remembering belatedly that it was exactly what her dad had always ordered for her when she was a child.

Within what seemed like mere seconds, they were clutching paper bags and carrying them to one of the tables. The professional in Belle had to admire the perfection in their processes and the pace with which they were served. It might not have been her restaurant of choice, but they knew what they were doing.

When Belle took the paper-wrapped burger from the brown bag, the simple action brought back a memory, almost like a muscle memory. As she unwrapped the burger from its little parcel, the familiar anticipation and excitement she’d felt as a child rushed back.

She glanced over at Finn who was tucking into his burger with an expression of bliss on his face.

‘Lived up to expectation?’ asked Belle, amused by his rapture.

‘Mmm,’ he said. ‘I’m starving. I haven’t eaten since yesterday.’

‘You’re kidding. Why didn’t you say earlier?’ The quick stab of guilt made her feel cross. She hated failing at anything, especially not doing her job properly. And this was a job. She was doing it for her boss and for the secondment to New York.

He shrugged. ‘I forgot. I’m quite often…’ he began seriously, and then his words drifted off as he stared at her as if seeing her properly for the first time, ‘busy…’

For those quick seconds, he sounded different. More human and less arrogant and bossy.

To avoid that steady look, she bit into her burger and this time took a bite of gherkin, followed by a handful of chips. How could she have forgotten how delicious a gherkin was? Or how wonderfully addictive the crisp, salty French fries were?

Dad had always taken her to McDonalds on Saturday mornings after they'd been to football practice in the park. He'd been one of the coaches and she'd been in the girls' second team. She dipped a chip into the ketchup and munched, thinking of him. Did he still go to McDonalds?

'Penny for them?' said Finn.

'What?'

'You looked a million miles away.'

'Yeah. My dad and I used to come for a sneaky McDonalds after football. It was our secret because Mum wouldn't have approved. Eating fast food was bad for us. As far as she was concerned, we had a Pret a Manger BLT every Saturday.' She smiled ruefully.

'That's nice. My dad wouldn't have been seen dead in here. He was a pretentious bastard.'

Belle glanced up, startled by the edge in Finn's voice. 'Did you not get on?' He'd said '*was*', so she was assuming he might be dead.

'I didn't see him often enough to fall out. He was an international lawyer. Spent more time at The Hague than at home. And if he wasn't there, he was somewhere else in the world.'

'And now? Is he dead?'

'Nah! He's hale and hearty, and working hissel' into an early grave. Complete workaholic. Your da sounds more fun.'

'He was until—'

'Shit, I'm sorry. He's no deid, is he?'

His face was so contrite and apologetic, Belle reached out and patted his hand. 'He's not dead, although my mum wishes him six feet under. He was a—' the words got stuck in her throat, 'a great dad until he wasn't.'

Finn frowned and she realised she was being unnecessarily cryptic. 'He and Mum are divorced. She hates him.'

And how had they got onto this subject? She didn't want to talk about it – that pocket of hurt wasn't something she ever brought to the fore, let

alone shared.

‘I get it,’ said Finn, as if he could read her thoughts. ‘My mother couldnae forgive my father for loving his job more than her.’

They lapsed into silence, finishing their food, slurping their Cokes through the long straws.

Belle crumpled up her burger wrapper and tidied everything up. ‘I’m not sure this is what your aunt had in mind when she told me to take you out to dinner.’ Hopefully, he would count this as dinner and that would be ticked off her list of duties.

‘This isnae dinner,’ he replied. ‘You can still take me to the Burmese place.’

Belle was half-amused, half-indignant at the high-handed, ‘you can still take me’.

‘I do have a life of my own, you know.’

He shrugged, but his granite-hewn chin stuck out with dogged insistence as he said, ‘Elspeth said you’d look after me.’

Shit, he’d played the aunt card, and she had assured Elspeth she’d look after him. Looked like she was stuck with him until she could come up with a way of ditching him. But, deep down, was there a small part of her that *didn’t* want to ditch him?

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Chapter Four

BELLE

When she finally escaped from Finn, Belle headed home, taking a diversion to the florist on the corner and the Waitrose down the street before letting herself into the modern apartment block where she lived with her friends from university, Maddie and Phoebe. She adored them, and the three friends had seen each other through thick and thin – Phoebe's dad's death from cancer, Belle's parents' break-up and Maddie's gran's worsening dementia. They'd celebrated together everything from Phoebe's fifth outing as a bridesmaid – in the worst dress to date, peach satin – Maddie's lottery win of fifty pounds, which they blew on a Chinese takeaway, and Belle's fiftieth parkrun, which they forced her to run carrying a '5' and '0' helium balloon in each hand.

Belle opened the door to cooking smells and headed straight to the kitchen where she found them.

'How was it?' asked Maddie from her seat at the kitchen table.

'I'll fill you in, but first … these are for you for smashing your presentation this week.' She handed over the box of Maddie's favourite Guylian Belgian seashell chocolates.

'You sweetheart, you didn't have to do that,' said Maddie, jumping up and giving Belle a hug.

‘And these are you for you, Phoebe,’ she said, handing over the bouquet of flowers. ‘Because I know you’ve had a crap week at work.’

‘Bless you, Belle. They’re gorgeous. My boss apologised this morning, so I’m feeling a lot better.’

‘He’s a shit,’ observed Maddie.

‘He is … but he’s also brilliant, and I’ve learned so much from him. I’ve only got to stick it out to the end of the year – a few more weeks – and then it’s my golden ticket to promotion. Would one of you mind sticking these in a vase for me while I finish dinner?’

‘No problem.’ Belle put her phone down on the kitchen table, filled a vase with water and stuffed the brightly coloured blooms in. Phoebe was the artistic one, so she’d leave her to arrange them later.

‘So how was the nephew?’ asked Maddie, pouring her a glass of wine.

Belle filled them in as she unwound her scarf and took off her coat, still talking as she took them out to the cupboard in the hall.

‘He sounds dead cute to me,’ said Maddie when she returned to sit at the table. ‘Scottish accent. Tall. Broad. Hello. Yes, please.’

‘No, Maddie. He is not cute. He’s a pain in the arse,’ complained Belle. ‘Honestly, it’s like looking after a five-year-old.’

‘How old *is* he?’ asked Phoebe, from her position at the hob where she was cooking pasta.

‘I thought he was going to be a teenager. Turns out he’s around early thirties.’

‘Sounding better and better to me,’ said Maddie.

‘No— Oh shit, yes, he’s hot, but I’m not going there. I don’t like him, and he doesn’t tick any of the boxes.’

The three of them exchanged disappointed looks. They had a strict checklist of non-negotiables when it came to men. They needed to:

Know how to wear a suit (even if they didn’t wear one very often).

Book dinner – and know the best places to go out for dinner.

Have a career and be bossing it.

Own surfaces.

Book the clown.

And Belle's personal addition: never have played their own guitar at a house party.

The latter points they'd worked out together over the last few years. Maddie had come up with 'must own surfaces', after staying over with a guy who didn't have bedside tables or coffee tables and everything was on the floor. And Phoebe had talked them through how, when she was married with kids and was hosting the birthday party, sorting out cakes, party bags, presents and games, et cetera, she needed to know that her other half could get on and book the entertainment.

None of them thought any of these things were too much to ask.

'He doesn't like wearing a suit,' said Belle.

'Doesn't mean he can't, or wouldn't look good in one,' said Phoebe. 'Anyway,' she added, her eyes gleaming as she waggled her eyebrows, 'wouldn't he wear a kilt?'

'Don't,' said Belle, her cheeks reddening, thinking of her earlier Jamie Fraser fantasies.

'She's blushing,' chipped in Maddie with a quick grin. 'So, he's Finn, Fit as F—'

'Don't say it,' said Belle, not wanting to think about Finn in that way, but knowing from the gleam in her eye, the name would stick.

'Fit as Fuck Finn. Faff for short,' announced Maddie. 'Have you got his number?'

'Yes,' said Belle. 'He insisted on putting it in my phone, so I'll know when he calls and make sure I pick up!'

Maddie sniggered and reached for Belle's phone.

Belle ignored her and carried on talking to Phoebe, which was much safer. ‘It took forever to walk along Bond Street, he wanted to look in every window.’ She snatched up her glass of wine, pretending to be irritated, but actually, now all she could remember was his infectious delight and enthusiasm and his very sexy jawline.

‘He is a tourist,’ Maddie reminded her. ‘Give him a break.’

‘I know, but I’d rather he wasn’t on my time. So much for saying hello, giving him my number and buggering off.’

‘Can’t you just ditch him?’ suggested Phoebe, stirring the Bolognese sauce. ‘Can one of you grate me some parmesan?’

Maddie jumped up to oblige. It was Phoebe’s night to cook. Three evenings a week they took it in turns to cook for each other, which worked well because they all had busy careers and it took some of the pressure off.

‘Not really. Not if I want that secondment to New York – I need Elspeth to put in a good word for me.’ It was telling that neither of the others pointed out it was a huge ask from a boss.

‘Ooh yes, New York. We can visit,’ said Phoebe.

‘Yay,’ said Maddie. ‘Now what’s the plan for Christmas?’

Talk turned to their weekend plans and who would do what for their annual Christmas dinner.

‘I’m happy to do the turkey,’ said Phoebe, the best cook of the three. ‘I’ll get a turkey crown from Marks. And I might as well do the potatoes and the carrots and the peas, too.’

‘I can be chief peeler,’ volunteered Belle. ‘And I’ll do pigs-in-blankets and stuffing.’

‘I’m on starters, then. Prawn cocktail, okay?’

‘Mmm, yum,’ said Belle.

‘So basically, the same as last year,’ said Phoebe, with a cackle.

‘Yup, although Maddie had better get decent crackers this year.’

‘What was wrong with last year’s?’

‘They were full of those stupid puzzles that none of us could figure out.’

‘Fair enough,’ agreed Maddie. ‘Must try harder. So shall we do the last weekend before Christmas Eve? When are you guys going home?’

‘Perfect. I’ll be going that Sunday because the trains will be mental that week,’ said Phoebe.

‘What about you, Belle?’ asked Maddie.

‘The last possible train on Christmas Eve,’ said Belle with a grimace.

The other two women gave her sympathetic smiles and Phoebe slipped over to give her a hug. ‘You could always come to mine, if you didn’t mind sharing a bed with me.’

‘We’re going to my aunt’s for Christmas Day,’ said Maddie. ‘But I can ask my folks. You know they love you and you’re always welcome – my aunt probably won’t mind.’

‘That’s sweet of both of you, but honestly, it’s fine. I’ll make my trip home, short and sweet, and plead the pressure of work to escape – well, I can live in hope.’ It was a bummer there were never trains on Boxing Day. Belle’s job was the magic get-out clause in everything. Her mother regularly WhatsApped any photos and mentions of Elspeth Drummond in the news, and Belle knew she’d be telling all and sundry in her vicinity that Elspeth was whom her daughter worked for.

After disposing of large plates of spaghetti Bolognese, the three of them took the rest of the bottle of wine they were sharing and, as was their custom on cook nights, settled down to watch the first season of *Off Campus* for the second time.

‘We’re like a married couple of three,’ Maddie often joked, which was true as they had shared the flat, holidays and many evenings together for the last three years. Belle loved living with the two of them, especially as they shared similar values. All career girls, all working hard and playing hard. Belle almost dreaded the day when one of them might get serious about dating and break up the comfortable threesome. At least she could be sure

that wouldn't be her. The last date she'd been on had been a tacit reminder of exactly why she shouldn't bother. He'd talked nonstop about himself, planned to go travelling in a few months for the third time since leaving university, and had no intention of sticking at his current, boring job.

After three episodes, they called it a night and went to their respective rooms. When Belle was tucked up under her duvet, giving her phone one last review, she spotted the text from her mother and wondered if the phone had been listening to her.

Have you decided when you're coming home for Christmas? Ariel is coming home on the 21st.

Belle's heart curdled with guilt.

Can I let you know? Work's a bit up and down at the moment.

That wasn't quite an outright lie. She added:

Probably come home Christmas Eve

It was best to prepare the groundwork.

There was no response from her mother and Belle quashed her guilt. Maybe she could go home the day before.

When the text alert came through five minutes later, Belle could have predicted it would be her sister.

Mum says you won't be home until Christmas Eve. I think she's a bit upset.

There it was – the predictable emotional blackmail/pass-agg text from Ariel.

You do know, Mum's on her own all the time. She doesn't get to see much of us. It's not that much to ask.

Belle so didn’t want to get into it right now. Even so, her mind went backwards and forwards thinking up suitable responses. The unnecessarily arsey *No it’s not too much to ask but I’m very busy at work right now*. The downright sarcastic *And who’s fault is it that she’s on her own all the time?* To the caving in *Okay I’ll come on the 21st.* None of these were satisfactory and her brain whirred some more as another text came in from her mother.

Do you want to come for lunch tomorrow? Would be lovely to see you. Ariel’s coming as well. Love Mum x

With a weary sigh, Belle plugged her phone in to charge and pushed it away to the far side of the bedside table. She’d answer in the morning, not that she had any choice in the matter. She had to go.

Rather than think about her sister and mum, she distracted herself by thinking about her day and Finn McAllister. Big mistake. Sleep decided to elude her because her body was jazzed thinking about him in a kilt, and she tried to remind herself how irritating he was. But it didn’t work.

After a while of tossing and turning, she reached for her phone, plugged in her ear buds and switched on the sleep app she often used to help her drift off.

It was doing its job perfectly well and she’d relaxed into her mattress, listening to the soothing music and dozing off, when she received another text. Snuggling into her duvet, she vowed to ignore it, probably another message from her sister. It was followed by another. And then another.

‘Blast,’ she muttered to herself. She could ignore one, but not three. Bloody Ariel.

She reached for her phone, not registering the contact name.

There are giraffes in London.

She blinked at the words, as if that might rearrange them into something that made sense. Giraffes?

Then she rolled her eyes. Maddie had reprogrammed her phone, changing Finn's name to FAFF. The second one read…

> The zoo is less than 3 miles walk!!!

Followed by…

> Auntie says you'd love to take me. I don't need you over the weekend, but ten o'clock in the lobby on Monday?

He didn't need her over the weekend! She threw her head back into the pillow. And seriously. The zoo. She didn't think he'd been serious about that, and she hadn't been to a zoo since she was about ten. And there was a reason for that.

It would serve him right if she didn't turn up on Monday morning.

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Chapter Five

BELLE

‘Isn’t this nice? So good to have both my girls home.’ Their mum beamed at Ariel and Belle. ‘It’s a shame you can’t come home for longer at Christmas, Belle.’

Belle resisted looking at her watch, not that she needed to. She’d been in the house less than five minutes before the subject was raised.

‘Although Christmas Day telly is awful this year. I can’t quite get used to the queen not doing her Christmas speech. Doesn’t feel right Charles doing it.’

Belle just nodded.

Ariel patted her mum’s hand. ‘I know what you mean, Mum. It’s not the same.’

‘I’ll just go and pop the plates in the oven. It was your dad who never bothered heating the plates. Makes the food go cold so much more quickly, but he always knew better.’

‘What are we having, Mum?’ asked Ariel.

‘Toad-in-the-hole.’

‘Do you need any help?’ asked Ariel, while Belle took a sip of the wine she’d brought, to stop her from saying anything.

‘No, love. You catch up with your sister. I’ve just got to make the gravy and get the peas on.’

Their mum disappeared to the kitchen. ‘Toad-in-the-hole, peas, potatoes and gravy, then,’ said Belle with a quick grin.

‘She thinks we’re still ten and twelve,’ said Ariel with a smile, looking towards the kitchen door.

‘Yeah,’ said Belle, wishing that her mum didn’t hanker after the past quite so much.

‘So, can you really not get off work any earlier?’ asked Ariel.

‘Why, will you miss me?’

‘No, but it’s easier with both of us here. Mum gets lonely on her own.’

Belle tipped her head back and looked at the plaster rose on the ceiling of the lounge. Her mum lived in a handsome Edwardian end-of-terrace, with three bedrooms, a kitchen, dining room, lounge and a large conservatory. Admittedly, it wasn’t the five-bedroom executive house they’d grown up in, but it was all Mum’s, unencumbered by mortgage.

‘I don’t know how she copes. Downsizing – it’s so unfair,’ said Ariel. ‘Bloody Dad.’

‘She owns the house outright,’ said Belle. In the divorce, their dad had been completely fair.

‘Big deal,’ said Ariel, bitterly. ‘While he’s living the life of Riley with that witch.’

Belle knew it was a waste of her breath to point out that their dad had made sure their mum had a home that she owned outright.

‘Come and sit down,’ trilled their mother.

The table in the dining room was formally laid with the best silver and white napkins.

‘Here we go.’ Her mum brought in the plates piled high with Yorkshire pudding, sausages, peas, all swimming in gravy.

‘This is lovely, thanks, Mum,’ said Belle, giving an appreciative sniff, the comforting smells reminding her of childhood when everything was still perfect.

‘I don’t know, the sausages … you just can’t get good ones these days, and I wasn’t going to spend a fortune on them. And I’m sure they’ve changed the gravy-granules recipe. I have to use a lot more.’

‘Tastes great to me,’ said Ariel. ‘Now, do you want us to bring anything for Christmas?’

‘No, I’ve already put my order into Sainsbury’s. They’ll deliver the weekend before. And now it’s only the three of us, I’ve just ordered a chicken. No point making a fuss. After all … Christmas lunch is just a roast dinner, isn’t it?’

Belle focused on her plate, looking at the anaemic sausages, which could do with another few minutes in the oven. Her mother no longer took much pleasure in cooking, and it showed.

‘We will still have pigs-in-blankets, won’t we?’ she asked, poking a sausage and glancing at her mum with a teasing smile, because of course you couldn’t have Christmas without them.

Her mother pursed her lips. ‘I can get some from Marks, if you really want them.’

Belle forced a smile. ‘Mum! We have to – they’re essential.’

‘Really, Belle.’ Her mother rolled her eyes with such disdain, Belle feared they might roll back in her head like errant marbles. ‘You sound just like your father. He always made a fuss about ruddy pigs-in-blankets. Insisting on doing them properly, wrapping them in sage leaves and proper streaky bacon and all that nonsense.’ Her mouth pursed as it did whenever she mentioned her ex-husband, while Belle’s mouth watered. Dad had also always insisted on making proper gravy, oven-roasting chicken wings, root vegetables and cooking with red wine before straining and reducing. It was always worth all the fuss, as was his special pork, chestnut and cranberry stuffing, which he made a week in advance. He loved Christmas and all the preparation. Belle had been his mince-pie assistant, and invariably they’d made several batches throughout December because they never lasted to

Christmas Eve. Which reminded her, she hadn't yet had a mince pie this year.

'I thought, as it's just the three of us, I'd keep it simple. If he were still around, you'd probably still have stockings.'

'I loved our stockings,' said Ariel with a wistful sigh.

'Phoebe's mum still does her a stocking,' said Belle with a smile, to show that she wasn't complaining but that it was still a lovely thing to do.

'Phoebe's mum still has a husband,' snapped her mum. 'And you're both far too old for a stocking. These days, you're perfectly capable of buying your own tangerines if you want them. In fact, I was thinking that, this year, we probably shouldn't bother getting presents for each other. I don't need anything, and quite frankly, going shopping at this time of year is too much of a headache.'

'Okay, Mum,' said Ariel, exchanging a quick glance with Belle, who could tell her sister was a little disappointed by this pronouncement but would never say anything to risk upsetting their mother. 'If you're sure. Or maybe we could do something creative, where we give ourselves a five-pound budget and have to get something from a charity shop.'

Before Belle could say that she and her flatmates were doing this as a bit of fun, her mother said, 'The last thing I want is someone else's old tat.'

'But it can be fun, silly stuff or practical stuff,' said Belle, who'd already decided that she was going to trawl through some charity shops to hunt down knitting needles and wool for Phoebe, while for Maddie, she'd planned to look for some vintage cocktail glasses which she'd present with handwritten cocktail recipes.

'I'd rather just give you the five pounds,' said their mum.

'Shall I bring some crackers?' asked Ariel, who apparently had yet to give up on the idea of injecting some fun into Christmas in the Woods' household. It might not be Belle's favourite time of year, but that was mostly because it brought on their mother's pity-fests.

‘Great idea,’ she said quickly before their mum could pooh-pooh the idea.

Once again, her mum’s mouth pursed into the familiar wrinkled prune.

‘If you must.’

‘Yay,’ said Ariel and held her hand up to Belle for a high-five. Belle obliged even though she thought it was a very minor victory.

It was a relief to get home to the flat, where Maddie and Phoebe were relaxing in front of the television with a glass of wine.

‘Want one?’ asked Maddie, as soon as Belle walked through the door.

‘God, yes please. A bucket,’ said Belle. ‘And just so you know, we are having proper pigs-in-blankets for Christmas lunch. I’ll be going to an artisan butcher to buy organic sausages and super-streaky bacon and a bloody nursery to buy fresh sage.’ She flopped down onto the sofa and accepted the glass from Maddie.

‘Hell, yes,’ said Phoebe.

‘What’s brought this on?’ asked Maddie.

‘My mother! Dear God, she’s determined to suck every last drop of joy out of Christmas.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Phoebe.

‘We’ll celebrate in proper style,’ said Maddie, giving her a quick hug. ‘Don’t you fret.’

‘Sorry. It’s just so dispiriting. Like she’s determined to be miserable. Now she’s decreed no gifts, which is fine. I get it. We don’t need more stuff – but you can still have some fun.’

Belle suddenly found herself close to tears and she had to clamp her lower lip between her teeth to stop them spilling out. She could cheerfully shake her mother, and probably would have done if it wasn’t for Ariel who

said she ought to be more sympathetic. Belle understood that her mother had been disappointed by life, that things hadn't turned out the way she'd hoped and that her husband leaving her had been beyond her control, but she remained so negative and bitter – and it was making her miserable. Belle wished she had the courage to tell her mother that she should take charge of her own destiny and not let the past shape the future. Instead of constantly harking back to the good old days … Mum needed to find a way of being happy with what she did have.

Belle had tried to get her to cultivate some new interests. Volunteering, taking up a hobby or going out to meet new people. Her mother refused point-blank to try anything different. Her view: why should she? She hadn't brought this on herself. The role of victim was well and truly entrenched, and it made Belle sad and equally determined that she would never end up in that position.

Phoebe jumped up and disappeared from the lounge before returning with a large bag.

'This will cheer you up … I was going to wait, but…'

She pulled three sets of reindeer-antler headbands from her bag, a silver stag-shaped candle holder, a flat, wooden Christmas tree ornament and six felt placemats in scarlet and decorated with holly leaves.

'For our festive table.'

'Cute,' said Maddie. 'Where did you get them?'

'Charity shop, of course. Although I got the headbands from Poundland – which is a bit of a rip-off because they were more than a pound – one-pound-fifty – but I thought they were super-cute.'

Belle smiled and sniffed back her stupid tears, ignoring the fact that the one of the stag's antlers was very skew-whiff. 'Perfect. Thanks, Phoebs. I love you guys.'

'And we love you,' said Phoebe squashing herself into the small space on the sofa beside Belle and hugging her. 'We're going to have the best not-

Christmas-Day Christmas. Actually … there's a guy at work … I'm not interested in him … but he's Australian. Not been here very long at all. Going to be on his own. I wondered about inviting him. He's good fun.'

'Why not?' said Maddie. 'The more the merrier.'

'Lovely,' said Belle, whose spirits lifted at the thought of them making their Christmas into something.

'Why don't you invite FAFF?' asked Maddie.

Belle swallowed down a glug of wine before answering. 'Er…'

'Yes, we want to meet him,' said Phoebe.

'I … I guess I could,' said Belle, cursing her ridiculously over-sensitive skin.

'You're blushing,' teased Maddie.

'He's my boss's nephew.'

'And…?' asked Phoebe coyly.

'You don't shit on your own doorstep.'

'Having dinner with friends is hardly overstepping. Surely, she'd be pleased you're looking after him.'

'I guess it depends on what Belle plans on giving him for Christmas,' said Maddie, waggling her eyebrows.

'You should invite him,' said Phoebe.

'I'll think about it,' said Belle, grateful when Maddie rose to get some more wine and Phoebe was diverted by a message on her phone. What would it be like to have Finn sitting here in their flat at the table, his big body taking up space? And why did she keep thinking about him and his physical presence?

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Chapter Six

BELLE

So glad you're looking after Finn. Isn't he a sweetheart?

'Hmph,' Belle grumbled aloud to herself rereading the email from Elspeth as she got off the tube at Green Park on Monday morning. She joined the throng of people rising to the surface.

She saw Finn long before he saw her, and stopped for a minute. Damn, she had forgotten how good-looking he was. She'd hoped her brain had conjured up the pre-weekend dazzlement but no, there it was again, that quick kick of recognition of a damn fine male. There was just something about the way he held himself. Like he belonged and knew his place in the world, a subtle confidence that was very attractive. Maybe she should add it to the non-negotiables list. Even though he was wearing his ancient waxed jacket and battered Chelsea boots, with his longish dark hair and masculine features, he exuded a certain style.

However, what made her do the trippy, skip-a-beat thing, was the endearing way he looked up and waved enthusiastically when he spotted her, like a small boy beyond excited to go on a trip.

A trip, she reminded herself with an internal huff, that he'd forced her into. She would rather not have had to trek into the West End when she could have gone into the office and got some work done. Elspeth had told

her she could take this time off in lieu. Which wasn't that much of a bonus, as Belle rarely took her full holiday allowance most years.

'Morning,' she said briskly.

'Morning.' He beamed at her, his face creasing into a delighted smile. The fine lines around his eyes crinkled, fanning out like rays of sunshine, entirely focused on her. Despite trying to hang on to her irritation – she didn't want to like him – her body seemed to have other ideas. Parts of her loosened: the taut muscles in her shoulder, tight glutes in her backside, her diaphragm – everything unfurling like a sunflower in the sunlight. Even her mouth curved into an involuntary smile.

'Belly. I mean Belle. What a bonnie mornin', just look at the sky. And my, they have a fine breakfast at the hotel.'

Surely, no one was this full of the joys of life? Not at this time of day. Belle preferred a slow slide into the day, and if she didn't have to get up and go into the office, she would work on her laptop in bed for as long as possible.

'How're you?' Sincerity trickled through his words like a bubbling stream, the words tumbling out.

'Good, thanks,' said Belle, trying to recapture her equilibrium. Her system seemed to go a little haywire around Finn. Having only had time to swig down a cup of black coffee and go through her emails quickly, she wasn't able to put up much of a fight against the powerful punch of attraction he exuded. Now, as her stomach growled loudly in a very unladylike way, she wished she'd had something more substantial for breakfast. It might have given her a bit more resilience and ability to resist him. She forced her hands into clenched fists in her pockets. This was ridiculous, she was a grown-ass woman who was in control of her own body – she was not going to be swayed by a rugged, handsome face and a broad, sinewy body. If she were looking for a relationship, it would be based on much more logical and grown-up criteria.

‘Aye, I had the full English: eggs, bacon, sausage, mushrooms, tomatoes and even black puddin’, which I never thought they’d have. Course we call it the full Scottish back home.’

Her stomach rumbled again, and she gave him a tight smile, grateful that the busy traffic along Piccadilly drowned it out.

‘Great,’ she said.

He stared down at her. ‘You look a little pale. Are you all right?’

‘I’m fine,’ she said, giving him another tight smile. ‘Didn’t sleep so well.’

‘I know a guid remedy for that,’ he said with a flirtatious wink. That sudden wicked twinkle made her flush and she had to break eye contact.

Oh, seriously, did he have to put those thoughts in her head? Why did she feel hot all over?

‘Shall we go?’ she said pertly, watching as he wrapped a woolly scarf around his neck and noting he had big strong, very capable hands.

‘Aye.’

‘We can get the tube.’

‘Och, no, lassie,’ said Finn, linking an arm through hers, as if it were a perfectly normal thing to do. ‘It’s no’ far to walk and I’m ready for a fair yomp – an’ you look like you could do wi’ some fresh air to put some roses in your cheeks. Come on.’ He pulled a brass compass from his pocket and flicked it open. ‘I’ve a mind we head due north.’

‘Okay,’ she said, hiding a smile and ignoring the stupid flutter in her belly. There was something rather endearing about the boyish earnest gaze he bestowed on the compass.

Finn and his compass didn’t let them down as they walked up through Mayfair, filled with expensive shops and yet more stylish window displays, towards Oxford Street.

‘That’s what we can do when we come back,’ said Finn pointing to one of the scarlet buses. ‘I’ve a need to ride on a double-decker. On the top, at

the front.’

Belle suddenly remembered that as a child she’d wanted to do the same. When had that excitement worn off? Now the buses were simply a means to get somewhere. His enthusiasm led her to say, ‘When I was little, the buses were the old Routemaster-style – the ones you could jump on and off. I always insisted my dad took me on one … my mum wasn’t so keen.’ The memories flooded into her head as she recalled the special thrill of jumping on the bus, the short-pile, retro seat cushions, the bench seats at the back, the metal grab rails on the backs of the double seats and the orange line that ran the full length of the bus, which you had to tug to ring the bell for your stop.

Although sleek and stylish, the new buses didn’t hold quite the same magic now, but she could see they might for someone who’d never been on one before.

Belle was about to cross the street at the lights when Finn stopped to gaze upwards at the strings of lights overhead.

‘Are these the famous Oxford Street lights?’

‘Sorry, yes. They’re not that gr…’ She curbed her initially negative dismissal of the lights – God, she was turning into her mother – because actually, they were quite impressive even in the daylight. When had she become so blasé that she stopped enjoying them?

Curtains of glittering stars were suspended at regular intervals all the way down the street. ‘We should come back at night,’ she said, and almost clapped her hand over her mouth. Where had the ‘we’ come from?

‘Grand idea. There’s a thing at Selfridges I want te see.’

‘A thing?’ she asked, intrigued. ‘What sort of thing?’ Did he mean the window displays, which were always the best in London? ‘You mean the windows? They’re quite something. There’s always a theme. And children can visit Santa, or at least they used to be able to.’ It prompted yet another memory of dressing up and queueing up to see Father Christmas, holding

tight onto her mother's hand, and her mother laughing at her excitement. Funnily enough, it had been Mum who had taken them. Every year. Belle recalled waiting in line, excitement and trepidation seeping through her veins, and the dark grotto with Santa resplendent in a red suit trimmed with white and a full flowing curly white beard, along with a couple of sidekick elves in green. Her eyes misted at the recollection of the brilliance of the smile on her mum's face – the change in her mother's outlook from then to now shocked her. So much had altered since then, leaving her mother shrivelled like a prune, her parameters decreasing year by year, like smaller and smaller concentric circles. That's what happened when you put all your eggs in one basket and handed your life over to a man. Sadness, like icy frost, gripped Belle, before she registered that Finn was talking to her, telling her something.

'…supposed to be wild. There's a Santa Spectacular every day at six p.m. Singing, dancing, confetti. Sounds braw.'

'Are you sure?' asked Belle, because she'd never heard of it. Did she really not know her city?

'We do have TikTok in Scotland, yer know.' Finn's eyes did that twinkly thing again that sent butterflies hopping, dancing and generally misbehaving in her stomach. There was a serious danger that she was becoming addicted to those sparkly gazes of his, especially as they seemed to be concentrated on her. It made her feel as if the sun had come out inside her – not a sensation she was used to, nor was she sure she wanted it to be. If there was one thing she'd learned, it was that it wasn't wise to rely on someone else for your happiness. When they went, they left a vacuum that was hard to fill.

Once again, Finn took her arm, looping his hand into the crook of her elbow as if it was completely natural and they'd been friends for years. Settling into a long stride, she managed to match his brisk pace. Finn strode along with purpose, as if he were crossing the moors and wading through

streams. Her mouth dried at the thoughts invading her head. She had to stop objectifying the man and wondering about what he'd look like in a lot less clothes. Since when had she turned into some sort of pervert?

'Mary le bone,' he said out loud, reading a Marylebone street sign.

'Marry le bone,' she enunciated automatically but with a smile, because that accent of his did funny things to her insides.

'Ach, that's the problem with the English, always spelling something one way and saying it another. Beauchamp – Beecham, Cholmondeley – Chumley, Leicester – Lester, Worcestershire – Wosstarshire? Why Marry, when it isn't, and where's the name from?' he asked.

'I've no idea,' she said, amused by the comical disconsolate expression on his face.

'I'll look up the Google later,' he said with a nod. 'Now, I've heard there's a bookshop nearby that we must visit on here.' Once again there was the subtle shift from comedian to a man of action, along with the up-and-down in the strength of his accent.

'Daunts?' said Belle who knew of it but hadn't been to this particular branch.

'That's the fella.' And the comedian was back. Belle frowned. Finn was quite a man of parts. It both intrigued and worried her. Was he more than he appeared to be? Or was he really the bumbling visitor to the city that had been presented to her?

They found Daunts, and as soon as they crossed the threshold, Belle felt that universal, magical and enthralling bookshop atmosphere, hushed and quiet, as if it held the line for all the thousands of stories stored in here waiting to be released when the pages of a book were opened. Belle studied the old oak-wood shelves, lined with colourful spines, and could see why this shop had earned the moniker of most beautiful bookshop in London. There was a sprinkling of Christmas fairy magic here, subtle but sophisticated decorations, gift-wrapped books in displays, all of which

seemed more authentic, homely and less gaudy and glitzy than in some other bookshops.

‘Over here.’ Finn pointed to a narrow passage lined with shelves of books on either side of them, above which was written, ‘This way to books arranged by country.’ *Funny way to organise a bookshelf*, thought Belle, not quite coming out in hives, but close enough. Books should be arranged alphabetically by author. What was wrong with the way they did things in libraries?

While the sign foretold of some kind of organisational chaos, it did not warn her that this was the equivalent of stepping through the back of the wardrobe into Narnia.

Belle let out a gasp as they stepped out on the other side.

‘Amazin’, isn’t it?’ observed Finn beside her, beaming at her delighted response.

Drifts of fake snow dusted the tops of the bookcases, some with tiny fir trees arranged in groups, with a single star on top of one; Santa sacks full of wrapped books were arranged in various corners as if the elves had prepared them in readiness to be collected by Santa’s sleigh.

‘I wasn’t expecting this,’ said Belle with shocked wonder, both at the size of the place and the pretty festive touches. ‘It’s like the Tardis – except way more beautiful. I had no idea. It’s much bigger than I thought it would be.’

‘That’s what they all say,’ said Finn in a mournful voice that made Belle burst into a fit of giggles.

‘Idiot,’ she said, pushing at his arm, which seemed to have become an easy and familiar gesture between them. ‘I had no idea.’

‘Yeah, they say that, too,’ said Finn, still deadpan.

She giggled again. ‘Stop.’

‘Ah, they definitely don’t say that.’ Finn nodded wisely.

His words once again put images into her head that she did not need. She turned her head away to stop him seeing the flush along her cheekbones.

‘This is amazing,’ she said moving quickly to lean against one of the dark-oak balustrades, which ran the whole length of the magnificent gallery towards an arched, Edwardian, stained-glass window at the far end, which was filled with an enormous, bushy Christmas tree. The simple decorations of a few strings of fairy lights and ribbon-tied books balanced between branches were perfectly understated and didn’t eclipse the gorgeous building. Despite the vaulted, glass roof running the full length of the space letting in plenty of light, there was a still, cosy, antiquarian feel to the space.

As promised, the shelves really were arranged by country, starting with books about Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria. Interestingly, both fiction and non-fiction were mixed together, which, Belle realised with surprise, made for a much better browsing experience. There were travel guides alongside memoirs, novels, recipe books and slim tomes of poetry, drawing her attention to books she might never have otherwise looked at.

Finn had already headed a few shelves down to the section on Brazil.

‘Is that somewhere you’d like to visit?’ she asked, coming to his side.

‘Uh…’ Finn murmured, busy reading the blurb on the back of a book.

‘I was thinking of booking a week in Greece with my flatmates, but this is making me feel very unadventurous.’

‘Greece is guid.’ He put the book back on the shelf and walked down to the Greek section. With a smile, he pulled out another book. ‘Have ye read this?’ He handed her a copy of *My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell. Belle vaguely remembered a TV series that she’d not watched.

‘I haven’t.’

‘It’s brilliant,’ he said, evangelical fervour shining in his eyes. ‘One of my favourites. Reading that made me realise you can be interested in the

natural world and it become a thing. When I was little I said I wanted to be the next Gerald Durrell and run ma own conservation park.'

'That's very sweet.' Belle could easily imagine a young Finn, with even more ruffled hair and shining eyes.

'Och. Sweet? No! Don't say that. It will destroy my hardman reputation.'

Belle laughed, and his face morphed into something harder and leaner. For a brief moment, there was a steeliness in his eyes, and with that solid, muscular, sinewy build, she could believe it was a reputation he could own. It sent a quick thrill through her, a reminder that Finn was very much all man. A man her body was clamouring to get to know. She glanced down at his long-fingered capable hands holding the book, and felt a little sigh of very uncharacteristic take-me-I'm-yours longing deep inside her. Being swept up in a man's powerful arms had never ever been on her relationship wish list. She was a strong, capable woman. Oh God, had she just sighed out loud?

Finn shot her a quick, sharp look, and for a full second, they stared at each other.

An adrenaline rush fired through her, a starburst in her chest. Inside, there was a physical ache low in her belly and, from nowhere, a sudden fierce need to be held by him. Clenching her housekeys in her pocket, so hard that they hurt her palm, she wheeled around and yanked a book from the shelf.

Island Hopping with a Catamaran, Children and a Dog, for Those New to Sailing, read the punchy title – which was so clearly out of her realm of experience she almost cringed. Next to her she heard Finn snigger softly.

She ignored him and moved along the shelves, putting a bit of distance between them, allowing her pulse to settle. *Enough, Belle. Stop letting your mind wander.*

Determined to focus on the books for the next ten minutes, she browsed through the section, and was relieved when he followed suit, both of them quite content to pick and choose titles to peruse until Belle's stomach let out a horrifically loud rumble.

'Was that you?' asked Finn in a loud stage whisper.

Belle nodded. 'Sorry,' she whispered back, mortified he'd heard.

'Wow, when did you last eat?' he asked, coming to stand in front of her and considering her face. 'Have you eaten, today?'

Both embarrassed and touched by his careful study of her and the concern deepening his blue eyes, she shrugged and moved on, grateful that he followed her lead and didn't say any more. She'd drifted into the New York section, which was a timely reminder of what all of this was for: the secondment in New York. She'd wanted to go and work in the city for as long as she could remember. Babysitting Elspeth's nephew was a small price to pay. She needed to focus on the goal and nothing more.

There were a couple of books she was tempted to buy but, while she prided herself on being a logical, smart person, she was still hesitant about tempting providence. Not, of course, that she was the least bit superstitious, because that would be silly, wouldn't it?

Despite her refusal to make a purchase there was one book that looked particularly interesting, *New York, Block by Block*. As she stretched out her hand for it, behind her, Finn reached for the same book. Warm breath grazed her ear as he leaned forward, their fingers brushing over the spine in tandem. It was the barest touch of skin on skin, but enough to send a tingle racing up her arm, supercharging her heartbeat. She turned to look at him, and with his face so close to hers, she could see the darker blue flecks in his irises, the dark lashes lacing his eyes and the pinpricks of fairer-haired bristles that etched his jawline. In a heated jump, her mind imagined the texture of them on her lips as she brushed her mouth across his skin.

His blue eyes darkened as his gaze locked on hers. The breath in her lungs seized in a slow-motion moment of intense awareness. Like every cliché in every romantic scene, she couldn't help herself shifting her stare to his mouth, her mind racing ahead, anticipating the feel of his lips on hers. Her breath stuttered as he continued to stare at her, his mouth opening very slightly. Was he going to say something?

Kiss me, she thought, unexpectedly. *Kiss me.*

'Pardon,' said a loud voice, heavily accented in French, as a man barged between them, his bag cannoning into her and pushing her away from Finn.

He inserted himself between them and grabbed a guide to New York, without even looking at it properly, and within seconds he was gone, and so was the moment. Suddenly Belle's feet were of great interest, and to top it all, her stomach let out another gargantuan grumble.

'Do you think he's on his way to catch a flight this very minute?' asked Finn, with the ghost of a smile on his face.

'Possibly,' said Belle turning to examine another book, grateful for the diversion. Fantasising about kissing Finn was not on today's bingo card.

Back out on the street, Finn took out his compass. 'We can't be too far away. It's only a few miles and we must have walked about a mile and a half.'

'Wow, your compass tells you how far you've walked,' exclaimed Belle, who was glad of an opportunity to start a fresh conversational direction. She was still trying to find her equilibrium after that encounter – had they been about to kiss, or had she imagined it all? Finn certainly seemed unfazed. But to her, the strength of the magnetic pull had … what? Scared her? No, terrified her. She was always in charge of her emotions. Kissing happened at the end of a date, if the date had gone well. It only happened when it had

been weighed up and assessed properly. Golden rule number one was that there always needed to be an exit plan. If you kissed someone and it was awful, you needed to have some place to go. Into a taxi, down into the underground or, at the very least, walking off in the opposite direction. If the kiss was going somewhere … then those options facilitated a change of direction.

Nearly kissing Finn in broad daylight when she would be spending another few hours with him – not to mention the fact he was Elspeth's nephew – was a supremely bad idea, except now she couldn't stop thinking about what it would have felt like.

She was fast going down an Alice rabbit hole of her own making. That's what happened when she went off-piste and didn't follow the rules.

She realised that her mind had taken off at a million miles an hour and Finn, holding his compass (and didn't that sound like a euphemism), was laughing his head off.

'Nae, lassie. The compass isnae that clever.'

She shot him an accusing look, noting that, while in the bookshop, his Scottish accent had faded into a much gentler burr.

'To get here, we walked for about half an hour. It takes an hour to walk three miles. It's good old-fashioned maths, aye?'

'Right,' she said suddenly feeling very stupid, which was not something she allowed to happen very often. There was something about Finn that was scrambling her brain and making her deviate from her usual common sense.

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Chapter Seven

FINN

The little giraffe turned its huge brown eyes their way and peered over at them, oblivious to the fanfare of Christmas around Finn. The zoo had mocked up a nativity scene in the enclosure, and it did look as if at any moment the Three Kings might come riding in. The children gathered around were on some sort of outing and all of them wore identical Santa hats and clutched little gift bags while they stared up in wonder at the giraffe.

'He's like Jesus,' said one little boy, sagely. 'He was born in a stable.'

Finn exchanged a wry look of amusement with Belle. When the children finally departed, the two of them stepped forward.

'She's a cutie,' said Belle, gazing at the giraffe calf which, despite being a newborn, stood at six foot.

Seeing Belle's face soften and her body relax made Finn flex his fingers inside his pockets, his fingernails skimming the cotton lining. He watched as Belle craned her neck to look up at the mother giraffe, wanting to grab the ends of the big woolly scarf she wore and wind it around his hand until it brought her to within kissing distance.

That moment in the bookshop had unsettled him. Had she wanted to kiss him? Or had he imagined it? He couldn't decide, and it … made him uncomfortable. He liked knowing where he stood.

He was fascinated by her mouth, and her reluctant, occasionally wistful smiles, as if she was unsure about letting too many out at one time. They said so much about her and at the same time shielded her. What had made her so reserved and keen to keep her emotions in check? And why did he feel a weird sense of triumph every time she did smile? Not the usual satisfying sensation of a punchy win but something settling and grounding. It was all very odd, because at the same time, standing close to her also gave him those itchy, punchy feelings that stemmed from a very different reason. The contradiction chafed like a noose around the neck. Hell, he was quite comfortable about the sexual chemistry buzzing between them. If she wasn't his aunt's assistant, he would have acted upon it and persuaded her into his bed already. He wanted her, but he wanted her to want him … and he wasn't sure that she did. She might feel the tension but … he wasn't sure she felt anything else towards him – which was disheartening for a man who rarely felt disheartened.

When he'd first met her, despite thinking she was gorgeous, he'd thought she had the personality of a snooty, corporate drone. But spending time with her was changing his mind. She was still sharp, spiky and very impatient – and he was quite enjoying poking the bear – but he realised that deep down she was softer than she allowed herself to show. Was she aware of it? He didn't think she was. He had a feeling she'd persuaded herself that a hard outer shell was vital armour to get her through life.

And though she'd probably hate it, it brought out all of his protective instincts – which was most disturbing and very uncharacteristic, because he hadn't thought he had any. It was almost as if his personality had been turned inside out. He loved independent, strong women, so why was he so keen to get to the know the vulnerable side of Belle which he was convinced was lurking beneath the brittle surface? When she allowed herself to laugh or smile, it was like a mask being removed. Sadly, it didn't take much for it to be replaced, although the giraffe calf was helping.

‘I can’t believe she’s only a few days old,’ said Belle, leaning her chin on her hands, her elbows propped on the wooden fence.

‘In the wild, they need to be ready to be off at a moment’s notice. With only one calf born at a time, each live birth needs to survive. It’s no’ like some animals that have multiple births and lose many of their young within the first couple of months.’

‘Nature’s brutal,’ observed Belle reflectively before saying, ‘But then so is the corporate world. At least I know the sort of sharks I’m dealing with.’ She grinned, her teeth bared and her eyes glinting, predator-like. He hazarded a guess that the sharks didn’t stand a chance.

‘I’d venture that nature is more fascinating. Much more unpredictable.’

‘Exactly, and I’d hate that,’ said Belle with feeling. ‘I like to know what I’m getting into and being able to weigh up all the odds with all the information I can get.’

Finn considered her and wondered how she’d fare on one of his expeditions. He suspected she’d be a lot more resilient and resourceful than she gave herself credit for. While she might not like coming face-to-face with a spider, he was pretty sure she wouldn’t run screaming from it.

With a nod, Belle agreed. ‘So, Mr Conservation, do you have a favourite animal?’

‘Apart from giraffes?’

‘Are they your favourites?’

‘No, I’d heard the calf had just been born. I’m partial to tree frogs.’

‘Tree frogs?’

‘This month. My interest is constantly changing. I’m no’ sure I could ever pick a favourite. All creatures are amazing in their own way. Much easier to deal with than humans, who quite frankly are a pain in the arse most of the time.’

‘Is that why you live in a croft on a Hebridean island?’ asked Belle. ‘Although, you seem quite … civilised.’ She frowned and glanced at him,

her eyes assessing. She was a sharp cookie, and he was really surprised he'd kept his pretence up this long. One reason for it was that, with Finn the unsophisticated Scot, Belle seemed to relax and feel freer to be herself. He enjoyed it when she chilled.

He really ought to come clean and own up to the fact that he'd spent three years at University College London and probably knew the city was well as she did, and also that his recent sojourn to Harris had been for a scant two months. Before that he'd been in Bolivia for three months and prior to that in New York.

'Aye, I'm civilised when I need to be,' he said and gazed past her at the wobbly giraffe. 'But when I'm out in the wild, I love it. I'm not sure I could ever give it up.' Although, he was always glad to get back to a soft bed, hot running water and decent food, his first love would always be exploration, which is why he couldn't ever see himself in a proper relationship. His parents had failed abysmally at a long-distance relationship. They would have been much happier if they'd divorced a long time ago instead of trying to make it work for his sake. Now, though they muddled along together, neither could be said to be happy. His mother resented his father for putting his work first and his father resented her for being so dependent on him.

There was absolutely no reason for him to tell Belle the truth about himself. After today, he'd do the right thing and cut her loose. Not hold her to his aunt's deal. And telling her the truth would serve no purpose, he'd look like a complete dick, and she'd feel humiliated. No, it was best to leave things and make this their last outing.

'I can't imagine what it's like to see these animals in the wild,' said Belle, gazing at the tigers. 'It must be amazing. I feel a bit bad, seeing them cooped up here so far from their natural habitat.'

'It's no' ideal, but the zoo is doing huge amounts of research and amazing work conserving many animal species and protecting them from extinction. It's your proverbial rock and hard place. But they've had some

real conservation success stories, like reintroducing a breed of snails back into the Pacific, returning a type of kingfisher back to the wild after they were wiped out by invasive snakes.'

Belle shuddered. 'I hate snakes.'

'Many do. But they're mostly harmless.'

'Next you'll be telling me spiders are harmless.'

'Belle, you cannae tell me you're afraid of spiders.'

'Not afraid … exactly,' she said scratching at her neck, her voice a little constricted. 'But not overly fond. Someone told me if you put conkers in the corners of the room and on windowsills it stops them coming into the house.'

'And did it?' he asked.

'No. Someone told me a load of bollocks. If anything, we had more. They probably came home with the conkers.'

He laughed at the disgust on her face. 'You do know that a spider is seventy thousand times smaller than a human.'

'That's as maybe but they're possibly seventy thousand times quicker.'

'And that scares you.'

She gave an exaggerated shiver and demonstrated with her hand. 'They're just very wriggly and spidery.'

'Spidery,' he said, with a sombre nod, pinching his lips together.

'Oh God, I sound such a girl,' said Belle, tossing her hair back from her face with a rueful pout of her lips. 'I mean, I don't like them, not that I'm … afraid. I'm perfectly capable of dealing with them, when I have to. A glass and a piece of card and they're escorted from the premises. And don't tell me some scientific fact about how they're like homing pigeons and find their way back, because I really don't need to hear it.'

He held up his hands in surrender. 'Wouldn't dream of it,' he teased her. 'So, you don't want to see the tarantulas, then?'

She gave him a scornful look, lifting her chin, rising to the challenge. ‘They’re behind glass, aren’t they? What kind of scaredy-cat do you think I am? Besides, you told me that I’m bigger.’

‘The dangerous ones are behind glass. It’s obviously been a while since you were last here.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s an immersive experience now. You can walk in with the spiders. They’re all completely harmless. It’s a fascinating exhibit. Proves that there’s nae danger. Are you game?’

Belle swallowed and paled.

‘Er … I’m … hmm. Maybe not.’

‘It’s really good and shows people how harmless spiders are. I’ll look after you.’

Her careful, solemn inspection of him, made his toes curl.

‘Promise?’

‘Promise. And we can leave any time you like.’

‘Promise?’ she said again, and he felt elated by her trust.

‘You’re perfectly safe with me. In fact, safer, because I know what to do with a dangerous spider.’

‘What’s that?’ she asked.

‘Run like hell,’ he said with a wink.

She rolled her eyes but there was also a smile there.

‘You game?’ He smiled at her.

With a lift of her chin, Belle gave him an imperious stare. ‘Of course,’ she said, giving him the impression she could tackle anything, or at least give it a go.

The entrance to the Walk with Spiders building was dominated by a large Christmas tree, decorated with lots of jewel-bright ceramic frogs dangling from the branches, while colourful, patterned, crocheted snakes wound their way through the fronds of fir, and plastic iridescent beetles had been strung in festive chains that were draped like tinsel around the tree.

Around the base, children in shrill voices were pointing at the creatures peeping out from the tree. Finn beamed with delight and mentally began to name the different species, mouthing their names to himself.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Belle.

‘That’s a Brazilian tree frog, see up on the second branch. And that one hidden on the right is a white-lipped tree frog and the one near the top is a red-eyed tree frog.’

‘Inventive names,’ said Belle with a laugh.

‘Always. This snake here is a garter snake, and that one is a green anaconda.’

‘You know your stuff. It’s adorable. The tree, I mean,’ said Belle, adding with a laugh, ‘And to be fair, the snakes don’t look too threatening.’

‘I wouldn’t pick a fight with any of them,’ said Finn.

Having studied the tree long enough to find all of the hidden creatures, Finn led Belle into the Walk with Spiders feature, where bark and gravel paths wound through tropical vegetation.

‘I heard one of those urban legends where a woman scattered glitter in the spiders’ webs in her home to dress them up for Christmas, but I’m guessing that’s probably cruel to the spiders,’ said Belle glancing tentatively at the spiders nestled in the huge webs, which must have been nearly a metre across each, and were suspended between trees just across the way.

Finn laughed. ‘Definitely, though I’m partial to the image it creates.’

‘Mmm,’ said Belle as they approached the nearest web and the spider that crouched in the centre. She gave a slight shiver, and Finn took her hand and squeezed it. He approached with no fear because he knew these ones

with their large pale abdomens were golden orb spiders and completely harmless.

‘You’ll like these ones,’ he said turning to Belle and pulling her alongside him so that they were shoulder to shoulder.

‘Why’s that?’ she asked, leaning backwards very slightly.

‘Because the females are six times bigger than the males – which means they are definitely in charge.’

‘Really?’ She gave the spider in front of them a second glance, but shivered and tucked in closer to him. He put an arm around her.

‘See…’ he pointed. ‘It’s near golden … hence the name. They won’t move from their webs. You’re perfectly safe.’

He guided her through the exhibit, his arm around her now. Her hair tickled his face when she turned to glance up at another web and spider.

‘No so bad, eh?’ he asked as they finished their circuit and came back to the start, to one of the terrariums, where the more dangerous spiders were safely behind glass. He released Belle to crouch down to look at one of the spiders. Unfortunately, being here reminded him just how much he was looking forward to his next trip. In a month or so, he’d be off. Maybe he should be focusing on that instead of wondering what it would be like to kiss Belle. Whatever happened between them, it could only ever be short-lived.

He turned to lead her out of the exhibit, but Belle stepped forward, taking his place. He was about to warn her that the salmon-pink bird-eating tarantula was quite large and could move very quickly, when one of them jumped down from its hiding place on a branch and reared up at the window.

Belle gave a little squeak and stepped back into him. He automatically put his arms around her to protect her. She turned round into his embrace and they stood face-to-face. He could see the furious beat of her pulse at her neck and lifted a finger to soothe it.

‘It’s okay. He can’t hurt you.’

She eased a long slow breath and clutched his arms, her eyes wide with shock, and her lips parted. Without a thought, he lowered his head and kissed her. Her grip on his arms tightened and she responded immediately, her lips moving against his.

What started as innocent reassurance, had turned into something hot and heady in a matter of seconds.

He wasn’t sure which of them pulled away first, although her hands still gripped his arms as if she needed the support to stay upright. In silence, she stared up at him, blinking, her eyes a little glassy, and he wondered if she felt as hazy and punch-drunk as he did.

‘Uh…’ he started, but the words evaporated. Instead, he lifted his hand and touched her lower lip as if to reassure himself that what had just happened was as real to her as it was to him. She clasped a hand over his, keeping the pressure on her mouth.

‘Excuse me,’ said an irritable woman with a young boy at her side. ‘We’d like to see the spider. I suggest you take your … shenanigans elsewhere. There are children and animals present,’ she scolded.

‘Aye … yes, sure,’ said Finn, realising they were blocking the view.

Beneath his fingers he could feel Belle’s mouth pinch tight, but her eyes danced as she grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the exit.

Outside they burst into laughter as Belle mimicked, ‘*There are children and animals present.* I hope we didn’t upset the spider.’

Finn laughed. ‘Do you think we could have scarred it for life?’

‘I think it might have scarred me for life – bloody huge great thing. Frightened the life out of me. Where do they live?’

‘Brazil.’

‘I am never going there,’ declared Belle. Finn took her hand and laced her fingers with his. She squeezed his hand back, seemingly happy to leave it there.

‘They are harmless.’

‘They eat birds.’

‘They are more scared of you. They would run away long before you saw one.’

‘I’ll take your word for it,’ said Belle dryly, but when she turned to him, admiration shone in her eyes.

‘That was … fascinating, aside from the jumpy one. I had no idea … you really know your stuff. Who knew a visit to the zoo could be so … brilliant.’ She bubbled with enthusiasm and nervous energy and suddenly he was all fingers and thumbs, like a sweaty schoolboy, as she stared at him like he was some kind of superhero.

His attempt at a casual shrug fell far short and a slight blush tinged his cheeks. So much for his rugged-explorer persona – this woman had just reduced him to a stuttering idiot.

‘Th-thanks,’ he managed to spit out.

‘That was … awesome. You should be on the television or something. You really made it interesting.’

‘Thanks,’ he said again, thinking that now would be the time to tell her that he would be in the very near future, as a camera crew was accompanying him on the next trip. And that he was actually a well-known naturalist and conservationist, and that his accent wasn’t quite as Scottish in actuality.

But he couldn’t bring himself to spoil the moment or diminish the admiration shining on her face, and he was grateful when she continued.

‘That really was amazing.’ She seemed to be deliberately avoiding talking about the kiss.

‘It’s only nature.’

‘But you showed me.’

‘All part of the service.’

He realised they were both talking for the sake of talking now, because if they didn’t, they’d have to acknowledge what had happened between them.

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Chapter Eight

BELLE

Belle was sure her face must be bright red and that not a word of sense was spilling out of her mouth.

‘Shall we go?’ she suggested, conscious of her hand in his and the gentle pressure of his fingers looped between hers. She certainly didn’t want to relinquish his touch. In fact, what she wanted was another kiss – purely as an experiment. Purely to reassure herself that the explosive response had been nothing more than a chemical reaction due to the right conditions at a finite moment that would never ever be recreated again. First kiss, beginner’s luck. An adrenaline-fuelled segue after her near brush with the spider. That was all it was.

But she couldn’t seem to stop staring at his mouth and mushing her own lips together trying to figure out if what she’d felt was real or imagined.

Finn suddenly made a decision, or so she assumed from the abrupt tug of his hand as he pulled her out of the building and to the side of the path, underneath an overhanging tree. After the hot, tropical temperature, they were plunged into the fresh, cold chill of December.

‘Can we no try that again?’ he asked.

‘The kiss?’

‘That, yes.’

She nodded, a little bemused, a burst of fireworks in her chest, but before she could think, his mouth was on hers, coaxing her lips into the kiss. Not that she needed coaxing: her mouth opened and she sighed as his warm breath mingled with hers. This time it was like sinking into warm treacle as her body moulded against his. Chest to chest, thigh to thigh, mouth to mouth. His lips were like coming home and she never wanted to be anywhere else ever again.

His tongue teased her and duelled, and she answered, holding her own, kissing him back, wanting the kiss to deepen even further. Starbursts exploded inside her. Thrill after thrill, chasing each other through the veins, cells and synapses. Every nerve-ending lighting up with heady desire. His hands delved into her hair, catching the back of her head and holding her still, as if he could never get enough of her. She pressed closer to him, aware of burning need and an ache of desire that left her breathless and ragged. She wanted his hands on her. Hers on him. She pushed under his jacket and burrowed into his jumper to feel warm skin, aware of the hard length him pressed into the cradle of her hips.

More. She wanted more.

‘Finn,’ she gasped, when his lips grazed down her neck and he nipped her gently with his teeth, her fingers skimming the waistband of his jeans with nervy, insistent strokes.

‘Mmm,’ he said nuzzling her neck, his hands cupping her bottom.

‘Finn,’ she said more urgently this time, even though she was gripping his waist and holding him tightly.

His mouth returned to hers and she was momentarily distracted by his firm lips, taking ownership of her mouth again. When his hand cupped her face, she turned to kiss his palm and looked up at him.

For a moment, they stared, dazed and bemused.

‘I…’ His thumb stroked her cheek. ‘Do you want to…’

‘Yes,’ she said, nodding. ‘No. Yes. We shouldn’t, should we?’

A smile tugged at his mouth. ‘I was going to ask if you wanted to go for a drink?’

‘Oh,’ she said, crestfallen.

‘Or we could go back to the hotel … and have a drink there.’

‘Yes,’ she said, realising that words of more than one syllable were completely beyond her. Luckily, Finn seemed quite content with that as he took her hand and together they walked quickly to the exit.

‘A drink,’ she said, knowing that her words included a whole other subtext. ‘But … this’—she waved between them—‘it’s just to get it out of our systems.’

‘Absolutely. One and done.’

‘Yes,’ she said resolutely, liking that idea.

They barely spoke on the way back, catching the tube at Regent’s Park and standing side by side as the train rattled along at a furious pace to Oxford Circus. But their bodies spoke volumes, leaning in to each other as they stood, exchanging shy smiles, sneaking peeks when they thought the other wasn’t looking, and intense eye-meets when they caught each other.

At the next station, they had to get off and change trains as there was a problem on the Bakerloo line. Finn held her hand the whole way as they navigated through what seemed miles of tunnels to find the Piccadilly line.

The train was packed but he wriggled on, creating space for her to follow and then when the doors slid closed with everyone squashed in like sardines, they stood pressed against each other. His chin grazed her hair and he held a firm arm around her to keep her steady. When she looked up, she met his intense gaze, those bright blue eyes open and unguarded, sharing a secretive smile as if they knew something no one else around them did, although surely everyone in the carriage could feel the electric field around

them. Inside her, overexcited butterflies soared and fluttered, leaving her legs a little trembly and grateful for his hold.

Belle felt like a bottle of champagne that had been shaken several times. She was ready to pop and anticipation flooded her veins as red-hot as lava. She mapped every inch of Finn's face as she looked up at him. The arch of his cheekbones, the tiny freckles in a crescent across his jawline – like little stepping stones of a path waiting to be kissed – the full lower lip that she wanted to taste to see if it was as plump and juicy as it looked. Her fingers twitched at her sides, involuntarily mirroring her desire to smooth her hands along his chin. Her mind was already racing ahead, plotting the route her lips would take when she had the freedom to let her mouth explore every inch of his skin.

She could see the tick of Finn's pulse at his throat and smell the citrus scent coming off his skin. The collar of his navy sweater circled his tanned skin and her fingers itched to smooth her way between the wool and his neck. Every cell of her was aware of him. The heat emanating from his body, his denim-clad thighs. She wanted to lick him, cling to him, wrap her legs around his waist and press her burning hot core to his groin – none of which were things she'd ever even thought of before, let alone longed for with a need so sharp it almost hurt.

The train halted, and pressed among a throng of people, they were carried onto the platform. It was a relief to see the sign for The Ritz above them, as Belle wasn't sure she was capable of navigating anywhere right that moment.

The minute the lift doors closed, he cupped her face in both hands.

'We shouldn't be doing this,' she said as his thumb stroked her cheekbone.

'No, probably not,' said Finn with a smile.

She smiled back.

A second later, their mouths were fused together again. As soon as the lift came to a stop they virtually tumbled out of the doors and walked with indecent haste down the corridor. When they reached Finn's room, he pressed her against the door and kissed her thoroughly while he fumbled in his pocket for his key card.

'Fuck's sake,' he said out of the corner of his mouth when he dropped the key card and had to get to his knees to pick it up.

She laughed and stepped aside to allow him to concentrate.

'Finn,' she said. 'How come your "och aye the noo" voice has vanished?'

'Hoots, man,' he said, turning to her, eyes twinkling. 'You found me out. It was a wee bit of fun to start with. You were so … ice-maiden-y.'

She laughed. Usual Belle would have been outraged; this Belle could only find it amusing.

'Are you going to open that door or not?' she asked.

Finn pushed the door so hard, it flew open. He was already shucking out of his coat and ushering her in while still kissing her. She did the same. He was stepping out of his shoes and, in a second, had stripped off his shirt and sweater in an almost fluid movement, except his head got a little stuck. Belle feasted her eyes on his bare chest as she tried to help him extricate himself. She laid a kiss on one of his pecs as he finally threw the clothes away to one side.

'You're overdressed,' he growled and lifted her sweater and T-shirt off, tossed them aside and dropped kisses on the swell of her breasts.

The quick scuff of his bristles sent darts of sensation southwards and she gasped, grasping his hips and attacking the buckle of his jeans. Somehow, they were both tugging at each other's jeans until … there was a knock at the door.

Seriously? Belle wanted to groan out loud and Finn frowned, his hand still on her jeans' zipper.

There was a second knock and Finn's hands dropped away, his shoulders bunching. 'You go into the bedroom,' he whispered and stepped back to pick up his shirt, trying to tug it free from the sweater.

She nodded, grabbing her clothes, and tiptoed towards the bedroom, while he finally managed to free the sweater and slip it over his head.

From the bedroom, she heard low voices and looked at her flushed face in the mirror, her chest heaving. What was she doing? This was madness. She grinned at herself … hot madness. It was a while since she'd slept with anyone, her body was more than ready. She crossed her arms over her chest, shivering a little. Finn was talking to someone, and it sounded like they were in the hallway.

'You didn't need to bring them yourself, Adam.'

'I know, mate, but it makes sense to have them in one place and I can fill in the carnet for the flight. Nice pad, by the way.'

They moved into the lounge and Belle could no longer hear them for a second, and then they were back in the hallway and there were sounds of shuffling and boxes being carried.

'That's it for the time being,' said the second voice who was obviously Adam. 'Do you want to count them now? Might as well, it's always easier with two.'

Catching her lip between her teeth, Belle stared at the goosebumping skin over her chest and shoulders and hastily pulled on her T-shirt and sweater. It didn't sound as if Adam was going anywhere anytime soon. Her ardour was cooling as fast as her body, and with the drop in temperature came the doubts. The kiss had got her all caught up, but now she was quickly coming to her senses. She glared at herself in the mirror. Yes, Finn was gorgeous, and she fancied him – a bit too much, if she was honest. And he was Elspeth's nephew, and she'd warned her not to sleep with him! Yet, the more time she spent with him, it was increasingly obvious he was more than just a pretty face and – she looked at herself again in the mirror – if she

were totally honest, he scared her. What would it be like to be with a man like Finn? Even fleetingly? There was more to him than she'd first thought and … she didn't want to go there.

She went into the bathroom and washed her face with cold water, her desire curling inwards and receding. Now she felt a little foolish, like a mistress hiding away.

With a towel she dried her face and returned to the bedroom just in time to see Finn coming through the door.

She gave him an awkward smile.

'Sorry, it's Adam, my logistics manager. Brought some kit over. I can introduce you, if you'd like.'

'I think it would look a bit … don't you? Why don't you go back to the lounge, and I'll slip out.'

'You sure?' he asked and the concern darkening his eyes almost made her change her mind. And that in itself, reinforced her decision. She should go.

'Yes. Maybe this was a mistake…' She forced a cool smile on her face, as if this had been nothing more than a nice interlude.

'This is a hell of a nice set-up,' called Adam's voice.

'Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't,' said Finn softly, with a grin that turned her stomach inside out.

'I don't know,' she whispered, now utterly confused by the combination of longing and fear coursing through her.

He lifted a finger and stroked her cheek. 'Okay. Shall I call you, about the next trip?'

She stared at him, nonplussed by his words. How could he be so matter-of-fact when she was a churned-up mess inside? 'Next trip?' she asked, deliberately delaying to try and make sense of things.

'Yes,' he grinned. 'There's still lots to see.'

‘Of course,’ she said, crisply, glad to slip back into her businesslike composure.

‘Finn. Where are you?’ called Adam again.

As soon as Finn went to join Adam, leaving the door ajar, Belle crept towards it, listening carefully until she heard Finn shut the lounge door. Darting out, she ran down the hallway and out the suite without even looking backwards. A lucky escape, she told herself as she fled towards the lift. She had a horrible feeling that, if she had slept with Finn, once might not have been enough.

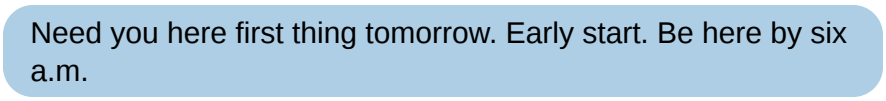
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Chapter Nine

FINN

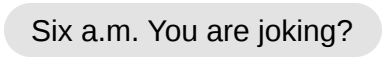
Finn was feeling ridiculously pleased with himself, as he strolled down the stairs to meet Belle in the lobby two days later. He'd thought long and hard about his strategy to get her to meet him again, after she'd taken off the other day with all her reserve back in place. Although his initial plan when he'd first met her had been to take her down a peg, now he wanted to win back the cautiously happy Belle he'd unearthed at the zoo. She reminded him of the giraffe that had found its initial steps and then wobbled again. He'd seen glimpses of the person she could be and now wanted to tease more from her.

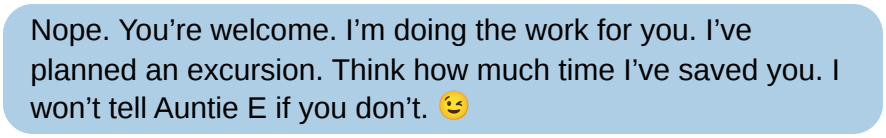
He still thought the text he'd sent last night was a masterstroke.



Yup, both peremptory and arrogant … and perfect.

Her text had come straight back, and he could imagine her indignation.





He'd added the winky-face emoji to tip her over the edge.

I work nine to five.

He could almost imagine her stabbing the words into her phone.

Your nose will grow.

Still grinning to himself at the memory of the exchange, he ambled into the lobby to wait for her.

Ten minutes later, Belle stalked towards him, less wobbly giraffe this morning and more angry lioness. Her cheeks were flushed with the cold and her eyes were narrowed as they focused on their target. Him.

'I have coffee,' he said thrusting one towards her, having made a diplomatic mission to the nearest coffee shop to purchase coffee and cinnamon pastries.

'It's the least you can do at six o' fucking clock in the morning,' she growled, grabbing the coffee, which he took as a good start in the peace process.

'Not a morning person?'

She glowered at him. He grinned back and she sighed in disgust.

'You obviously are. What the hell happens at this hour? Where are we going?'

'It's a surprise,' he said. 'Don't tell me you're not a surprise person, either?'

'I've no idea,' she said and then her face softened. 'My life is too busy for surprises.'

'Whereas mine is always full of them.'

'I can believe that,' she replied with a touch of tartness.

'You really *aren't* a morning person, are you?'

'No, I'm not,' she conceded and gave him a weak smile. 'I need at least two coffees before I'm human, and this is only coffee number one.' She

held up the cup he'd bought.

'Shall I give you mine as well?' he offered.

'It would serve you right, if I said yes. Are you going to tell me where we're going?'

'Nope.'

She sighed and followed him to the underground station.

'You've got to be kidding me,' said Belle, coming to a dead stop beside him at the sight of the big purple double-decker bus outside Watford Junction station. 'A Knight Bus. I don't believe it. Please tell me we are not going to Hogwarts in the Snow. Seriously?' She turned to him, her face a picture of exasperation and disbelief.

'I could tell you that if you want me to, but I'd be lying.'

She clicked her tongue. 'You could have come on your own. You didn't need to drag *me* here.'

'Where's the fun in that? Things are always better in pairs. Noah knew a thing or two.' He winked at her, even though by his own admission that was a truly dreadful joke.

'And why so flaming early?'

Despite her supposed ire, if he wasn't mistaken, he suspected her interest had been piqued, just a little. He beamed. 'We are getting the super-duper, magical exploration, personal tour. Just us. Adam, who so kindly interrupted yesterday, has a cousin who works here. I pulled a few strings and we're getting a private tour before the studios open to the public.'

It was interesting that she completely ignored his reference to yesterday afternoon, but stared at him, irritation and exasperation written in every line on her face. 'Are you for real? This is for children.'

'There's a child inside all of us,' he quipped.

Her mouth tightened and he nudged her. ‘Even you.’

He saw it, the quick spark in her eyes and he wondered what she might do if he kissed her. Instead, he grabbed her hand, leading her towards the bus. ‘Come on.’

She grumbled under her breath but followed him and sat beside him, even though they were the only people on board.

Finn nudged her leg with his. ‘It could be a lot of fun, if you let it.’

She sighed and glanced at him, still obviously sceptical. ‘Finn, I could be doing a dozen other things today.’

‘Like what?’

‘Preparing a proposal for a client.’

He shook his head. ‘Where’s the fun in that?’

‘Life isn’t all about fun, you know.’ She folded her arms across her chest as if she really believed that, but Finn wasn’t convinced. Under the stuffy, reserved exterior he was sure there was more to Belle than she was revealing.

‘It’s pretty miserable without it.’

‘Is that your philosophical conclusion?’ There was a tiny tilt to the corner of her mouth as she surveyed him.

‘It’s a good start. What do you do for fun?’

‘Fun, sounds … aimless, like going out and, I don’t know … being feckless and a bit irresponsible.’

‘Okay, let me phrase it differently, what do you enjoy doing?’

She sat up a little straighter, clearly on surer ground. ‘I enjoy my job. I know that might sound dull, but it’s also lots of things that make me feel happy. Valued. I’m good at what I do, and I like that feeling. I get a lot of satisfaction when a project goes well. And I enjoy spending time with my friends. My flatmates – we have fun together.’ A rueful smile lit up her face. ‘Although we don’t do anything specific, we just hang out together.’

The bus pulled out of the car park, swaying alarmingly, throwing Belle against him and he automatically put his arm around her. She glanced up at him and gave him that same small, shy smile from yesterday.

‘What else would you be doing today if you weren’t working?’

‘Christmas shopping. I haven’t started yet.’

‘There’s a shop at the studios,’ he pointed out.

She laughed, in spite of herself. ‘Yeah, I’m sure my flatmates would love a pair of matching Gryffindor scarves and a holly wand each.’

‘Aha!’ Finn pounced on her words. ‘So, you’ve read the books.’

‘Of course I’ve read the books.’ She shrugged and then stared out of the window, her mouth suddenly pinched tight. ‘My dad read them to us when we were younger.’ Her voice was flat and factual.

Oh hell. Was he raking up memories she’d rather forget?

‘Sorry.’ He put his hand over hers and she gave him the smallest, most vulnerable smile. For some reason, he felt it was a huge gain.

‘It’s fine,’ she said.

‘Shall I tell you why I wanted to come?’ he said quietly, taking her hand in his, linking his fingers through hers, wanting to banish the sadness in her eyes.

‘Go on, then.’

‘When I was a kid, my parents’ marriage wasn’t great. Quite tempestuous. Reading was an escape to another world, especially when I discovered *Harry Potter*.’ His laugh was self-deprecating. ‘I wished I could go away to a magical school where the children had so much freedom to creep out at night, explore the underbelly of the castle, fly on broomsticks and drive magical cars.’ If he were honest, it had been the characters’ youthful magical adventures that had inspired Finn to search out adventures of his own. ‘From the moment I read the first book, I was hooked.’

Belle squeezed his hand, memory lighting up her face. ‘I still remember the very first chapter. My dad doing Mrs Dursley’s voice and me being

desperate for the next chapter every night.'

'Magical.'

She nodded. 'It was.' She turned away and looked out of the window as if she didn't want him to see what was in her eyes, but he could guess. As he studied her profile and the earnest determination to quash whatever memories she had, those quiet words stirred something inside him.

'Maybe I brought you because you lost your childhood magic,' he murmured. He saw her shoulders stiffen, but she didn't turn around. It didn't matter. Today, he would help her find the magic again.

'Hello to you, and festive felicitations. I'm Molly Weasley. Ron's mum,' said the woman who greeted them. She wore a home-knitted Christmas jumper and looked and sounded remarkably like Julie Walters, the actress who played the character in the film.

'And aren't you the handsome couple,' she said when Finn introduced them both.

'Er … we're n—' started Belle.

'Thank you,' said Finn, grabbing Belle's hand as he added, 'You're not the first to say it.'

Belle blushed slightly, and as the delicate rose bloomed across her cheeks, he wanted to trace her soft skin with his lips. The speculative look he gave her made her blush deepen, and again they had one of those second-too-long eye-meets, which made him feel like someone had shaken and opened up a can of soda inside him.

'Ahem,' said Molly with a distinct twinkle in her eyes. 'Before we make a start, we need champagne.' She waved her wand and the door opposite them opened, leading to a starlit grotto. On a small table in the middle, was an ice bucket with champagne, sparkling flutes and a silver platter of mini

smoked-salmon and cream-cheese bagels decorated with delicate fronds of dill.

‘I’ll be back in a little while. Do make yourselves at home, and if you need more champagne, you only have to ask Dobby to ring the bell. But mind you ask him nicely.’ With that, she wafted away, leaving them both staring at each other, a little bemused.

‘Shall we make a start?’ asked Molly, appearing the very second they’d eaten the last crumbs of their bagels. ‘We only have an hour before the ordinary muggles arrive. Our first port of call is The Great Hall. Just a word of warning. Don’t eat any of the chocolate frogs – the last batch were faulty, and all the children turned into tadpoles.’ She cackled with glee and led them to a pair of huge double doors. As soon as they stepped through the doors, she took up a position on a little wooden stool in the corner of the room and picked up her knitting, leaving them to wander at will.

The Great Hall was as festively spectacular as promised, the Gothic interior faithfully restored from the film sets, with tables groaning, quite literally, he noted with a grin, under the weight of the magical food. There were flaming Christmas puddings, blazing with sudden energy every now and then, the aforementioned hopping chocolate frogs, leaping across the table – and the Christmas crackers had come alive and were telling jokes and jumping about the golden place settings. A sorting hat hovered in the corner, birthing snow-covered pointy-hat babies that fluttered away off up to the ceiling.

Everywhere you looked there was another little detail to absorb. It was heartwarming, endearing, and it seemed the place was having a similar effect on Belle. ‘Look at the owls,’ she said, pointing overhead to a row of white barn owls dropping a flutter of talking Christmas cards. Her eyes

sparkled, lighting up and animating the usually sombre blue-grey depths. ‘Oh, and the holly berries!’ She indicated a garland swathed along the walls adorned with holly and ivy, where the little red berries kept bursting open and raining snow like festive popcorn. Belle laughed up at Finn, and he smiled back at her. Their eyes locked for one of those moments where it seemed neither of them could look away.

‘I might have to admit this is quite good fun,’ she said, rolling her eyes as if it cost her something to make the admission.

‘You know it is,’ he teased and linked his arm through hers, pulling her close, pleased when she relaxed naturally into him as if they’d been together for years.

Molly guided them on, regularly retreating to do her knitting as they moved through ice-blue sculptures and a wall of glowing candles before coming to the Forbidden Forest, where the trees were covered in badly-behaved fairy lights, which kept leaping from tree to tree, in and out of the strings of tinsel that kept changing colour.

Belle squeezed his arm, laughing as he ducked out of the range of one string of particularly lively lights, and they came face-to-face.

‘You were right,’ she said, smiling up at him, unguarded and open. ‘This is fun.’ His heart did a funny thunk in his chest and her expression softened, as if she, too, registered that this was *something*.

They stared at each other – the air around them stilled, and they were just two.

‘Pleasure,’ he replied and lifted his hand to brush her hair from her face, because he had to. Had to try the connection. A slow-motion moment. His heart kicked hard when he saw her swallow and her head lift a little towards him. His fingers grazed her skin, soft to the touch, her hair so silky.

When her blue eyes, a little shell-shocked, stared back at him, igniting another one of those weird fidgety feelings, something tilted inside, putting him off kilter. He’d had plenty of relationships, where each party knew

what they were getting into – fun, fleeting and very temporary, with satisfactory sex. This was a whole level of new. As his fingers tangled in her hair, his palm cupped her cheekbone because he was reluctant to break the contact. Finn had to rein back the sudden instinct to wrap his arms around her, haul her to his chest and kiss her like some bloody possessive and protective Neanderthal. What the hell was wrong with him?

‘Ahem,’ said Molly. ‘Ready to move on.’

Finn hauled in a breath. ‘Shall we?’ He linked his arm through Belle’s again, watching her nod as they moved on through the forest to the Gryffindor Common Room.

‘Oh, the stockings,’ said Belle, as if she were striving for normality.

‘I knitted them all,’ announced Molly as Belle pointed to three bright red wool socks hanging from the mantlepiece, each one embellished with the H, R and H, and then she did her usual vanishing act, this time disappearing up the chimney before their eyes.

Belle giggled and stepped forward to examine the hand-knitted socks.

‘I love a stocking,’ she said. ‘Mum stopped doing them.’

Finn paused, hit by an unexpected memory. ‘My mum loved doing my stockings. I’d forgotten. She would theme it each year. Drawing and painting one year; when I went to university, a cooking theme.’ When he’d gone on his first full expedition, she’d given him the antique brass compass, which he always took with him.

‘My mum used to…’ Belle’s voice trailed off wistfully.

‘I think if I went home for Christmas, my mum would still do one for me,’ Finn surmised, with a rueful twist of his mouth, pushing away the quick stab of guilt. He’d got out of the habit of going home for Christmas a long time ago and now his mum didn’t expect him to spend it with them.

The pair of them turned to look at the Christmas tree covered in magical presents that kept bursting open, and he wondered if Belle was as grateful for the distraction as he was. They moved on, Belle giggling and pointing to

the plate of mince pies, where the little pastry pies jumped up off the plate and scattered around the room, hiding under sofas and chairs before reassembling back on the plate to start all over again.

Molly reappeared, picking up one of the mince pies. ‘I can never get the pastry right,’ she said, ‘But here, try one of Professor McGonagall’s mince pies. Far superior.’ She held out a tray of crisp mini mince pies before guiding them into Dumbledore’s office, which contained many of the props and details from the film sets, plus the addition of a giant roll of wrapping paper that kept unfurling, and colourful, self-wrapping ribbons.

They stood spellbound for some time in Diagon Alley, which sparkled with snow and tiny invisible creatures leaving footprints before their eyes. Finn studied the scene, trying to figure out how on earth the special effects were achieved. ‘It’s all so clever,’ said Belle in a hushed whisper. Finn had to duck his head to hear her, and once again he had to fight the urge to kiss her cheek. If he started kissing her now, he wasn’t sure he could stop, even under Molly’s benevolent eye.

‘I have shopping to do, so this is where we say goodbye,’ said Molly. ‘The rest of the way is easy to follow, and don’t forget to stop for refreshment. I made the chocolate logs myself … although they keep turning into crocodiles. Most vexing.’ And with that she disappeared into Ollivander’s wand shop.

From there, Finn and Belle visited Platform Nine and Three Quarters, saw the Hogwarts Express, which was crowded with a very loud and overexcited group of Hogwarts black-gowned students, their wands flashing and colourful sweets dancing through the air.

‘Whoa,’ said Finn, hit by the sensory overload. For a man used to birdsong, the distant whoop of monkeys and the hiss of a machete slashing through vegetation, this was a lot for one day and he suddenly longed for quiet.

‘Everything all right?’ asked Belle, picking up on his change of mood.

‘Yes, it’s perfect,’ he said, squeezing her arm. ‘But I’m in need of refreshment. Fancy a Butterbeer and a chocolate-log crocodile?’

Belle wrinkled her nose. ‘I always thought Butterbeer sounded revolting. I need more coffee, and I’m still trying to figure out if the chocolate log is a real thing or not.’

Finn shook his head in mock disgust. ‘Have you no soul, woman?’

‘No, I have a healthy respect for my stomach. And I need caffeine.’

He left Belle to take a seat in the Backlot Café while he went to buy drinks.

Coming back, he was disappointed to see that she was checking her phone, her head bent over the screen and her face once more taut with concentration.

He placed the coffee in front of her and she barely looked up. ‘Thanks,’ she muttered, focused on her phone. He took a sip of his own coffee, having decided that the Butterbeer was more suited to sweet-toothed children.

‘Sorry,’ she said, finally realising that he was pointedly ignoring her. ‘Just needed to catch up on some emails.’

‘It must be difficult to be so indispensable,’ he commented innocently, hiding his irritation remarkably well.

She looked up with a start. ‘I’m not indispensable. That would be very … arrogant to think that.’

‘But you are very important. You must be.’ He tilted his head towards her phone.

She had the grace to look a little shamefaced. ‘Sorry, I guess I’m being a little rude.’

‘A little,’ he said with a smile, to take the sting out of the criticism before adding, ‘Although perhaps very conscientious.’

The quick *eww* expression on her face made him laugh out loud.

‘That makes me sound horribly prim and goody-two-shoes. I’m just doing my job.’

‘Can you put one of those treble-O thingymajigs on your thingy?’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Funnily enough, I understood that. You mean “out of office” on my email.’

‘That’s the fella,’ he crowed. ‘You can tell them you’re at Hogwarts for Christmas.’

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Chapter Ten

BELLE

Belle laughed for what must have been the gazillionth time that morning as they stepped off the train at Euston. Finn hadn't stopped teasing her since they'd left Watford Junction.

'So, on a scale of one to ten, how much didn't you want to go this morning?' he asked.

'Ten,' she said.

'And now on a scale of one to ten, how much would you recommend it?'

'Ten, and stop being annoying just because you're right.' She poked him in the arm. These easy, casual touches had increased in frequency as the day had progressed, and now they had become … necessary. Another thing she wasn't sure how she felt about. Being with Finn was both unnerving and addictive. There, she'd acknowledged the two-edged sword governing her thoughts.

'So …' said Finn as they approached the barrier. 'What do you want to do now?'

Run away. Stay with you. Kiss you.

She made the mistake of looking at his mouth.

He smiled and she turned hurriedly away. She needed to put some distance between them.

‘I need to do some Christmas shopping,’ she said, delving into her handbag for her phone.

‘Excellent. I’ll come with you.’

‘What?’ She’d assumed he’d run a mile at the word shopping, and she hated that a little prickle of excitement had popped up inside her at the thought of spending more time with him.

‘I’ll keep you company. Carry your bags for you.’

‘I don’t need anyone to carry my bags.’

‘Okay, you can carry mine, then.’

She rolled her eyes because he had an answer for everything and … it was rather cute.

Belle tucked her hands in her pockets wishing she’d brought a pair of gloves as they walked along Portobello Road. While the two of them had been out of town, the temperature had dropped quite dramatically.

‘Do you think it’ll snow?’ asked Finn, looking up at the flat, grey sky. ‘Looks like it might.’

‘Belle shook her head. ‘It hardly ever snows in London.’

‘Not so sure about that. I can smell snow in the air.’

‘Snow doesn’t smell.’

‘Yes, it does,’ insisted Finn, lifting his nose.

‘What does it smell of?’ asked Belle, planting her hands on her hips.

‘Clean, icy, fresh. And you can taste it on your tongue.’ He tilted his head to sniff the air and she couldn’t help noticing the strong lines of his throat and the taut oh-so-kissable jawline.

Belle raised a sceptical eyebrow, even though she wanted to run her mouth across his skin at that very moment. She needed to get a grip.

Yesterday's frantic kissing at the zoo had been an aberration but now it was all she could bloody think about. 'It's not going to snow.'

She glanced around. As always, Notting Hill was busy, but it was the perfect place for a spot of Christmas shopping. They started on Portobello Road at the market, where most of the stall holders were wearing Santa hats and the stalls were decked out in fairy lights, tinsel and holly.

Mulled wine scented the air and Belle could smell cinnamon and oranges.

'Want one?' asked Finn, almost reading her mind.

'Yes, let's,' said Belle with uncharacteristic spontaneity. 'My hands are freezing.'

Once they were clasping tall paper cups of ruby-red mulled wine, they ambled along, perusing the eclectic range of products on the stalls – from organic beauty products through to vintage toys, handmade cushions, Chinese medicinal herbs, trendy T-shirts and leather cowboy boots.

'I always wanted a pair of those,' said Belle, pointing at a pair of rich chestnut leather boots, with their stacked heels, pointed toes and decorative inlay with white stitching. 'No idea when I'd wear them.'

'They never go out of style and always look good with jeans,' said Finn.

'I'm not sure I could carry them off. I'd probably look ridiculous in them.' Her attention was drawn to the next stall selling vinyl, where Brenda Lee's 'Rocking Around the Christmas Tree' was playing at full volume. Finn beat her to the first box of records. Next to him she immediately started leafing through the old album sleeves, recognising a few familiar names.

'I love these old album covers – some of them were works of art,' said Finn enthusiastically, lifting out a scuffed copy of Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*. 'I've never owned a record player, but my parents still have one, and all their old records. My dad still plays them occasionally.'

‘My dad loved music. We used to go to Tower Records at Piccadilly Circus.’ She remembered when he moved out, he’d taken his record player and the boxes and boxes of vinyl with him. ‘He had hundreds of records, and Mum threatened to throw them away if he didn’t take them all.’

Her hand skimmed over a modern pressing of the Beatles’ *White Album*. It would have made her dad a great Christmas present, if she still saw him. Although maybe he had a copy now. He hadn’t five years ago. He’d always been a big Beatles fan.

‘Remastered,’ said the stall holder to her.

‘Thanks. I’m just browsing,’ said Belle, hastily taking her hand away. She hadn’t seen her dad at Christmas for several years now. At first it was easier not to, and then it became habitual.

They wandered along to the next stall which was selling a variety of crocheted and knitted hats, scarves and gloves in a rainbow of colours and styles. Belle smiled at the cosy snowmen hats, with black buttons for eyes and a floppy knitted carrot, which just managed not to look rude. There were sweet reindeer mittens, grown-up gloves patterned with ivy and mistletoe and knitted, fur-lined muffs that looked like Christmas crackers. Belle was very tempted by a beret-style hat and tried on a navy-blue one. Mmm, she wasn’t sure. She took it off again.

‘How about this one?’ said Finn, picking up a scarlet-red hat. ‘May I?’ he asked, looking so impossibly handsome and charming that her mouth dried.

‘Uh.’ Words eluded her and instead she looked dumbly up at him. He brushed her hair back from her face. Inside her, everything turned to mush.

Stretching open the hat from the inside using both hands, he gently placed it on her head, his hands sliding down her face as he positioned the beret at a slight angle. A shiver ran down her spine at the gentle touch, and she made the mistake of glancing up. He’d caught his lower lip between his teeth and all his attention was focused on her.

‘Cute,’ he said, and he lowered his head. Her breath caught in her throat, and she tilted her face up to his.

‘Looks lovely. You should buy it for the lady.’ The stall holder’s strong cockney accent cut through them.

Finn jerked back and Belle blushed. Her face was probably the same shade as the hat.

‘No, no, it’s fine,’ said Belle, backing away, embarrassed. ‘Come on.’ She tugged Finn’s arm hard, leaving him no room to resist. ‘Thank you,’ she said to the stall holder, and steered him towards the next stall, full of chunky jewellery, which wasn’t to Belle’s taste but which her sister would love. She picked up a purple necklace with large square beads interspersed with tiny green round ones. Then there was another, with oval blue beads and a pattern of smaller oval yellow beads. They were definitely what you’d call ‘statement’ necklaces. Then there was another one that Ariel would like in black and amber. Choices, choices. Should she buy one and keep it for Ariel’s birthday, which wasn’t until March? She was so absorbed in making a decision, weighing up whether to buy the blue-and-yellow necklace or the black-and-orange that she didn’t realise Finn had wandered off until he returned.

‘So, are you going to buy one?’

She wrinkled her nose. ‘I don’t know. It’s for my sister, but we’re not supposed to be doing presents this year. I could get it for her birthday. They are gorgeous and very her. I’d love to give one to her for Christmas.’

‘Why don’t you, then? It sounds as if you’ll get as much pleasure out of giving it to her as she will receiving it. So why not?’

‘That’s a really lovely way of looking at it. Yes, I will.’

With that, she decided on the darker necklace and watched as the lady who made them parcelled it up for her in pretty candy-cane-covered tissue paper.

As she took out her purse, she fumbled slightly and tucked it under her arm as she rubbed her hands together, trying to warm them up. Maybe Finn was right, perhaps it would snow. It certainly felt cold enough.

‘Here,’ said Finn, and opened up a paper bag she hadn’t realised he was holding to produce a pair of reindeer mittens. ‘You said earlier your hands were cold. I bought you these.’

Just when she thought her insides couldn’t get any squishier and gooey, he then pulled out the red beret.

Her lower lip trembled. ‘That’s the nicest thing ever.’ Unable to help herself, she threw her arms around him.

And then she completely spoiled the moment – maybe it was just as well – and dropped the purse tucked under her arm. It fell to the floor with a thud and sprang open, spilling coins everywhere.

Immediately she crouched down to round up the errant coins sprinkled around her feet and almost bumped heads with Finn when he followed suit, though at least concentrating on finding her loose change meant that she could avoid looking at him.

What on earth was wrong with her? She was Belle Woods. She didn’t do soft and squishy. Feelings and tenderness were not part of her lexicon. She’d obviously drunk that mulled wine too quickly on an empty stomach. What other explanation could there be?

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Chapter Eleven

FINN

It had been the perfect day. Too perfect. And Finn didn't want it to end. He huddled into his coat, noticing that Belle, despite the beret and gloves, still looked cold. Dusk was spreading its pall across the sky and bringing down the temperature. He really ought to be getting back to the hotel – he had plenty to be getting on with. He could put the finishing touches to his Royal Geographic presentation slides, check whether there was an update on travel arrangements out of Manaus, and follow up with his publisher on how ticket sales were going for the Waterstones book signing event. And none of that sounded the least bit appealing. He glanced at Belle's face, now a little pinched by the chilly air. They'd shared hot mince pies, a bag of roast chestnuts and another mulled wine, but Finn's stomach was rumbling like a volcano about to erupt.

'I'm starving,' he announced. He really didn't want to go back to the hotel alone or, at least, that's what he told himself. 'Why don't you take me to the Burmese place? I've a yen to try something exotic.'

She rolled her eyes. 'I thought you'd dropped the naive tourist routine.' He grinned, and she nudged him in the ribs with another of those easy, casual gestures that was anything but casual to him. Throughout the day, he'd become more sensitive to each physical interaction as each new touch

tripped another switch in his system, adding to the stored-up, edgy, antsy feelings that he couldn't put a name to.

'Come on,' he said, grabbing her arm and virtually frog-marching her forward, needing physical activity to get rid of the weird restless-legs syndrome that had overtaken his whole body.

When they arrived at the little restaurant in the smart courtyard off Long Acre in Covent Garden, even though it was late afternoon, they were seated at the restaurant's last table.

Finn looked around at the simple décor and Belle noticed that his foot was jiggling up and down constantly. She could relate. All afternoon she'd veered between wanting to kiss him and wanting to keep him at arm's length. It all felt a bit too … easy between them and … it wasn't what she wanted or needed in her life. Besides, he was only here on a fleeting visit. Maybe she should just go to bed with him and get it over with. Get it out of her system. There was no denying she was attracted to him.

'This is a long way from Harris,' he observed.

'Stop with the making out you've never eaten anywhere but McDonalds.'

Finn's smile widened, his eyes holding hers, and her heart contracted at the gentleness in his expression.

'But it makes you smile, admit it. And I like it when you smile.' He reached forward and traced the outline of her mouth with one finger.

She stilled, unable to look away from him.

'You look different,' he said softly.

'Oh, and is that good?'

He put his chin on his hand and tilted his head. 'Why would you think it isn't?'

‘There’s the insinuation that, when a woman doesn’t smile, she’s somehow less…’

His voice dropped to barely above a whisper. ‘I don’t think you could ever be less.’

The quiet words struck her straight in the solar plexus and once again their eyes met.

‘You must know you’re extremely bonnie,’ he said, amping up the Scottish brogue again. ‘But when you smile…’ his face turned sombre, ‘you’re even bonnier.’

The quiet declaration left her speechless. ‘Oh,’ was all she could manage.

The waiter arrived to take their order.

‘I’ll take the chicken and a glass of white wine, thank you,’ said Belle.

Finn lifted his head and made eye contact with the young Asian waiter.

Belle sat back and watched as Finn engaged the waiter in a lengthy exchange and Belle smiled as the shy young man warmed up quickly in the face of Finn’s careful attention and onslaught of questions. Watching Finn and his gentle handling of the waiter, who seemed to blossom under Finn’s questioning, made her heart melt all over again. Finn’s eyes were warm as he talked, nodding in encouragement and letting the young man speak. This wasn’t just a polite exchange, she got the impression that Finn was really interested in what he was saying.

‘And what’s his shoe size?’ asked Belle with a gentle laugh after the waiter had disappeared; she was charmed by the exchange.

‘I completely forgot to ask that.’ Dimples appeared alongside his chagrined smile. ‘Sorry, I can’t help myself. People are interesting.’

‘It’s sweet,’ said Belle.

‘Sweet,’ repeated Finn in mock-outrage, his eyes twinkling with a warmth that made her want to fan herself. ‘That’s not very manly.’

‘Endearing. Cute. Adorable.’

‘Adorable, eh?’ He grinned at her. ‘I’ll take that. It’s warm in here.’

She rolled her eyes, but a second later, as he peeled his jumper off to reveal a tight-fitting black T-shirt, all thought of him being adorable was banished. Her mouth dried and she tried, she really did, to avoid looking at the broad expanse of his chest. Normally, overtly masculine men were not her type. Finn was a big man. A manly man. As she knew very well. She pressed her legs together as the memory flooded her body, of being caged by that big body the other day, before they’d been interrupted. The sudden memory made her squirm in her chair and bite her lip, aware that Finn had gone very still. She raised her eyes to his face and found he was watching her, as if he knew exactly what was going through her mind. His eyes zeroed in on her lower lip still held between her teeth, and there was a slightly feral smile in his eyes.

She swallowed, a little scared by the wanton desire twisting up her insides and the hot nub of heat burning between her legs.

When the waiter returned with their drinks, they barely acknowledged him and then, as soon as he’d placed wine in front of her and beer in front of him, Finn stood up abruptly, grabbing her hand.

‘Cigarette break,’ he said to the waiter and tugged her out of the restaurant.

It was cold outside but she barely noticed the chilly temperature.

Finn led her to an alcove and pressed her up against the wall.

‘Hell, I’ve been wanting to kiss you all day,’ he murmured, twisting his hands into her hair and cupping her face. ’If I don’t kiss you—’

Before he could finish, she looped her hands around the back of his head and pulled his mouth down to hers, driven by the heat simmering in her blood which threatened to boil over if she didn’t get that first taste of him.

The minute his lips touched hers, it was a like a nuclear detonation. All the hours of pent-up tension exploded and they were caught in the fallout.

Belle was ravenous for him. His hands dived under her coat and worked their way to touch bare skin, while she was already shamelessly grinding up against him.

‘Belle,’ he murmured, hauling her tighter against him, his mouth on hers again.

Sensations raged through her like a forest fire – uncharacteristic and unnerving, but she couldn’t get enough of him. Being caged by his body again was every bit as good as she’d recalled.

‘Oi, get a room,’ jeered a voice and they both stilled. Finn gave her a rueful smile.

‘Oops.’

She gazed back at him, her breath ragged. This wasn’t ever allowed to be anything other than pure lust. ‘One and done?’

‘Yes.’ His hot breath sighed against her skin. ‘One and done.’

By the time the hotel door closed behind them, they were stripping clothes, coats dropped, tops cast aside, madly racing to remove their jeans. As soon as he’d stepped out of his, he pulled her close, their bare skin touching. She let out an involuntary moan as he kissed her neck, working his way down to the swell of her breasts. His hand cupped her bottom and he pulled her hard against his very obvious arousal. She plunged her fingers into his hair, sucking in desperate gasps of air as he pushed aside the lace of her bra and his hot, wet mouth closed over her nipple. A sharp yearning pulled at her, tugging from her very core. She dug her fingers into his scalp, urging him, desperate for more.

He moved to the other nipple and she had to hang on for dear life, her legs dangerously wobbly. He groaned into her mouth as her hands slipped down his front, stroking him through the soft jersey of his briefs.

Somehow, they half-staggered, half-fell into the bedroom and collapsed onto the bed, their mouths fused in a furious kiss. She almost reared up off the bed when he removed her bra and his mouth closed over her breast, licking and sucking in strong pulls that set fire to the already heated nub at her core. She tilted her head back and gasped for air, one hand clawing at the sheets as if that might ground her and bring her back to sanity. He kissed her throat, his hand moving down over her stomach, pushing down her underwear and his fingers making their way to her most sensitive part. She opened her legs, desperate for his touch, willing him on, while her hand pushed down his briefs and she grasped the smooth skin of his iron-hard length. Between her legs, she was wet and slick and his fingers feathered in a circle, in a teasing brush that made her thrust her hips at him and grip him harder, pumping him because she needed more. He kissed her with the same teasing circles and then slid his tongue in her mouth at the same time as he pressed a finger inside her. She cried out at the fierce bite of pleasure that sent white heat in wave after wave over her body.

She pumped him slowly until his hand came over her and stilled the motion. He slung a heavy leg over hers anchoring himself to the bed while he leaned down to grab his jeans from the floor and retrieved his wallet.

With no fanfare or fuss, he eased on a condom and moved over her. Having been bereft for all of thirty seconds, she pulled his head down for another kiss, desperate to feel the weight of him.

‘Is this too much?’ he asked, quickly. ‘Am I going too fast?’

‘Not fast enough,’ she muttered, lifting her hips and urging him on, her hands roving over his strong, broad back.

He lowered his body to hers and pushed her legs open, teasing her entrance with gentle fingers.

‘Please,’ she begged and lifted her hips, frantic now. She needed to feel him.

He looked up and gave her a devastating smile. ‘Impatient, aren’t you?’ he teased, and then he pushed inside her. She let out a cry of both pleasure and relief as the heavy weight of him settled on her. He filled her and then pulled away. She lifted her hips to catch the rhythm, moaning each time he slid home. He set a smooth, merciless rhythm, filling her over and over, and she traced the indent of his spine with both hands, trying to anchor herself to reality. The slow build was taking over, the tension rising and rising. She pushed against him, trying to get more friction. He pulled out and taunted her and then pushed hard into her. She welcomed each thrust, crying out, desperate to reach the orgasm that hovered tantalisingly out of reach.

‘Belle,’ he groaned, in a low agonised voice. ‘Oh God.’

She saw his throat tense, his eyes burning into hers, and then, as he thrust one last time, she gripped him and felt her release come crashing over her as he pulsed inside her. He collapsed on top of her and lay there as she tried to catch the breath that rasped in her throat. Tiny aftershocks of pleasure pulsed through her and her body softened into the mattress as her brain tried to comprehend what had just happened.

Neither of them said a word as Finn stroked the back of her neck. Gradually, she felt him relax and move so that his weight wasn’t on her, and he pulled her against him.

His steady blue-eyed gaze met hers.

‘Well, that was…’

‘It was,’ she breathed on a sigh, still reeling from what was possibly the best orgasm of her life. In fact, did previous ones even count? Now she smoothed her hands on Finn’s lightly haired muscular chest, taking her time to admire the physique which had been intriguing her for the last couple of days. His body was glorious, especially the lean hips and the dip below his hip, which her fingers traced because it was so deliciously sexy.

‘Sorry … that was all a bit of … I … I’m normally a bit more considerate.’

‘I’ve no complaints,’ said Belle with a stretch, a little self-conscious that her body didn’t match his rugged perfection.

‘If that was one and done, I feel I might have wasted it.’

‘Hmm,’ she said with a smile. ‘There is that.’

‘I mean that was incredible, but I wonder if … I could do better.’ He ran a hand across her waist, stroking her skin with his thumb.

She giggled. ‘That might kill me.’

He nuzzled the tender spot beneath her ear, ‘But it would be fun finding out.’

She smoothed a hand down the outside of his thigh because she didn’t seem to be able to stop touching him. ‘I’m game if you are.’

‘I just need to recover a little.’

He put an arm across her waist and tucked her in next to him, closing his eyes. Feeling sated and supremely relaxed, Belle did the same and drifted off to sleep.

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Chapter Twelve

FINN

Finn came to an hour later, a delicious lethargy filling his limbs and a sense of everything being right. The sight of Belle sleeping next to him stirred something inside him. A sense of profound connection – the feeling that everything was right in the world, and this was exactly where he should be. It should have scared the living daylights out of him, but he was surprised by how at peace he felt.

He stroked the soft, taut skin on her shoulder, marvelling at the serenity on her face and the way she sprawled so comfortably across his body. Something quickened in his blood, and he wrapped an arm around her and dropped a soft kiss on her temple. She stirred and smiled, her whole face lighting up.

'Hello,' she said.

'Hi.' He nudged her nose with his. 'Sleeping beauty.'

'Have you been watching me?' Her eyes narrowed.

'Only for a minute. You sleep very peacefully.'

'Not normally,' she said with a rueful smile. 'What time is it?'

'Need to be somewhere?'

She scrunched up her face and shook her head. 'No, but I can go if you want me to.'

‘Definitely not. I think, according to the terms of our agreement, one and done, means one night.’

‘So it does.’ She sat up and tugged the duvet up to cover her chest, leaned back against the pillows and looked around the room. Surely, she wasn’t feeling awkward?

‘Shall I order some room service?’

‘Oh yes, that would be lovely.’

‘I’ll get the menu.’ He slipped out of bed and glanced over his shoulder at her lying in bed, her hair fanned across the pillow.

‘Nice,’ she said when he caught her clearly ogling his backside.

‘Not objectifying me, are you?’

‘Absolutely. You’ve got a gorgeous arse.’

He laughed and strode into the bathroom to retrieve one of the robes. He took the other and laid it on the end of the bed for her.

Her eyebrows rose and she gave him an approving nod. ‘Thank you. Very gentlemanly.’

He grinned at her. ‘Not always.’

Leaving her to put the robe on, he walked into the living area and picked up the room service menu.

‘What’s your aunt going to treat us to?’ asked Belle, with a raise of her eyebrows as she joined him wearing the robe, her honey-blonde hair delightfully mussed and a sheepish smile on her face.

Finn winced. Of course Elspeth wasn’t paying, even though she’d wanted to. Now was a good time to tell Belle who he really was. It was only a matter of time before she found out anyway… But maybe he’d wait a little while, until the afterglow of sex had dissipated.

They settled on a beer for him and a Christmas Champagne Cocktail for her, along with a selection of snacks – smoked-salmon blinis, caviar, brie and cranberry bites and goat-cheese wreaths – because it was still a little early for dinner.

‘I love snacky food,’ said Belle with an appreciative sigh once he’d phoned their order through. ‘I think it’s possibly my favourite thing about Christmas. All the things that go with it.’

‘My favourite thing is pigs-in-blankets,’ said Finn. ‘And mince pies.’

‘Mine, too,’ said Belle. ‘Although I thought you might have some haggisy thing, haggis-in-blankets?’

Finn laughed. ‘I’m not a complete heathen, you know. I’ll have you know I’m a bit of a pigs-in-blankets aficionado.’

Belle’s eyes gleamed. ‘Really? Best pigs-in-blankets you’ve ever had?’

‘Homemade, of course. Finest streaky bacon, wrapped around a locally sourced chipolata.’

‘Aha!’ said Belle, with sudden animation as if she’d caught him out. ‘What about the sage?’

‘Around the outside, so it’s crisp.’

‘No, no, around the chipolata so that it absorbs the bacon fat,’ she protested.

‘No, everyone wants crispy sage.’

‘And waste all that yummy bacon flavour?’ Belle shook her head vehemently. ‘You’re an amateur. I promise you, my dad taught me how to make the best ever pigs-in-blankets, and the sage has to go between the bacon and the chipolata.’

‘I disagree.’

Belle wrinkled her mouth. ‘We’ll have to have a bake-off.’ Her face wrinkled in thought.

‘Any time,’ he said.

‘What are you doing for Christmas?’ she asked suddenly.

‘I’ll be here.’

‘On your own?’

‘Yes, but that’s fine. I’d far rather be on my own than spend Christmas with enforced jollity, pretending to have a good time while my parents

bicker and bitch at each other. That's why Aunt Elspeth always insisted on us going to her for Christmas. They behaved themselves in public. I'll be forever grateful to her for giving me that.'

Belle's face softened in sympathy. 'I can understand that. I wish I had the courage to stay home by myself.'

He reached out for her hand and gave it a squeeze. 'Why's that?'

Her laugh was bitter. 'Christmas is still a trial because Mum can't forget that Dad left just before Christmas. Before he went, Christmas was always perfect. Since he left, Mum can't … or won't … I don't know which … but she doesn't enjoy Christmas. All the family traditions we had are gone. My dad loved Christmas, and I didn't realise until he left that a lot of our traditions were instigated by him. Now Christmas is just with Mum and my sister, Ariel, and it's a pared-back affair.' Dejection echoed in the slump of her shoulders. 'Mum doesn't even want to do turkey this year … not that I love turkey, but not having it feels like giving up. And like I said before, no presents this year – I mean, I'm not mercenary – but I love the whole present-giving thing. Like you said at the market, giving can be more special than receiving. Finding something special that you know someone will love and watching them unwrap your gift. Like that necklace I bought for Ariel.'

He tilted his head. This was something he could relate to. His mother always made an effort and tried to find gifts recipients would love, whereas his father put in very little effort and inevitably bought something practical for his mum, who would have much preferred something completely impractical. It was his mum who'd sourced his compass, although it had been officially gifted by her and Dad. It was one of his most prized possessions.

Belle gave a shrug. 'I guess it saves me some time this year.'

'When I asked my mum why she kept on trying to get nice presents for Dad,' Finn said, 'she said, just because someone else doesn't make any

effort doesn’t mean you should lower your standards. I always send her something nice.’

Which was a pertinent reminder that he needed to find something, and quickly, to make sure it got to her in time.

‘I love that,’ said Belle and then she sighed. ‘Although pleasing my mum is very difficult these days.’ She lapsed into silence.

‘What does she like?’ asked Finn.

Belle screwed up her eyes and gazed away out of the window, and he wished he hadn’t asked when he saw the pain on her face.

‘Nothing. She doesn’t like anything.’ Belle’s eyes filled with tears, and he put his arm around her and squeezed her shoulders. It would have been easy to offer a platitude, she must like something, but that wouldn’t have been listening. Instead, he waited for Belle to elaborate.

She sighed and sucked in a breath. ‘Sorry. I don’t know why I’m getting upset. It’s just … it’s frustrating … you know, when you can’t … solve it. Provide a solution. That’s what I do. I’m good at it. But when it comes to my mum. It drives me crazy. Since Dad left, she doesn’t … she doesn’t like anything. And I know him going really pulled the rug from under her … but it was six years ago. He’s gone. He’s remarried and he’s not coming back. I get that it’s horrible … and I know she was bereft, but … she’s still so negative. Like she wants to be miserable … about absolutely everything. It’s so hard when you’re with her, because she never has anything good to say about anyone or anything. She takes no joy in anything. It makes spending time with her … I was going to say difficult, but it’s depressing.’

‘Have you said anything to her?’

Belle gave a bitter laugh. ‘I tried once, and we ended up having the most horrendous row, and then my sister didn’t speak to me for a month because I’d upset Mum. And Mum, she just told me I was hard-hearted and had always been on my dad’s side, and she cried every time I spoke to her for the next three months.’

‘Ever heard of emotional blackmail?’ said Finn, squeezing her hand to show that he was on her side.

‘I know but … it’s my mum. I’m conditioned to please her.’

‘And yet, in your job, I bet you don’t pull any punches. You don’t strike me as a people-pleaser.’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘I took you to the zoo.’

‘Yeah but … it’s a quid pro quo. You might get a secondment to New York out of it.’ He winked at her, wanting to wipe the disconsolate expression off her face.

She laughed. ‘There is that. But surely the sex helped.’

‘Mmm, the jury’s out on that one.’

Her mouth quirked. ‘I thought you said you could do better?’

Now it was his turn to laugh. ‘I’ll certainly try.’

‘How long until the room service arrives, do you think?’

‘Long enough,’ he said with a wicked smile, pulling her to her feet, untying the belt on her robe and easing it off her shoulders, so that it slipped to the floor.

She angled her chin up, standing confidently before him. ‘You’d better make this one count, then.’

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Chapter Thirteen

BELLE

‘Finn, I have to go,’ Belle said, dragging herself reluctantly out of bed.

‘No, you don’t. Where do you need to be?’

‘I need clean clothes. I have stuff to do, and my flatmates are going to think I’ve been kidnapped.’

‘You have,’ he grinned, clasping her arm and tugging her back towards him for another kiss.

‘I have life admin. Washing. That sort of thing.’

‘Boring stuff.’

‘Necessary stuff,’ she insisted, laughing at him. ‘And you said you had things to do. A Zoom call?’

‘Yeah, there is that.’ His face sobered. ‘I do have work stuff to do.’ She watched as he caught his lip between his teeth, his eyes suddenly serious. ‘Actually, Belle…’ He paused. ‘There’s something I—’

Belle’s phone suddenly burst into life, loud and discordant. Maddie was calling her.

‘I need to get this,’ she said. ‘Otherwise, they’ll be sending out a search party. We have an agreement.’ The three of them made sure they checked in if they hadn’t been home for more than one night. And Maddie, an inveterate reader of thrillers, insisted it had to be a call because a serial

killer could fake messages and access a phone with your finger or face, if you were dead.

She picked up the call.

‘Proof of life,’ demanded Maddie.

‘I’m alive and well,’ said Belle.

‘Well-shagged?’

‘Something like that,’ she said, conscious of Finn laughing because he could clearly hear Maddie’s very loud voice.

‘Very well,’ he murmured.

She attempted to give him an admonishing glance but when she saw him sprawled, tanned body against the white sheets, looking ridiculously sexy, she could only grin back at him.

‘Good. I take it it’s Fit as Fuck Finn.’

‘It is. And I’ll be home soon.’

‘Over and out.’ Maddie hung up.

‘Cute,’ said Finn.

‘We look out for each other. Now I really must go.’

Finn beamed and broke into song, telling her it was cold outside, doing a fair impersonation of Tom Jones.

Belle shook her head. ‘I have to go, and I always thought that song was a bit creepy.’

‘On that note. I’ll stop begging you to stay.’

‘You were hardly begging me,’ she said.

‘Dinner tonight?’ He batted his lashes at her.

She weighed him up. How could she say no?

It *was* cold outside. The chilly damp air seeped into the collar of her coat. Today was one of those drizzly, grey winter days, although inside she had

her own personal brazier of warmth. She felt positively giddy every time she thought of Finn, his hot, hard body and the things he could do with his mouth. Her heart softened when she remembered the time they'd spent together at the zoo and Hogwarts in the Snow. Her flatmates were really going to tease her.

She hurried along Piccadilly, in a little world of her own, oblivious to the dull rumble of traffic and distant police sirens, a faint smile on her face. When she drew level with Waterstones, she remembered that one of the things she wanted was a book on knitting for Phoebe, to go with the knitting needles and wool she'd found yesterday in one of the charity shops in Notting Hill. She turned into the store and came face to face with Finn.

What!

She stared at the large poster advertising an evening event with Finn … Drew. Finn Drew?

Finn Drew, the famous explorer. Phoebe was a big fan, but Belle had never been interested enough to check him out. He was a big deal, though. Tipped to present the next series of the BBC's *Natural World* programmes. The poster blurred and her stomach hollowed and then her blood boiled.

Finn McAllister. Finn Drew. Why hadn't he said anything? She read through his bio on the window card. He wasn't from an island in Scotland … he'd gone to university in fucking London! He was internationally renowned and had lived all over the world.

Belle couldn't move. Was she the stupidest woman on the planet? He'd played her. Manipulated her. He'd been lying to her all the time. Had he been laughing all along, pretending to be something he wasn't? That stupid accent was only the half of it. He was just like her dad, who'd pretended to be happily married when all the time he was looking for a way out. She still remembered her dad telling her his justification for leaving … that things hadn't been right for a long time between him and Mum. When Belle had

said they seemed fine, he'd told her he'd been unhappy for a long time and had been pretending, manipulating the way things appeared.

Despite being so determined never to fall into that trap of believing something that wasn't true, it turned out she was just as gullible now as she had been then. She, her mum and sister had retreated into a state of grief, for the loss of what once was. A state that her mother had never emerged from. Just thinking about it fuelled Belle's fury. She snapped her teeth together and pivoted on the spot, stalking out of the bookshop and storming back down the street towards the hotel, building up a head of steam. Weaving between dawdling shoppers and tourists, she bowled along like a ship in full sail with the wind well and truly behind it.

Marching into the hotel, not even glancing at the concierge, who not so long ago had bid her a cheerful good morning, she crossed straight to the lift. Her fingers drumming on the brass hand rail the whole way up to the seventh floor.

She pounded on the door of Finn's suite, her foot tapping as she waited for the bastard to open up.

Finn's curious expression morphed into a delighted smile.

'Belle! You're back.'

'Oh, yes,' she snapped with an ominous scowl. 'I'm back.'

He stepped back as she charged inside, taking great delight in slamming the door behind her. He stood in front of her, his hair damp and sticking up and a towel wrapped around his hips. There were still drips of water on his bloody chest.

'You…' She stabbed at his chest hard because the mere sight of it annoyed her so much, bringing home the betrayal. With a flush of anger, she remembered draping herself over that wonderful fucking chest, kissing her way down… She actually growled in pure frustration. It had all been a big fat lie. So much for thinking that being with him had been so right, so

natural. She cringed now at how uninhibited, easy and comfortable she'd felt.

She punched her finger into his solidly muscled chest again, wanting to hurt him as much as he'd hurt her. She thought they'd been so in tune with each other, that there was a connection between them and now … he was standing there, handsome and without a fucking care in the world, and she was so on the back foot. 'You … you…' She scrambled to recall the words she'd practised the whole length of Piccadilly.

'Finn Drew,' she snarled, unable to produce the cold, icy delivery she'd planned. 'What a game, eh? Playing with one of the minions. You even called me a minion. How you must have laughed! First, fake an accent, then make the stupid girl go to stupid places because you could. Ordering me about … because you could. Pretending to be all lost and lonely in the big bad city,' she paused and yelled, 'when you fucking went to university here!

'And as if that wasn't bad enough, you slept with me. Because I'm just a mere minion who doesn't matter and you needed to get your rocks off.' She had never ever used that phrase before in her life, but it sounded bloody marvellous as she shouted it at him.

'And do you feel good about yourself? King of the world. Were you going to tell me? Or was I just a gullible shag? Handy and on tap.'

She glared at him. 'What have you got to say for yourself? Finn bloody Drew-Not-McAllister?'

A buzz of light-headedness threatened, and she had to force herself to hide the unsteadiness in her legs. Now she'd poured everything out, her ire was spent, leaving her wrung out and decidedly wobbly. She didn't do scenes, never lost her temper and didn't get emotional about things.

She gave him an icy stare and folded her arms, disappointment chewing away at her stomach, making her feel sick.

'Belle.' His face filled with concern. Because he'd been caught out. Yeah, she could see the guilt etched in the sad lines around his eyes. Lying

bastard.

‘Don’t you *Belle* me. I’ve got nothing else to say to you.’ She whirled and grasped the doorknob, desperate to escape before she fell apart, horrified by her weakness and the emotional outburst. She needed to get out of here.

‘Belle, wait.’ He laid a hand on hers. ‘Please let me explain.’

‘There’s nothing to explain. You’ve had your fun. One and done, remember?’

She made the mistake of looking over her shoulder at him.

He wasn’t supposed to look at her with regret and sorrow.

She wrenched open the door and marched out.

‘Wait, Belle. Wait,’ he called and followed her a few steps out of the door. ‘Don’t … at least, let me explain.’ She turned around and grabbed the towel, ripping it from around his waist.

His mouth dropped open in surprise and his hands dropped to cover himself. With a triumphant smirk, Belle waved the towel and took it with her, leaving him buck naked as she raced away down the corridor towards the lift.

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Chapter Fourteen

BELLE

‘It’s Finn again,’ said Maddie, as Belle’s phone rang, buzzing on the kitchen table.

Belle tightened her lips.

‘He’s certainly keen to apologise.’ Maddie nodded towards the ringing mobile. ‘Maybe you should listen to what he has to say.’

‘Yes,’ said Phoebe eagerly. Belle glared at her, and Phoebe had the grace to look a little shamefaced. ‘I know. I know. I’m a fan … but…’

Belle bit down on a retort. Phoebe didn’t have to remind her that she had been following the ‘renowned’ explorer/wildlife expert/narrator’s podcast for years.

When Belle’s phone rang again, Maddie picked up it and answered. ‘She doesn’t want to talk to you.’

Belle could hear Finn talking, but not the words. Maddie sat and listened, nodding now and then before finally saying, ‘Sorry, no can do. Sister-code and all that. You’re on your own, buster. Find your own intermediary.’

She hung up and gave Belle a sympathetic smile. ‘To be fair, he does sound genuinely sorry for being a dick – his words, by the way.’

Belle shrugged. ‘It doesn’t matter. We slept together. That’s it. I’m fine.’ She sipped at her tea. ‘Absolutely fine. It’s not as if I was expecting

anything. Although honesty would have been nice.' She paused, inspecting her nails and pushing the cuticles back with what she felt was admirable nonchalance.

Maddie studied her face.

'I'm fine,' she reiterated.

'Are you?' asked Phoebe. 'More tea?'

Belle pushed her empty mug towards her in response and Phoebe jumped up to make her a second cup.

Belle took a deep breath, keeping her body still and upright when what she actually wanted to do was huddle over and grip her stomach to stop everything hurting.

'Okay, I'm not fine.' She jumped up and began to circle the table. 'I'm raging. He lied. Manipulated me.'

'And what are you going to do with it?' asked Maddie.

'What?'

'If it doesn't matter, you move on. It clearly does matter. Only you can control your response to what's happened. You're angry. How will you stop being angry?'

Belle glared at her and her irrefutable logic. 'Bugger it,' she said, sitting down and slamming a hand on the table, making Maddie jump and her half-drunk tea mug skitter to the edge of the table. Phoebe hurriedly put out a hand to rescue it.

'I really liked him. I'm such an idiot,' said Belle. Now that she'd admitted it, she couldn't stop thinking about the time she'd spent with him. Every minute of every hour was indelibly inked into her brain like a tattoo; the way his eyebrows almost met in the middle when he was curious about something; the way his eyes crinkled when he was trying not to smile and failing; the way he smiled nearly all of the time. He greeted life with open arms. Already he'd made her notice things that she'd stopped noticing.

Made her remember the happy things. Opened her eyes to a different world around her.

The three of them lapsed into silence, with Maddie and Phoebe looking at her.

‘Okay! I liked him. I had fun with him. He was good company. And yes, he was fan-fucking-tastic in bed. Happy now?’

Maddie tried and failed to suppress a smile. ‘That good. He really is fit as fuck, then.’

Belle sighed. ‘He really is.’

‘Way to go,’ said Phoebe, holding her hand up for a high-five.

Maddie grabbed Belle’s limp hand and forced it up to meet Phoebe’s.

She gave a pathetic laugh. ‘It was only supposed to be one and done.’

‘And?’ asked Maddie with a salacious grin.

‘It was more than that.’

‘So, what are you going to do? Sit and seethe and let him have all the power, or take charge and have it out with him?’

‘He doesn’t have all the power,’ snapped Belle.

Maddie raised an eyebrow.

Phoebe said apologetically, ‘He kind of does because…’ she spread her hands towards Belle, ‘look at you. He’s making you feel this way.’

Belle gritted her teeth, glared at them both and left the room. Annoyingly, they were right. But she had no idea what she was going to do about it. It turned out, she didn’t have a choice.

Then Finn pulled out the big guns.

Stopping just short of throwing her phone across the room, several hours later Belle left her bedroom and marched into the kitchen where

Maddie was preparing dinner and Phoebe was sitting on the kitchen bench, sipping wine and swinging her legs.

‘You’ll never guess what the weasel has done,’ Belle snapped.

‘Wine?’ asked Maddie, already pouring her a glass and handing it to her.

Belle snatched it up and took a fortifying gulp.

‘What’s he done?’ asked Phoebe, exchanging a wide-eyed glance with Maddie.

‘He’s only got his aunt involved. The donkey-weasel, wank-puffin, shitbag—’ Belle caught herself. ‘I’m acting like a crazy lady, aren’t I?’

‘Out of character,’ suggested Maddie in a far gentler, more conciliatory tone than she would normally have used.

‘Crazy lady,’ said Phoebe in a role-reversal with Maddie, which made Belle realise just how out of character she was acting.

‘Sorry.’ She pulled a hand down over her face. ‘Calm.’

‘So, how’s he got your boss involved?’ asked Maddie, pitching a hip against the kitchen bench and taking a sip of her wine.

‘Elspeth sent me a message. Apparently, he’s’—Belle lifted her fingers in air quotes—‘lost his phone and can’t contact me, so he asked her to message me. I’m to meet him so that I can hand over a key as he needs to collect something from her apartment.’ Belle paused before huffing out an exasperated breath. ‘A designated time and place. I’ve a good mind not to go. Leave him stewing.’

‘And that is not going to happen,’ said Maddie.

Belle narrowed her eyes at her friend.

‘You’re still riled up. You need to go and say your piece, get it all off your chest. Hear what he has to say.’

‘Why?’ snarled Belle, feeling that Finn was still calling the shots.

‘Because it’s the grown-up thing to do.’

‘And you’re going to die of curiosity, if you don’t go,’ piped up Phoebe. ‘This is your opportunity to tell him what you think and work out what you

want to do … because clearly there's unfinished business.'

With her mouth pinched tightly closed, Belle remained silent for a couple of seconds before bursting out. 'I hate it when you're right.'

'Oh pants,' she said when her phone rang the following day just as she was getting ready to go out and meet Finn. It was her mum. To answer or not to answer. Better to get it over with. Answering her phone, she propped it up against her mirror on speaker while she did her eye make-up. She might not be planning to forgive Finn, but she'd make sure he'd get an eyeful of what he was missing.

'Hi, Mum. How are you?' She deliberately injected a cheery note in her voice, hoping that might buoy up her mother.

'I'm fine, considering. You know that woman has been posting all over Facebook about how wonderful she is? You'd think your father had never had a birthday before. It's ridiculous at his age. He's forty-nine, for God's sake. That's what happens when you shack up with a child.'

Belle didn't say anything: platitudes only made things worse and she never felt comfortable agreeing with her mother. Her father wasn't a bad person; he just had questionable judgement.

'What are you up to this weekend?' she asked brightly.

'What do you mean, what am I up to? You think she's invited me along?'

'No, Mum. I wondered if maybe you were doing something with Brenda or the ladies from the choir? Or is Ariel coming round?'

'Your sister is going out with her friends. Although that boy Jason is still sniffing around. I hope she doesn't get back together with him.'

'Mmm,' said Belle noncommittally. Jason was actually a really good guy and treated her sister well.

‘And Brenda’s busy. She’s always busy. Apparently, she’s going out with the knitting circle. For goodness’ sake, what sort of knitting circle calls itself Stitch and Bitch?’

Her mother’s next-door neighbour Brenda was widowed about the same time as Belle’s dad had cleared off. Unlike her mother, Brenda was determined not to feel sorry for herself and had embarked on a series of new hobbies so that she wouldn’t be lonely. She’d confided in Belle, with a naughty smile, that she couldn’t knit for toffee but it was good to get out of the house and the gossip was top-notch. Again, Belle wished her mother could try and move forward instead of dwelling on the past.

‘How’s work?’ she asked.

‘Unfulfilling. Honestly, Josie is hopeless. Talk about incompetent. I could do her job standing on one leg and conducting an orchestra. Although the pay wouldn’t be much more than I’m getting now. She’s got some ridiculous idea about offering school Christmas dinners to all the kids that have packed lunches, so they feel included. The admin involved is a nightmare.’

Belle listened to her mother moan on about her job as a school secretary in the local primary school. She suspected that her mum actually enjoyed her work, if only because of the opportunity it gave her to moan about her colleagues, the children and the parents. She reserved her highest criticism for the head, Mrs Thompson, who despite having run the school very successfully for the last ten years, was apparently ‘totally unsuited to the role and should be fired’.

When Belle finally managed to end the call, she was running ten minutes later than she’d planned and had to rush out of the flat feeling woefully unprepared.

When she emerged from the underground, Belle stood looking at her map, trying to figure out where she was going. Where in the flaming hell was Phoenix Garden? Belle had never heard of it before and its obscurity annoyed her as much as being dragged to this meeting, although her stupid nervous system was dancing about like a bear on crack.

Now she regretted not putting on her reindeer mitts, because her hands were flipping freezing, but there was such a thing as pride. She'd picked them up and then put them down before she left the flat, eyeing the red beret with a curled lip. No. Much as it suited her – and yes it did make her look cute – she couldn't do it.

Her pace as she walked was measured, not too brisk, because she was in no hurry to get there, and not too slow because she wasn't the least bit anxious or worried or nervous about this meeting. She was going because she had to – that was all.

The garden held the forlorn abandonment of winter, the bare trees a little straggly and the shrubs a little shrunken, shying away from the brick-built paths and making her wonder why on earth Finn had chosen to meet here. She found out a few seconds later, as she followed the path and spotted an oasis of Christmas, with two Christmas trees flanking a wooden bench under a pergola of fairy lights. There was an audience of gnomes in various poses and sizes, each wearing a Santa hat, arranged in front of the bench as if they were elves awaiting the big man. It was ridiculously kitsch, and it made Belle smile even though this was serious business. Only Finn could have found somewhere like this to meet.

And there he was, sitting on the bench. Behind him, on an adjacent building, was a large mural of stick people and something in her brain flickered in recognition but was eclipsed by the swarm of butterflies trying to beat their way out of her stomach. She honestly thought her legs might let her down as she wobbled like that little newborn giraffe and prayed that it didn't show.

Finn looked up as she approached. She almost stopped, shocked and annoyed anew by how handsome he was. How had she forgotten that? Bugger him.

He watched with steady eyes as she walked forward, every sense on high alert. Her footsteps on the brick path sounded too loud and, like the princess and the pea, with each step she took she was aware of every stone and crunch beneath her feet. His solemn, focused gaze brought out tiny pinpricks of awareness across her skin, all the hairs rising like tiny magnets tuned in to due north.

She studied him, avoiding meeting his eyes, taking in the red rose in his lapel and the copy of *The Times* on his knee. Blind-date ready, she realised.

He stood up and held out a hand.

‘Hi, I’m Finn McAllister, also known as Finn Drew. I think we got off on the wrong foot, and I wanted to introduce myself properly.’

Surprised, Belle took his hand and shook it.

‘And for full disclosure’—his regret-filled eyes stared down at her as he kept hold of her hand—‘I haven’t lost my phone. I did use nefarious means to get you here, for which I’m sorry. I did it because I was desperate to right a very bad wrong. And to apologise wholeheartedly for being a manipulative dick who doesn’t deserve a second chance. Full disclosure, I find … I like you very much and enjoy spending time with you.’

He released her hand. She was aware of his stillness, as if his every nerve-ending was on alert.

‘I think we got off to the wrong start and I’d very much like it if perhaps we could start again.’

The only sounds around them, apart from the distant buzz of traffic, were the sweet notes of a blackbird singing nearby. They were tucked away in an oasis of calm in the centre of London, the only people here in this hidden little park.

Belle gave him a cool look and then realised it was probably the exact look she'd given him when she first met him, when she'd thought he was an entitled man-baby and dismissed him as such. She'd made a bad judgement call. So had he. Maybe two wrongs balanced each other out.

Maybe.

The jury was still out.

She looked into his face, lifting her chin slightly to make sure he knew that she wasn't a pushover.

'I'm Belle Woods. I work for your aunt as an executive assistant. Not Belly. Not a minion. Your aunt asked me to look after you in exchange for helping me to get a secondment to the New York office. I never had a choice. You took advantage of that.'

'I did. I overheard you calling me an entitled man-baby and I assumed you were a snotty, stuck-up madam who didn't know me. And I decided to take you down a peg.'

'I overheard the way you told Elspeth to get "a minion" to book a hotel for you.'

He stretched his mouth in an ugly grimace. 'That probably sounded shit. For the record, I've always teased my aunt about being so high-powered she has minions. It's an in-joke that probably didn't sound the least bit funny from the outside. I'm not like that, really.'

Belle nodded because, if they were being honest, she had to concede she did know that.

'Once I started playing the game … we were having fun and I didn't want it to stop.'

She nodded, understanding that.

'Right, well at least you've been honest with me now,' she said, thinking she could leave with her head held high. Finn had confessed and apologised. They could go their separate ways. 'I appreciate that,' she said, holding out the key. 'You needed this.'

She turned to go, but Finn’s hand caught her shoulder gently. A quick dart of something flickered in his eyes and his Adam’s apple dipped.

‘If you’re looking for honesty …’ he paused. ‘I should have come clean with you a lot sooner. I kept putting it off. I didn’t intend to sleep with you. I didn’t intend for it to matter … but it does. I don’t want it to end like this,’ he said. ‘I think this is something special.’

Belle lifted her eyes to his face, shocked by the determined sincerity glowing in his eyes.

‘I’m scared, if you go now, we might never find out…’

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Chapter Fifteen

FINN

Now Finn wished he hadn't blurted it out as they stood looking stupidly at each other. 'Too soon?'

'Er … unexpected,' said Belle, folding her arms, her expression wary. 'I'm trying to be cool and dispassionate here, and you have to go and spoil it.'

He winced at the 'cool and dispassionate'. He'd known he was going to have to work hard for her forgiveness, but honesty was all he had.

'Let me start again with that apology,' he said. 'I shouldn't have manipulated you or lied to you, but once I started … I didn't know how to stop, and then… What I mean is … I panicked.'

'You panicked?' Her mouth tilted in an amused smile as if she knew a secret she wasn't sharing. It unnerved him. What was she thinking? Would she listen? If he were in her shoes, would he?

He scratched his head, still trying to grasp the right words but grateful that he had at least secured the smile. 'I don't do'—he spread his hands out wide—'this stuff. I'm not here for long.' He gave a mirthless huff of laughter. 'That sounds wrong, I'm not dying. I leave in a few weeks.' With a frown, he tried to count the days in his head. Normally he'd know, he and the team had a countdown but, for some reason, he couldn't access that bit of his brain. 'I don't … I don't do relationships because I'm away so often.

I spend less than three months a year in the UK.' He hated saying that, but it was true and anything else would be a lie and he owed it to Belle to be completely honest with her.

She studied him and he felt he was being weighed up, like she was totting up a list of pros and cons before she said anything more. The pause in the conversation dragged on and he felt as if he were standing on a precipice, because whatever she said mattered.

Finally, she said, 'I don't do relationships either, because I don't need a man in my life. I prefer to be self-sufficient. I'm not interested in finding a partner.'

He nodded.

'I'm not upset with you because I thought you were relationship material. We did say one and done,' said Belle. 'I shouldn't really care that you lied to me, because … we'd already agreed it was never going to be a thing.' Her casual shrug sent a dart of fear through him. 'It's more that I feel you've humiliated me.'

'That was never my intention. And now I really regret it … because it's more than one and done. It is a something,' said Finn, a little desperately, even though he was being contradictory. 'This, you … it's different.' His incoherence frustrated him. Why couldn't he articulate how he felt? He was panicking again which was not like him. He faced all sorts of obstacles and issues on his trips and always approached them with calm and logic.

He forced himself to take several even breaths. 'Look, Belle. I don't know what this is, but I'd like to spend time with you. While I'm here. There's a connection. But I'm not going to lie to you and make any promises for the future.' He stared her down, willing her to admit it. She stood like a warrior, ready to fight or declare the battle was over and walk away and not look back.

'Where are you going?' she asked, and he was irritated by her deflection.

‘Brazil. The Amazon Rainforest.’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘When do you go?’

‘Boxing Day.’ This was stupid. He should let her go. He was leaving in a matter of weeks and would be away for at least four months. After that he’d be going to the Andes for three months, and then, who knew where?

She nodded. ‘Maybe we’d have worked whatever this is out of our systems in a couple of weeks.’

He nodded back. They looked like a pair of dogs in the back of someone’s car. ‘Maybe we could put it down to the build-up of Christmas and being swept away by festive spirit.’

‘Maybe,’ she agreed with another, grave this time, nod.

‘What?’ The most ridiculous rise of hope made him want to whoop, which of course he didn’t. ‘Does that mean you’ll give me another chance?’

When she pursed her lips, he feared that she would say no. ‘Just make sure you don’t lie to me again. It made me feel like a fool.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘Really. I should have been up front from the start about who I am, but you were so trusting and cute.’

‘Cute! I am not cute.’ She pulled a disgusted face.

‘You are.’

‘Do not call me cute. I’m not cute. Women don’t go around calling men cute.’

‘I think they do.’

‘Not in the workplace.’

‘We’re not in the workplace.’

She gave an exasperated sniff.

‘You were very patient with me,’ he said. ‘And you’re such a decent person. You played along. Taking me to the zoo, when you didn’t really want to.’

‘I didn’t have a choice.’

‘Come on, Belle. If you really think my aunt wouldn’t promote you because I told tales on you … then you shouldn’t be working for her. Elspeth thinks you’re the bee’s knees … and she’s going to be mad as hell at me. She explicitly told me not to seduce you.’

‘You didn’t seduce me. I’m a big girl and I’m quite capable of saying no.’

‘Remember to tell her that.’

‘If you’re going away soon, she’ll never need to know. It will be over and done with by the time she gets back from New York.’

‘So… Does that mean you will give me another chance?’ he asked.

‘This time, but don’t lie to me again. This is just until Christmas.’

‘Just for Christmas.’

‘Don’t make me sound like a puppy,’ she growled at him. ‘And why here? Please don’t tell me you put the gnomes out.’

‘No, I didn’t know about them until I got here.’ Suddenly, he hoped that she’d seen *Last Christmas* and the scene on this very bench with Emilia Clarke and Henry Golding. ‘So, now, what?’ he asked, wanting to get back onto a steady footing.

‘I go home, sort some stuff out, and then, you can take me out to dinner. I’m guessing you know your way around a bit better than you let on. Do you really live in the Outer Hebrides?’

‘I was there for a couple of months, on the Isle of Harris, but it was just to get my book finished.’

‘So where do you live?’

‘No fixed abode at the moment.’

Which was why he’d been going to stay with Elspeth over Christmas.

She glared at him, but there was humour in her eyes. ‘All that malarkey with the bloody compass. I bet you knew where you were going all the time. I can’t believe I fell for that.’

‘It was kind of adorable that you believed it could tell how far we’d walked.’

She punched his arm, and he took the opportunity to haul her up against him. He looked down into her eyes. ‘I just wanted an excuse to spend time with you.’

‘Hmph,’ she said. ‘Kiss me and I might get over it. But I’m not staying, I have things to do.’

When Belle finally left after agreeing to meeting up with him later, he watched her walk away with all the pathetic longing of a lovesick puppy, hoping that it wasn’t the last he saw of her, while knowing that he was stepping into treacherous waters.

What was he thinking? In a few weeks he’d be leaving.

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Chapter Sixteen

FINN

He waited beside the big Christmas tree, in the lobby of the hotel, the fragrance of the pine reminding him of Christmases past. Finn ignored the pang of melancholy it brought with it. It had been the one time of year that his father was home, and his mother had worked hard to create the perfect family Christmas. Of course, it dissolved the minute Hogmanay was over and his father departed back to whichever apartment in whichever European city he was working in.

The minute he spotted Belle entering through the revolving doors, his spirits lifted.

'Hello,' he said as they stood in front of each other, grinning like a pair of idiots. He leaned in and put his hands around her waist, wanting to stake his claim and re-establish the warmth and the connection between them. Since he'd woken this morning, he'd been counting the minutes until he saw her, half convincing himself that perhaps the feelings he had for her were the result of post-heady-sex endorphins and he'd imagined it all.

But when she wrapped her arms around his neck, her eyes glowing with amusement, he felt that quick pull of recognition. A tug of awareness that fired up all his senses as he remembered the tiny freckles on her nose, only visible when he was this close, the way that she smiled with her eyes and the secretive curve of her lips when she was trying not to smile.

‘Hello,’ she said, with a touch of endearing shyness.

When he leaned in to kiss her, they bumped noses, and the unexpected awkwardness and frisson of newness made them both laugh. He took her hand.

‘Shall we go?’

‘Are you going to tell me where?’ she asked with an animated huff.

‘It’s a surprise.’

She rolled her eyes and squeezed his fingers in her hand. ‘I’m here now. You can tell me.’

‘Impatient, aren’t you?’ he teased and there was a flash in her eyes as the remembered words came back to both of them.

‘Always,’ she said with a challenging smile.

‘So I recall.’ Tension fizzed between them and he let out a slow breath to regain his equilibrium. At this rate they’d never get to the theatre.

‘Come on.’

‘Are you really not telling me where we’re going?’

‘Only if you promise not to get your phone out and look it up.’

She gave him a teenage eye roll. ‘I promise.’

‘We’re going to the London Palladium.’

‘Okay,’ said Belle guardedly.

‘But dinner first. I know this great place.’

‘Not McDonalds.’

‘No, although admit it, once you tucked into those French fries, you were quite happy.’

She sighed. ‘It was okay for a change. So, are you at least going to tell me where we’re eating?’

‘No. Trust me.’ He winked at her, and they walked on quickly, cutting through the backstreets of Mayfair towards Regent Street and across it to the Carnaby Street area.

‘Kingly Court,’ said Belle. ‘Now you’re talking. I love it here.’

It was a foodie heaven, with restaurants on three floors around a quaint and very busy cobbled courtyard. With an eclectic collection of restaurants, people could eat every type of food, and he smiled, thinking of insisting on going to McDonalds.

Belle caught him and nudged him in the ribs. ‘I know what you’re thinking.’

‘I’m sorry…’ He sniggered. ‘But when you told me that it wasn’t Scottish’—she glared at him until he finished—‘I think that’s when I fell for you.’

Her mouth twitched with that reluctant smile of hers which he found so endearing. ‘I can’t believe I was so gullible.’

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. ‘You were kind. Letting me down gently and not mocking me.’

‘My sister doesn’t think I’m kind,’ she said.

‘Why not?’

‘She thinks I should be a little more tolerant of my mum.’

‘And what do you think?’ asked Finn.

Belle lifted her shoulders in a helpless shrug. ‘I suppose I should be more patient with her but it drives me mad that she won’t help herself. That she won’t move on.’

‘Sometimes people need a catalyst, to show them that there’s another way or that there are two sides to a story.’

‘Well, I’ve no idea what that would be with Mum.’

‘Oh my,’ said Belle, staring at the vast quantity of fairy lights strung along the lengths of the balconies of Kingly Court and cascading down into the open courtyard below. ‘Isn’t it pretty?’ She stood hugging her hands to her

chest, staring around, her eyes glowing with a childlike delight as bright as the bulbs around them.

He couldn't resist dropping his head to give her a kiss on the mouth, his soul warmed by her obvious pleasure and the air of bonhomie and happiness around them. People were wrapped up in gaily coloured hats and scarves, their faces softened by the radiance of the lights and the joy of being together.

They scaled the stairs to the second floor, accompanied by the escort of the twinkling lights, which were absolutely everywhere. Finn decided, there and then, that if he ever had a place to call home, he would definitely deck it out with these small gold lights every Christmas. They warmed the night, creating a welcoming, gleaming beacon for all.

'Have you been here before?' she asked.

'Not this restaurant but I've been to the Pizza Pilgrims on the ground floor.'

'I hope you've booked a table for wherever we're going. It's mobbed.'

'I have, or rather, Jonathan, the Ritz concierge and my new best friend, did it for me. He recommended this place.'

They were greeted at Imad's Syrian Kitchen with a friendly welcome as soon as they stepped across the threshold of the restaurant, and were immediately enveloped in a fug of spices and instant warmth.

Belle beamed at him. 'This is great. Just the sort of food I love.'

'Phew,' he said as they were led to a small, intimate candlelit table for two. 'It's mainly sharing plates.'

The food when it arrived was every bit as good as it smelled, although Finn was also enjoying the long eye-meets and twinkly smiles and the low current of undeniable anticipation between them. Before he could stop himself, the words breezed out of his mouth because life was too short to muck about.

'Are you thinking about us kissing again as much as I am?'

Her eyes did that cute widen-with-surprise thing and he liked that she was so expressive, especially when her mouth dropped open and she gazed at his lips. An extra beat inserted its way into his pulse with a thud.

‘Are you always this smooth?’ she asked, a smile playing around her mouth as she studied him.

‘Hardly,’ he said, because he hadn’t meant to blurt it out quite like that. ‘I had no intention of saying that … it just sort of… If I was smooth, I would be trying to play it cool and be a lot more sophisticated and worldly.’

She laughed. ‘Sophisticated and worldly? I’d rather honesty every time.’ And then she wondered if she were being honest with herself, why she hadn’t pressed him further on the casual ‘that’s when I fell for you’. The words had launched a thousand butterflies in her stomach… Why hadn’t she pressed him on it? What was she scared of?

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Chapter Seventeen

BELLE

Belle entered The Ritz, tugging her small cabin bag behind her, with a small frisson of excitement blooming in her chest as she was once again delighted by the sheer gorgeousness of the elaborate Christmas tree and the beautiful gilt-edged décor. Jonathan, the concierge, gave her a discreet nod making her smile even brighter. Who'd have thought that one day she'd be spending the weekend at The Ritz? All her senses tingled in anticipation. It was such a fabulous place and she wanted to make the most of every minute.

In fact, being crammed into a busy tube carriage like the runt of a sardine shoal had made her regret declining Finn's offer after the pantomime to stay over. She'd impressed herself with her considerable will power after a very long goodbye kiss, which very nearly made her toss her good intentions aside and go back to the hotel with him. However, if you were going ice-skating, you needed the right clothes, not going-out-to-dinner clothes.

Today she was wearing thick black lycra tights, her favourite kilted skirt – because you had to wear a skirt if you were going ice-skating in case you wanted to do twirly things on the ice (in her head, because she couldn't skate, actually, but hey, you had to be prepared for the possibility) – and she had overnight things so she didn't have to do a walk of shame through the

hotel lobby, although the staff were far too discreet to acknowledge such a thing.

When Finn flung open the door, she couldn't help the brilliant smile that flooded her face. Each time she saw him, her whole body reacted to his sunny good looks.

'Good morning,' he said and hauled her into his arms to give her an exuberant kiss, while she was still clinging to her suitcase. 'I missed you.'

She gave a breathless laugh. 'Oh no you didn't.'

'Oh yes I did.'

'Didn't.'

'Did.'

Belle realised Finn might keep up the traditional pantomime trope forever if she didn't put a stop to it.

'My sides still hurt from the pantomime last night,' she said. And who knew she'd have enjoyed it so much? Going to the panto was something she and her sister had done with Dad, and her memory of it had been soured by her mum's disapproval. It wasn't something she'd have chosen to do in a million years, yet she couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed so much or eaten quite so many Maltesers in one sitting. Despite their dinner, Finn had insisted on buying them. 'What a show.' The whole thing had been spectacularly camp and outrageous. The actors' costumes had been completely over the top, with wider than wide crinolines, taller than tall hats, brighter than bright fabrics with the most ostentatious amount of glitter and sparkles humanly possible. They'd been befrilled, befrogged and beribboned, combined with ridiculously large handbags and props. The script had been played to be camp and tastefully crude, chock-full of double-entendres that thankfully went over the heads of the many children in the audience who joined in with the booing and hissing of the villains with great gusto … as had she and Finn.

‘Wasn’t it good?’ said Finn, beaming from ear to ear. ‘Maybe we should go again.’

Belle laughed because his enthusiasm was so infectious.

‘Have you had breakfast?’

She shook her head. Not wanting to admit her empty flat had held little appeal for a solo breakfast and there’d been no milk anyway. Both Maddie and Phoebe had gone away for the weekend.

‘I ordered some pastries and a couple of bacon butties. Want a coffee?’

‘Yes, please. The joys of living in a hotel,’ she said with a laugh, thinking of the luxury of being able to order up anything you wanted.

‘I know,’ he said, leading the way into the lounge area. ‘Although, sometimes I regret not having my own place. I did rent a flat for a while in Clapham but gave it up, and so now most of my stuff is in storage.’

‘No way. Clapham’s where I live.’

They established that his flat had been two streets away from where she was currently renting.

‘Small world,’ said Belle.

‘Not really,’ said Finn thoughtfully. ‘People say that, but … there’s a whole world out there. Parts of which are still unexplored.’

‘And what makes you want to find them?’ asked Belle, curling up on one of the sofas as he made her a cup of coffee using the fancy coffee machine and frothing up the milk to make her a cappuccino, exactly as she liked.

‘The million-dollar question,’ he said. ‘There’s something about being somewhere untouched by humans or untouched for hundreds of years. Seeing the undisturbed landscape the way nature intended. It’s fascinating.’

Belle couldn’t take her eyes off his face as he spoke in that low, steady, confident voice. She studied the quiet, burning determination in his eyes and the thoughtful tilt of his head and recognised a kindred spirit. He was driven. Motivated. Inspired. Passionate. She found it hopelessly attractive

and ridiculously sexy. When he handed her coffee over, she stared at his biceps under his khaki T-shirt, easily able to imagine him hacking his way through a jungle with a machete. She could tell he was a doer, a man that got things done. A man that probably would book the clown, if required. If he were around, a small voice in her head reminded her, because Finn would be moving on. After this, she might never see him again. It was a timely reminder that she shouldn't get too attached, because there was an expiry date on whatever was developing between them.

Leicester Square thronged with people and Belle was ready to head straight through when Finn steered her to the Christmas Market in the middle of the square.

'Let's take a look,' he said with a mischievous grin.

'You can't be hungry, we've only just had breakfast.' The bap, stuffed with crispy, streaky bacon and English mustard had been filling enough, and she really hadn't needed the chocolate croissant to follow, but it had been too good to resist, especially with Finn feeding it to her and getting her to lick the chocolate from his fingers. It was a miracle they'd left the suite at all, let alone before lunchtime.

'I'm always hungry,' said Finn with a lascivious smirk, waggling his eyebrows.

'I think the word might be insatiable,' retorted Belle, unable to hide her smile because around Finn it was just impossible.

'I don't recall you complaining.' He tucked her hand into his with another irrepressible smile.

'It's a good job you put the do-not-disturb sign on the door,' said Belle, unable to believe her wanton behaviour and going back to bed at ten in the morning. Around Finn, she seemed to be quite happy to cast aside any

inhibitions and seize the moment. What did that say about her? And did she really want to analyse her answer too closely?

Finn insisted they buy a mince pie each. ‘To keep our strength up.’ And when she took the first bite, as always when she was with him, she was glad.

‘Mince pies are my favourite thing about Christmas,’ he declared.

‘I thought you said it was pigs-in-blankets.’

‘Those, too, and Christmas trees and Christmas pudding and chocolates on the tree and stockings and—’

‘So, everything, basically.’

‘I guess. How about you?’

‘Christmas trees definitely.’ She cast a wistful look at the trees lining the outside edge of the market. ‘But we probably won’t have one at the flat.’

‘Why not?’

‘You try carrying a Christmas tree home through London.’

Finn frowned. ‘What else?’

‘Stockings,’ said Belle, remembering how much fun she and Ariel had had when they were younger.

‘Me, too. It’s a shame we have to grow up.’

‘Mmm,’ said Belle, suddenly thinking hard. She knew Ariel had been disappointed about not having a stocking this year, and she remembered Finn telling her what his mum said about Christmas. Something along the lines of doing what feels right to you: making an effort, even if other people don’t.

‘You know, I’m going to make a stocking for my sister,’ she said. ‘Because she really does love them. And I’m going to give her the necklace I bought.’

‘Attagirl,’ said Finn with an approving glance that warmed her inside. She’d make him one, too, she resolved.

‘Actually, Finn.’

‘Yes?’ he drawled, at her serious tone.

‘Would you like to come and have Christmas lunch with me and my flatmates? It’s next Saturday, not on Christmas Day – we’ve got another waif and stray coming too, so there’ll be five of us.’

‘Will there be pigs-in-blankets?’ he asked solemnly.

‘Hell, yes.’

‘Turkey?’

‘Yes.’

‘Stuffing?’

‘Yes! We’ll have the works.’

‘Christmas pudding?’

‘Possibly not.’ Neither of her flatmates was keen. ‘But I could get you a little one.’

‘Deal, if you let me get you a Christmas tree. Because I’m not coming if you don’t have a tree.’

‘If you carry it to the flat, you can fill your boots,’ she said, thinking that he’d have a job on his hands.

From Leicester Square, they meandered their way to Covent Garden, one of Belle’s favourite parts of the city. The piazza was a mass of poinsettias in pots that had been loaded on old-fashioned market barrows, draped with variegated ivy and wreaths of berry-laden holly. Around them, the cobbled streets were filled with shoppers and street entertainers. In the market itself, giant silver baubles trimmed with outsize mistletoe decorated the whole length of the Victorian vaulted ceiling. The traditional stalls, which once might have been full of fruit and vegetables, were now bursting with a plethora of colourful and unusual gifts.

Belle bought each of her flatmates a pretty felt brooch, and a silver bangle made out of an old silver fork for her sister. She also spotted a gorgeous wool scarf for Finn, and was just wondering how she might get rid of him, when he said he needed to find the gents. She pointed him in the right direction and, in his absence, nipped back to the stall they'd passed five minutes before to buy the chunky cable scarf in navy. As she was paying for it, she wondered if her dad might like one, too. It was his birthday tomorrow. She'd sent a card but had ignored his suggestion that they might get together for dinner one night very soon. Acting on a whim, she bought a second scarf in a dark-olive colour, telling herself she could always gift it to someone else or keep it herself. One could never have too many scarves.

By the time Finn caught up with her, she was examining some earrings and wondering if Maddie might like them.

'Who are they for?' asked Finn, as she stood umming and ahhing.

'My flatmate, Maddie. We all buy each other a couple of small gifts and one silly one from a charity shop.'

'And why wouldn't she like them?' asked Finn.

'Because earrings are quite personal.'

'Do you like them?'

'I love them,' she replied.

'Easy, then. You give them to your flatmate. Tell her, if she hates them, you'll take them off her hands and keep them and buy her something she does like.'

Belle burst out laughing at his infuriating logic. 'I can't do that.'

'Why not? If you like them, it's even more reason. They won't go to waste. There are two reasons for buying things, because they're useful and you need them, or you love them and will get joy from them.'

With the earrings tucked into her backpack, along with her other purchases, they walked on through to Drury Lane and then down onto the

Strand, which as always was wall-to-wall double-decker buses.

‘I take it you have been on a double-decker bus,’ said Belle accusingly.

Finn had the grace to look sheepish. ‘Yep, a time or two. Usually drunk on the night bus.’

Somerset House never ceased to surprise Belle. It was an oasis of calm with its elegant white Portland limestone facades tucked just off the hubbub of the busy London streets.

Today, the quadrangle bustled with life, an enormous Christmas tree standing at the entrance, and beyond it the iconic ice rink which had become such an intrinsic part of London’s December festivities. Everyone was bundled up against the icy snap of the wind today. The temperature had nosedived and when Belle looked up at the heavy grey clouds gathered ominously above, she shivered into her coat.

They walked around one side of the square to the ticket office, passing the huge Fortnum & Mason pop-up shop. Through the windows, they could see brightly coloured tins of biscuits, square boxes of plum pudding, canisters of fragrant teas and lots of shoppers with the familiar blue carrier bags.

Belle felt the bite of ice on her cheek and squinted up into the sky disbelievingly. She shook her head and turned back to Finn.

‘Can you skate?’ she asked. ‘I’ve been a couple of times. I was going to assume that you’d learned on the lochs in the Highlands but … where did you grow up?’

‘Edinburgh. A gang of friends used to go to the big rink at Murrayfield occasionally, but I wouldn’t say I can skate. I can stay upright.’

‘That’s about my level,’ said Belle, touching her cheek where another hit of cold had landed.

This time when she looked up, she could see tiny, tiny flakes of snow whirling downwards.

‘It’s trying to snow,’ she said, brushing another flake which had landed on her nose.

‘I think it’s succeeding,’ said Finn, looking at the white flecks starting to gather on his coat.

‘It won’t settle,’ said Belle, peering upwards at the fine dusting falling steadily. ‘It’s not heavy enough.’

When she gingerly stepped out on the ice with the unfamiliar boots on her feet, the thin blades felt ridiculously inadequate to hold her up. She quickly sought the rail around the edge and clung to it while Finn took a few exploratory steps, testing his balance, and then reached for her hand. He was a lot more competent on the ice than he’d admitted.

‘Come on.’

‘I’ll pull you over,’ she said, shaking her head and inching along.

As she took a few careful steps, pushing forward with the skates, the ice unforgiving beneath her feet, she gained a little confidence. Finn stuck close by, and when she wobbled, he hovered as if ready to catch her. When she finally let go of the bar, she managed a whole slow circuit, albeit with her head down watching her feet the whole time, aware of Finn beside her.

‘I could do with one of those penguins the children have,’ she said casting an envious eye at some of the tots gliding along.

‘Oh, no,’ he said. ‘If you rely on something like that, you’ll never learn.’ He took her hand and led her into the middle. The snow had thickened a little and the flakes had doubled in size.

‘Try and catch one with your tongue,’ said Finn.

‘You’re joking, I’m having enough trouble looking where I’m going.’

‘This will distract you and allow you to relax. Better for your centre of gravity.’

Belle clutched his hand tighter and tried to do as he said, looking forward and up instead of down at her feet.

‘Got one,’ said Finn with a sudden crow beside her. She lifted her head and opened her mouth, focusing on the feathered flakes drifting down. It missed her mouth and landed on her eyelashes, making her blink and laugh. ‘You’ve set an impossible challenge,’ she muttered.

However, she realised, he was right. After twenty minutes, she’d stopped worrying about falling over her own feet, and was circling the ice with more confidence than skill, and catching quite a few snowflakes in her mouth, although admittedly they were falling much faster now. With a cry of delight when she finally caught one on her tongue, she promptly overbalanced and sat down hurriedly on her rump.

‘Ouch.’

Finn helped her to her feet. ‘You okay?’

‘Yes, although I’m going to have quite a bruise on my bottom.’

With naughtiness brimming in his eyes, Finn promptly said, ‘I’ll kiss it better.’

‘Kiss my ass clearly means something different to you,’ she replied with a giggle.

Five minutes later, they’d both quietened and were focusing on seeing where they were going in the flurry of snowflakes. Visibility had dropped dramatically, and Belle couldn’t see the other end of the rink.

‘I think we ought to call it a day,’ said Finn nodding at her snow-covered coat. His eyelashes were dusted with snow and his dark hair flecked with white.

‘Yes. My face is freezing.’ The snow now stung as it brushed her icy skin. ‘My reindeer aren’t happy.’ She waved her mittens at him.

‘We can’t have unhappy reindeer.’ He took her hand and together they skated off the rink, divesting themselves of their boots as quickly as possible. ‘I think we deserve a hot toddy in front of a blazing fire, and I know just the place.’

‘Ooh, that sounds wonderful,’ said Belle.

With heads down they began to walk back to the hotel. The earlier crowds had thinned, as if every sensible person had taken refuge, and it felt as if the skyline had fallen to just above their heads. The cold seeped into Belle's neck and she tucked in closer to Finn, whose height and breadth sheltered her from some of the snow, although she couldn't help but be fascinated by the feathering flakes that floated and danced down around them.

'Snow always feels like some kind of magic,' she said, holding out her hand and catching a few. 'Like winter fairy dust or divine crystals falling from the angels. Surely, it must come from another realm.' It wasn't like Belle to be fanciful in the least, but there was just something so extraordinary about these delicate flakes floating out of the sky.

Finn laughed and kissed her. 'Even though I know there's a logical and scientific explanation – to be precise, they are hexagonal dendrites – but I know what you mean. It is magical.'

She smiled at him and when he smiled back, the pair of them echoing the perfect symmetry of a snowflake, something inside her clicked, like another tumbler to her heart falling. Luckily, she was too entranced by the fairy-tale world and Finn's smile to notice.

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Chapter Eighteen

FINN

Overnight Piccadilly had been cocooned by the snow blanketing the floor, and the sounds of the city dampened. Finn wrapped his scarf tighter around his neck, grateful for his favourite, perennially reliable boots suited to every terrain. The snow squeaked beneath his feet and he took in a deep breath of the cold, sharp air. Everything had been cleansed by the snowfall, turning the buildings into icing-trimmed gingerbread fantasies and muting the sound of the traffic. A couple of black cabs crept along through the road. All through the night, it had snowed, on and off, and after they'd vacated their fireside spot in the bar where they'd been drinking mulled wine, he and Belle had spent a while at the French windows of his hotel room watching the snow swirl down, gradually chasing away the last shoppers and revellers of Saturday night.

'Are you going to tell me where we're going?' Belle asked, kicking up flurries of snow with her heavy-soled boots. She had on a voluminous, hyacinth-blue scarf, which brought out the deep blue of her eyes and the roses in her cheeks. The fairy-tale prettiness was a startling contrast to her no-nonsense personality and made Finn even more curious to peel back her layers.

He'd watched her dress this morning, surprising himself by how much he enjoyed the intimacy of them getting ready together. Not since his early

twenties had he had girls sleep over. His recent relationships being the type where someone left before dawn broke.

‘No.’ He paused and grinned at her. ‘It’s a surprise.’

Her mouth quirked. ‘You do realise that I’m getting immune to surprises now.’

‘No one ever gets immune to surprises. What you mean is, you’re starting to like them.’

‘Maybe,’ she replied, her eyes twinkling at him.

‘Did you have a dog when you were growing up?’

‘Random question. Why do you ask? We’re not going to the pet section of Harrods to buy a puppy, are we?’

‘I’m pretty sure Harrods stopped selling puppies a long time ago.’ He laughed. ‘It was a random question.’

Belle narrowed her eyes. ‘I’m not sure I believe you.’

‘Trust me.’ As he said it, he flinched because he was still earning her trust back. ‘I promise I wouldn’t take you anywhere I honestly thought you wouldn’t like.’

‘That’s good to know, and in answer to your question, we never had any pets when I was growing up. Did you?’

‘Yes,’ said Finn. ‘We had three, thoroughly overexcitable spaniels, who were even madder than springers usually are. They were allegedly game dogs, but they were so badly behaved they were banned from the local shoot.’ He smiled at the memory and linked his arm through hers, steering her into Green Park rather than walk along the street. ‘Montague, Winston and Archie. All bonkers.’

The park had been transformed into a winter wonderland, with a layer of snow blanketing the grass, turning it into a blank white canvas, while the branches of the bare trees were coated in shimmering ice crystals refracting the light of the bright morning sun, giving them a diamond-encrusted

sparkle. The otherworldliness of the scene and the crisp cold of the morning put a spring in both their steps.

‘I forget we have days like this, when it’s sunny and bright. I spend too much time at work.’ She grimaced at the admission. ‘When I think of winter in the city, I think of damp journeys to work, and everyone on the tube smelling of wet dog.

‘You probably get proper snow in the Scottish Highlands. I bet it’s a right pain when you get cut off? Except, of course,’ she added, poking a tongue in her cheek and nudging him, ‘you don’t really live in the Scottish Highlands.’

‘Point taken,’ he said with a grin. ‘But most people think it’s terribly romantic, getting cut off. I wouldn’t mind being cut off in a cottage with you, with a nice open fire…’

‘Fine if you don’t have to go to work,’ said Belle with one of her reluctant smiles, ignoring his suggestion. ‘And it’s probably not that romantic being pulled out of a snowdrift by a tractor. This is lovely. Not too much snow, but enough to make things look pretty.’

Finn, having only spent a few summer and autumn months on Harris, couldn’t answer this honestly. But he did remember his childhood in Edinburgh with great fondness.

‘Didn’t you ever have snow days as a kid, when school was cancelled? And everyone went sledging on any slope they could find?’ asked Finn, the memories of a free day off school flooding back and the joy of waking up to a white-covered world.

Belle’s face suddenly lit up, her eyes softening and her mouth curving into a dreamy smile. ‘I remember there was one year, my dad played hooky, too. He took me and my sister sledging on the golf course.’ Then, just as quickly, the happiness in her eyes was snuffed out and replaced by a sombre expression.

Wanting to lighten her mood, Finn tugged at her hand and left the path, pulling her onto the grass. Taking off into a run, he released her hand, and with arms outstretched like wings, he wheeled in a huge circle leaving his footprints in the frost.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked, breaking into laughter.

‘Leaving my mark,’ he called back with a delighted grin, enjoying being childish and free. ‘We’re the very first people here this morning in this bit of the park. It’s untrodden by anyone else.’ It gave him the same buzz of excitement he felt when he was on an exploration, treading in places that were rarely accessible to ordinary people. It was the most exciting feeling in the world. Knowing that no one else had been there for hundreds of years, if ever.

After a brief hesitation, she followed suit, running in her own circle.

‘We should make crop circles and try to make people think aliens have been here,’ she said with a grin when she completed her circuit.

‘Now that is an excellent idea, but I rather think we’ve blown it this morning. I shall have to try and fashion some stilts next time so that we can get into the middle of the grass as if we’ve been beamed in from outer space leaving no footprints.’ He stroked his chin, already thinking about the mechanics of how it might be done.

She caught up with him and nudged him. ‘Please tell me you’re not really thinking about it?’

He shrugged and caught up her hands. ‘I love a challenge.’

With a laugh she pulled him back to the path, but not before she’d left a couple more little patterns in the snow.

‘Hyde Park,’ guessed Belle as they neared one of the gates. ‘We’re going to build snowmen.’

‘We can do that if you want, but there’s something specific.’

‘Oh, look at that dog.’ Belle pointed to a dachshund with a jaunty little Christmas-cracker hat/fascinator thing on its head. ‘Cute.’

Finn kept his counsel, smiling to himself.

‘Oh, and look at that one all dressed up for the season,’ she said as a woman walked briskly by with a dachshund tucked under her arm. He wore a green and white Christmas jumper around his long-barrelled body.

They passed through the gates into the park, where the paths had been cleared and there were already a few rather impressive snowmen dotted about. There were also a lot of small dogs dressed up in festive accessories.

Belle pointed at a man with a dachshund in a Santa hat who jogged by. ‘And there—’ A couple of women in front of them had two dachsies each, all four dogs dressed in matching knitted coats adorned with Christmas puddings.

Belle turned to Finn, whispering under her breath, ‘What’s going on?’

‘It’s the annual Christmas Dachshund Dog Walk. I thought it might be fun. Bet you’ve not done this before.’

‘I didn’t even know it was a thing.’

‘I was worried we might not find it.’

‘Ha! No danger of that,’ retorted Belle.

Directions as to which part of Hyde Park they needed to be in were definitely not required; it was as if there was a tractor beam drawing everyone in. Small dogs were everywhere, barking and capering. Finn hadn’t been sure what to expect, but it wasn’t this joyous chaos of small squirming tan-and-black bodies. Most were dressed up for the occasion, but there were a few that looked rather displeased about it all. He couldn’t resist taking a picture of one dog sitting stubbornly on the path with his back to his owner, who carried a sign that read ‘Pigs in Blankets – One Hundred Per Cent Sausage’.

‘Oh, my goodness, this is craziness,’ said Belle. There were dachshunds in Christmas jumpers, dressed as turkeys, as gifts, some carrying a Santa on their back, one in a Christmas-tree outfit with fairy lights that lit up in different, flashing sequences.

The vast majority of dogs were quivering with excitement, bright-eyed and inquisitive, their tails wagging furiously, while some looked bemused, as if they couldn’t figure out what they were doing here and what all the fuss was about.

Finn beamed at Belle. ‘It is,’ he agreed, and ducked down to pet one of the dogs, who immediately nudged at his fingers, looking for some more attention. He massaged the dog’s head just behind his ears and sighed as the dog squirmed with unabashed pleasure. There was nothing in the world quite like the joy of unconditional love that came with a dog. Unfortunately, his lifestyle wasn’t compatible. Although he knew that he’d get the same heartfelt greeting on his return whether he’d been away for ten minutes or six months, it wouldn’t be fair to have one. How could he leave a dog while he was away? Who would he leave one with? Having a dog would be for him, rather than in the dog’s best interest.

He gave the dog’s head another stroke, unable to resist giving its silky ears one last stroke.

Following his lead, although a little more warily, Belle crouched down to fuss at one dog on a lead. It was one of a group of five dogs belonging to one owner, and the rest of them immediately swarmed around her and she tipped over onto her bottom into the snow, disappearing in a sea of tartan doggie waistcoats and wriggling bodies all fighting for attention.

‘I’m so sorry,’ said the owner trying to gather them up, tugging on the leads, which had wrapped round her like a maypole.

‘It’s fine,’ Belle laughed, as the dogs scrambled over her legs, jumping up at her.

It was such a gorgeous sight that Finn whipped out his phone and took a picture of her laughing up at him, surrounded by the little pointed faces and wriggling bodies and the snow.

‘Buster! Titch! Kevin!’ called the owner, pulling at the leads again.

‘Kevin?’ Belle burst into a peal of laughter.

‘I know,’ said the woman, who wore the same tartan as her dogs. ‘My daughter was obsessed with the Minions. She was five.’

Finn helped Belle to her feet, grinning at the unselfconscious happiness on her face as she brushed the snow from her thick, woolly tights.

‘Having fun?’ he asked.

‘Yes, I can’t stop smiling.’ She spread her hands to encompass the huge crowd of dogs and owners before taking off her wet mittens and shaking them to dislodge the crust of snow and rubbing her hands together.

‘Cold?’

‘Just starting to chill down. Sitting on the ground probably wasn’t such a great idea.’

‘Come on. I know how to warm you up.’ He dropped his voice deliberately and gave her a suggestive grin.

She gave him a dubious look in return and he laughed at the suspicion on her face.

‘Dear me, Belle, your mind is always in the gutter. I meant hot chocolate.’

‘Hmm, right,’ she said, narrowing her eyes.

‘Yes, I’ve got a craving for hot chocolate with lots of cream and marshmallows. There’s a place I’ve heard about. Knoops.’

‘Oh, I’ve heard of it.’

‘There’s nothing better on a cold and frosty day. Are you up for a walk? I know there’s one in Knightsbridge somewhere.’ He pulled out his phone.

‘What, no compass today?’ she teased.

‘Not today, but I do believe it’s south of here. So this way.’

He navigated their way through the park, dodging the odd plump drop of snow falling from the tree branches overhead, pausing to watch a family's snowball fight and passing the Old Police House to walk along Policeman's Path towards the Serpentine Bridge. They stopped briefly to look out over the lake, which had frozen over in some places and was blanketed by the snow to the very water's edge, confusing the ducks who couldn't work out what was what. This was very familiar territory and Finn cast a glance towards the Royal Geographic Building, before they walked on down Exhibition Road past the Science, Natural History and Victoria & Albert museums, all of which looked like fanciful snow palaces edged with white trim on the caps and ledges.

He looked over at the Natural History Museum with a wistful gaze. He'd never been this close and not visited, and wondered if they might have time after they'd been to Knoops.

The rich, warm smell of chocolate almost knocked them over the minute they stepped over the threshold.

'Mmm,' moaned Belle in a throaty voice that made his skin buzz with awareness of her. 'Why have I never been here before?' She gazed up, wide-eyed with wonderment at the large board behind the counter, with its complete menu of bespoke chocolate drinks that you could order according to your personal taste. There were at least twenty different chocolate blends where the cocoa percentage ranged from 28 to 100, including single origin Columbian 35 per cent chocolate or a 72 per cent Peruvian origin chocolate. Chocolate had been sourced from Venezuela, Ghana, the Philippines, the Solomon Islands and Madagascar. In addition, you could zhuzh up your chocolate with herbs, spices, cream or marshmallow and have it made with every type of milk from dairy through to almond, oat, soya or coconut.

'My mind is officially boggled by this choice. I'm not sure where to start.' She sniffed and closed her eyes. 'Heaven.'

‘I’m going to have the dark chocolate with sea salt and marshmallows,’ said Finn.

‘That’s very decisive.’ Belle concentrated on the board. ‘I’m not a big dark chocolate fan,’ she said, narrowing her eyes and studying the descriptions of the different chocolates.

‘How about the milk chocolate? That’s one of their bestsellers.’

Belle nodded. ‘That sounds the easiest.’

‘You shouldn’t go for easy,’ Finn admonished. ‘Never settle. You should be adventurous.’

‘Okay, I’ll have it with the orange cream.’

‘Mmm, nice. You grab a table, and I’ll order?’

‘No. You took me to dinner and the theatre. I’ll get these.’

‘Yes, boss.’ He smiled at her. There were times when he could see his aunt’s training in Belle.

‘I am, and don’t you forget it.’

The only free table was one at the back that seated six, but had only two occupants, a woman with an older man.

‘Would you mind if we sat here?’ he asked indicating the two free seats on this side of the table.

‘No, not at all,’ said the woman with a wide, friendly smile. In her early thirties, she had lots of brunette hair tucked beneath a woolly band in bright pink. Her gloved hands, one of which was entwined with the man’s, matched the fuchsia pink of the band. They looked the picture of settled happiness.

The man added, ‘The more the merrier.’ With his free hand, he lifted his cup of chocolate in a toast.

‘What did you choose?’ asked Finn, nodding at their cups.

‘I’ve got the single origin Venezuela, with notes of tropical fruits, walnuts and spices,’ said the woman, before cheerfully adding, ‘Can’t taste any of that, but it’s bloody delicious.’ She turned to her partner with a

teasing smile. ‘Of course, Frank had to be all macho and go for the hundred per cent.’

‘How’s that?’ asked Finn.

‘Dark,’ said Frank with a rueful smile. ‘I’m very grateful for the extra marshmallows and cream.’

‘Maybe if we mixed them,’ suggested the woman.

‘It’s fine, love. It’s an intense experience.’ He winked at her and pulled a jokey face at Finn.

‘I’m glad I’ve only gone for the seventy-two per cent.’

‘Makes you feel all cosy and Christmassy,’ said the woman.

Finn looked up to see Belle approaching with a cup of chocolate in each hand.

She smiled at him, but as she looked beyond him at the two people on the other side of the table her face froze into a mask of utter confusion. She came to an abrupt halt and stared.

The man’s face broke into a tentative smile. ‘Hello, Belle, love,’ he said.

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Chapter Nineteen

BELLE

‘Hi,’ said Belle, squeezing the lacklustre word out of her tight vocal cords. Her chest tightened and she had to fight the light-headed, out-of-body sensation threatening to derail her. In the suffocating heat, it was as if she were looking down on the nightmare scenario. She couldn’t have imagined a worse one if she tried… Well, apart from if her mother was present, too.

But seriously? Here? Now? When she was with Finn? The place had shrunk and her head spun as all three people looked at her. She wanted to leave. Escape. There had to be a gazillion flipping cafés in London. Why this one?

She handed Finn his hot chocolate, both grateful for and irritated by the concern in his eyes. She mustered a tight smile and reluctantly took the seat next to him, opposite her father.

‘Small world. How are you?’ Frank’s eyes twinkled at her, and she could tell he was working hard to fake the bonhomie. ‘Still working as hard as ever for that ballbuster?’

‘That ballbuster is his aunt,’ said Belle, with a fake smile, indicating Finn, glad to be able to score a point even though it was petty.

‘Whoops,’ he said, turning to Finn. ‘Sorry. I’m Frank. This is Carole.’

‘Finn,’ he said, with a polite smile now.

Belle didn’t say anything, she was too busy wishing the floor would open up and swallow her down in one easy gulp.

‘And so … you know Belle?’ Finn added, obviously needing clarification.

‘That I do,’ said Frank, looking at her as if daring her to deny it.

Finn turned and gave Belle a reassuring smile, though there was nothing reassuring about this situation.

‘Belle, this is Carole,’ said her father, so she had to look at the other woman and acknowledge her with a quick impassive nod.

‘So how do you guys know each other?’ Finn tried again.

There was an elephant-sized pause. Carole’s lips twitched and Belle caught her eye and for the briefest of moments they almost smiled at each other.

‘Because I’m her dad,’ said her father.

‘Oh,’ said Finn, masking his surprise rather well, before looking at Carole questioningly. ‘You’re not Belle’s sister … are you?’

Belle couldn’t look at Carole. She couldn’t even breathe.

‘No,’ Carole replied gently. ‘I’m Frank’s wife. We’ve been married for three years.’

‘Oh, right.’ Finn looked flustered, and Carole gave him a kind smile.

‘Don’t worry. It happens a lot. There’s an age gap. We’re used to the confusion.’

Belle was grateful that Carole didn’t look at her as she spoke.

This was awkward, beyond awkward. As always, Belle was conflicted. She couldn’t bring herself to be rude, because it wasn’t part of her make-up, but Carole embodied her dad’s betrayal and was her mum’s sworn enemy, deemed responsible for causing so much misery. When Belle’s dad left, it was bad enough, but when he’d got himself a girlfriend who was only five years older than his eldest daughter … it was beyond embarrassing. Humiliating for her mother and mortifying for Belle and Ariel.

A few years later when she and her sister had been invited to the wedding, it had caused no end of rows. Belle had felt a duty to go, while her sister had ripped up the invitation and her mother had taken to her bed and not come out for the whole weekend.

As all this flashed through her mind, Belle couldn't bring herself to say anything. What was there to say?

'Gorgeous day, isn't it.' Carole filled the silence. 'We're on our way to Winter Wonderland to celebrate Frank's birthday, but we took a walk through Hyde Park and saw the—'

'Dachshunds,' interrupted Finn.

'Yes, they were adorable,' said Carole smiling, her face lighting up with pleasure. 'Although some of them looked a bit grumpy.' She laughed.

'I don't blame them,' said Belle's dad, laughing along, too. 'Most undignified. I'd have been very pissed off if someone had put me in one of those Christmas jumpers.'

'Aw, you've spoiled my Christmas surprise.' Carole's eyes twinkled in jest.

'Don't even think about it,' threatened Frank, beaming back at her.

'But I've already started knitting.' She shot him a coy smirk, her eyes brimming with mischief.

'Oh, God help me.' Frank clapped a hand on his forehead. 'She's a terrible knitter.' He held up a bright red and green scarf and poked a finger through one of several holes.

Belle thought of the sensible olive-green scarf she'd bought him. That was definitely redundant now.

Carole slapped him on the arm with the sort of familiar ease that Belle had found herself doing to Finn, before linking her hand with his again. 'Frank. You know that was my practice piece.' Adding with indignant mock outrage, 'You ungrateful toad.' And Belle found herself almost smiling.

They seemed so comfortable together, in the same way that she was with Finn. It was weird.

‘If I were you, I’d use it to throttle him,’ said Finn with a laugh and Belle couldn’t blame him. It annoyed her to admit it, but the two of them were exuding twinkly, happy coupledom as if their lives depended on it … except, she didn’t think they were faking it.

‘Now, there’s an idea,’ said Carole, with another one of her teasing smiles.

Frank put his arm around her. ‘You know you’d miss me. Who else would bring you a cup of tea every morning?’

‘Oh yes. There is that. Okay. I’ll keep you a bit longer.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘It’s a fair point. You are very patient.’ She turned to Belle and Finn. ‘I’m really grumpy in the mornings.’

Although everything in her was programmed against it, Belle found this difficult to believe. This woman, with her cloud of hair, her smiling eyes and bright clothing, seemed to personify sunshine and happiness.

‘So, Winter Wonderland,’ said Finn. ‘Is it worth a visit?’

Belle groaned inwardly. He wasn’t going to drag her there, was he?

‘Yes,’ said Carole enthusiastically, nudging her dad’s arm.

‘It is. We go every year. It’s ridiculously touristy. Overpriced. And so much fun,’ he said, grinning.

Were these two for real? He was forty-nine, for God’s sake. No, fifty today. A grown man.

‘Frank loves the Ferris Wheel.’

‘Yup. Anything with heights has my name on it. You get such a great view of London. Not as good as the London Eye on a clear day.’

‘Do you know, I’ve … not done that,’ said Finn. ‘Maybe another one to add to my list.’

As he spoke, a memory hit Belle – a trip to the London Eye with Dad when she was about ten, running about the glass pod, trying to see

everything and him crouching down beside her, so that he had the same vantage point, and showing her all the landmarks: Buckingham Palace, St Paul's Cathedral, the Wembley Arch, the bridges crossing the Thames. All the while, her mother and sister, who'd insisted they went as well, even though neither of them had a head for heights, sat on the bench in the middle of the pod refusing to look up, making Belle feel vaguely guilty for enjoying herself. The memory brought with it a tidal wave of emotion.

As if he'd read her mind, her dad caught her eye and smiled sadly. Tears pricked her eyes for all that had been lost.

'There's so much to do in London,' said Carole hurriedly. 'We live about forty minutes away on the train, but we love coming in and playing tourist for the day.'

'Where's your favourite place?' asked Finn.

'Definitely Covent Garden. It's just so lovely and festive.'

'We were there, yesterday,' said Finn. 'Belle took me ice-skating.' He put his hand over hers and squeezed as if to underline their togetherness and that they were a team.

'What fun. We haven't done that this year. Another favourite place is Borough Market; all those lovely foodie things. And then from there, we like walking along the South Bank. And I love the annual carol concert at the Albert Hall. In fact…' She paused and looked at her husband. He nodded slightly, and she continued in a rush, as if getting the words out quickly would make them easier, 'On Thursday, we have spare tickets and our friends can't make it. Maybe … you could join us.' She gave Belle such a hopeful look it almost hurt her heart.

'Sounds great,' said Finn. 'There's nothing like singing along to carols.' Then he glanced at Belle and must have clocked her deliberately blank face. 'Of course, we need to sort out our plans, but if we come, we'll give you the money for the tickets.'

'Don't you worry about that. It'd be our treat.'

Belle swallowed and realised all eyes were on her. She could hardly say no now.

‘Okay, yeah,’ she said with a weak smile. ‘Fun.’

And then Finn and her dad were exchanging numbers so that Dad could WhatsApp the tickets. Wily old fox.

‘And maybe we could go out for dinner, afterwards,’ he said.

Belle stared at him grimly, channelling don’t-push-it vibes at him.

‘Or not,’ murmured her father, and his shoulders slumped.

Finn gave Belle a look, and she immediately felt like she was the guilty party, and then to her horror, Carole squeezed her father’s arm in tacit sympathy.

‘So, what’s the verdict on the hot chocolate?’ Finn turned to Belle, who’d barely drunk hers with all the drama circulating around her.

‘It’s delicious,’ she said, taking another slurp, and feeling the warming heat slide down her throat, glad of the change of subject.

‘I love coming here,’ said Carole, who, Belle decided tartly, was a veritable bloody Pollyanna.

‘Me too,’ said Finn. ‘There’s something special about hot chocolate on a cold winter’s day.’

‘Next time I might not go quite so hardcore,’ said her dad regaining his equilibrium, and Carole laughed.

‘I’ll avoid that one, then,’ said Finn.

Belle suddenly felt like the odd one out. The three of them were all smiling and nodding about the joys of flaming hot chocolate while she was left feeling cross and crabby.

Just like her mother.

The thought hit and she almost gasped out loud. Oh my God. Like her mother, she was being miserable, sucking the joy out of things. Shame doused her in a flash. The number of times she and Ariel had had to dodge and dance around her mother’s moods.

Belle realised she was gripping her cup so hard the cardboard was bulging out of shape. She hastily put it down and tuned back into the conversation. Her dad and Carole were talking about restaurants in Covent Garden.

‘Belle took me to a Burmese place there, off Long Acre.’ Finn nudged her foot under the table, encouraging her back into the fold. His eyes twinkled, reminding Belle of how they hadn’t actually eaten there in the end and she couldn’t help a smile.

‘Was that Lahpet?’ Carole asked.

Belle nodded. ‘You know it?’

‘I write a food column.’ Carole’s eyes sparkled again. ‘Not only do I get to eat in some great places, I also get paid to do it.’

‘Nice work,’ said Finn. ‘What do you do, Frank?’

‘I’m an architect.’

‘Interesting.’

‘It is. I’m very lucky. I love what I do.’

‘He’s being very modest,’ said Belle, who had always been proud of him. Her dad’s career had had a bit of a renaissance in the last eight years. ‘He’s won lots of awards for his designs which minimise environmental impact.’

‘Energy efficiency, sustainable construction,’ chipped in Carole.

‘Use of renewable materials. You name it, Dad’s won it.’ Belle gave him a proud smile and he beamed back at her.

‘It’s all obvious stuff,’ he said.

‘What sort of materials do you use?’ asked Finn leaning in, clearly interested.

Half an hour later, Frank and Finn were still talking, and Carole and Belle were exchanging patient, long-suffering eye rolls. Belle had even asked her more about her job, which did sound brilliant.

It was Carole who broke up the party, with a tug on Belle's father's sleeve. 'If we want to get the most out of our tickets, and see London while it's still daylight, we ought to make a move.'

He nodded reluctantly and the pair pulled on their coats, him wrapping the moth-eaten-looking scarf around his neck and winking at Belle as he poked a finger through another hole.

She smiled back at him, because despite everything, he was her dad and she loved him – even if the thought left her conflicted.

They said their goodbyes and her dad and Carole left arm in arm. Hollowness settled on Belle. She was feeling wrong-footed and completely out of sorts.

Maybe Carole, her stepmother – eek, she'd never called her that – wasn't quite the villain her mother thought she was.

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Chapter Twenty

FINN

It was amazing how he could read Belle's moods like cloud formations. This morning, as they'd crossed the park in bright sunshine, she'd been as light as cirrus stratus; now they gathered round her like cumulonimbus, heavy and dark, the same as the greying sky above them. The temperature had dropped in more ways than one while they'd been in the café.

As they walked along the street, everyone around them now wrapped up with their heads down, the snow beneath their feet turning to slush, Finn could sense her uncertainty and confusion, and he wanted to help. He couldn't ignore what had just happened, so playing innocent seemed an ideal strategy.

'So that was your dad?' he said conversationally.

'Yup.' Her mouth pinched tight, like she was reluctant to allow anything else to escape.

'Interesting guy. I liked him.'

'Mmm,' Belle replied.

He put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer, wondering if she'd caught on to the symbolism of the gesture. *We're a team. I'm here for you*. He was good at team stuff – that was where he excelled – and problem-solving. He ignored the tug of something deeper in his stomach. Problem-

solving, that's all it was. Finding a way to make her happy again, so that they could have a good time together. Purely selfish on his part.

'He's a hell of a lot nicer than my prick of a dad,' he added.

'He is nice,' Belle admitted with reluctance. 'But it's complicated.'

Complicated, he understood. 'I mean, the two of them seem happy and Carole seems nice, too.' Perhaps he wasn't being very tactful, but he'd never seen the point of telling people what they wanted to hear instead of the truth.

'Yeah, bully for him.' Belle turned to him, her mouth drooping. 'He's happy, rah, rah, rah. My mum is not so happy.'

He squeezed her shoulders. 'Ah, split loyalties.' He sympathised, even though that had not been a problem he'd suffered. Each of his parents was equally reprehensible. His father cold and aloof and uncaring, while his mother became more and more outrageous in her attempts to get the attention she craved. Sadly, she refused to call time on the relationship because the perks outweighed the unhappiness.

Belle looked up at him, her eyes mirroring the grey clouds in the sky. 'I'm stuck between them, and I never know what to do for the best.' Her jaw tensed. 'Mum would flip her lid if she knew we'd just had a drink together.' She paused as they walked a few more steps in the chilly December air. 'And what possessed you to say yes to going to the bloody carol concert with them?'

'Because it sounded fun.' He gave her a careless grin. 'What could be jollier than going to sing carols with lots of other people – and a Carole?' He nudged her side with his elbow to underline the ridiculous pun. 'Singing together is uplifting. Proven positive therapy. They have dementia choirs, you know.' He studied her unhappy face and went for it anyway. 'Your dad obviously wants to spend time with you.'

'I know,' said Belle, and he could see her weighing up whether she should say more. 'We used to be really close,' she whispered, as if just

saying it out loud hurt. ‘And then he left. It was hard because I’d go and see him and then Mum would be unbearable for days. It just got easier not to see him. Then he met Carole, and it felt like he’d swapped her for us. And it was even easier not to see him.’ She pressed her lips tightly together as if she regretted letting the words slip out.

‘Must have been tough for your mum, but you’re an adult, you can make your own decisions.’ He avoided pointing out that he thought her mum was guilty of emotional blackmail. That was perhaps a truth too far in one day.

‘Thanks for that insightful observation,’ she said dully, and although he’d stepped on a raw nerve, he pressed on.

‘Do you begrudge him his happiness?’

As an outsider he could see both sides of the story. He’d actually been rather charmed by Frank and Carole’s obvious happiness and the way they were so in tune with each other. Their relationship demonstrated a rare harmony that he almost envied.

Sadly, Finn suspected, with an unpleasant sinking sensation, that he loved his work too much to have the space for that sort of relationship; the kind where intimacy grows over time.

‘He is happy, isn’t he? said Belle, startling him out of his reverie.

‘Yes, very, from what I could see.’

She nodded with resignation. ‘He’s been that way ever since he met Carole and started at a new firm. He talked about changing jobs for ages, but Mum couldn’t understand why he wanted to give up a good, safe partner position to go and work for a small independent firm of architects. They had a lot of rows about it.’

‘I’d say he’s found his niche, and from what you say, he’s pretty good at what he does.’

‘Yeah. He’s so much happier now. I can see it,’ said Belle, a little sadly.

He gentled his tone. ‘You were on the wrong end of your parents’ break up – it’s not your fault, and your mum is clearly hurt and unhappy, but that doesn’t mean you have to be.’

‘Hmm,’ said Belle, and Finn wondered if he’d gone too far. Realising their date was in danger of passing beyond a point of repair, he made a sudden decision.

He turned her round to face him and planted a light-hearted kiss on her lips, his eyes roving over her unhappy face. ‘Today is supposed to be fun. You’re meant to be showing me a good time. Looking after my spiritual wellbeing. Even if you were bullied into it by my aunt.’

He was pleased to see the teasing light back in her eyes. ‘Well. Originally, yes. But maybe you’re not so bad after all.’

‘I’m awesome,’ he said, winking at her. ‘And you know it.’ He gave her another kiss, hard and fast on the mouth, before tugging at her hand and pulling her across the road, instead of turning right to retrace their steps as he’d originally intended. ‘Come on.’

‘Where are we going?’ she asked.

‘Wait and see,’ he said and led her along the street.

Minutes later, Finn spotted the trees dressed in fairy lights and they drew alongside the iron railings behind which stood the vast building – with its pale bricks, Romanesque arches, towering walls, Gothic dormer windows and intricate, layered decorative detail – all lit up with tiny lights. In front of it stood a huge Christmas tree. ‘I give you the Natural History Museum,’ he said, throwing out an arm.

It was one of his happy places, somewhere he usually liked to visit alone, but now, maybe inspired by Carole and Frank, he wanted to share it with Belle.

‘Come on, let’s go inside.’ He led her up the wide shallow stairs to the many-layered, arched entrance, to the two, large-arched doorways, each festooned with festive greenery that perfumed the air with pine and

eucalyptus. The familiar excitement fizzed inside him. The museum was a testament to a golden age of science and curiosity about the natural world. It never ceased to fill him with awe whenever he stepped over the threshold.

The collections here were world-renowned, and he'd been lucky enough on numerous occasions to go behind the scenes and work in the archives. There was so much fascinating history, the science of evolution and the astonishing magic of nature. He envied those early collectors and explorers like Charles Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace, Henry Bates and Mary Anning, at the forefront of so many exciting discoveries, with so much of the world opening up to them. He still marvelled that, with a population of eight billion people on Earth, there was still many square miles of undisturbed land.

Happiness bubbled under his skin as they stepped into the huge vaulted Hintze Hall with its glorious, majestic staircase and the statue of Charles Darwin sitting looking down at them all. For a moment, Finn stood, absorbing the almost spiritual atmosphere. It had been built by the Victorians as a cathedral to discovery, and for Finn, it still held that sense of the divine. Even the air felt different.

'I haven't been here since I was a kid on a school trip,' said Belle in an awed whisper. 'I'd forgotten how amazing it is.' She stared round at the ornate brick arches and the high clerestory windows bringing light into the vast hallways. Finn saw that the light missing in Belle's eyes for the last hour had returned, and he knew he'd done the right thing in bringing her here. Peace settled over him. He took her hand. 'I'll show you around.

'Above us, Hope, the blue whale.' He pointed up to the enormous skeleton suspended from the ceiling, stretching out at over twenty-five metres, dwarfing them.

As they stood looking up, music began to play and a choir assembled on the stairs. Their voices soared in the huge space as they sang 'The Holly and the Ivy', which Finn felt was rather fitting.

Holding hands, they stood and listened, his heart swelling a little at the joyful notes and bright melody. The music spread a blanket of happiness over the room, with everyone stilling as if in a game of musical statutes. Even the shrill cries of children and the scuffles of their feet stopped, as everyone stared at the red-gowned choristers.

It seemed they were all content to stand and listen and, when the song finished, the choir immediately burst into ‘Joy to the World’. Around them, a few people joined in, encouraged by the choirmaster waving his arms to everyone.

Finn glanced down at Belle and saw her eyes were shining. He leaned down and kissed her. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so at peace or contented. Christmas around his parents, despite Elspeth’s best attempts, had always been tense and fraught, which was why he’d successfully avoided it in recent years, preferring to do his own thing – even if it meant he was often alone. Again, he wondered what it might be like to share the day with someone and what they might do; perhaps new traditions might be created.

After the two songs, the choir disappeared back up the stairs, as quickly as they’d appeared, leaving behind a wonderful atmosphere of wellbeing.

‘That was lovely,’ said Belle. ‘You were right, I’d forgotten how beautiful carols are. It might actually…’ she said, as if careful not to commit, ‘be nice to go to a sing-along.’

He resisted an ‘I told you so’. Never a good look. Even though he was sure it would make her father very happy and bring some ease to their relationship, he settled for a neutral, ‘Good.’

They toured a small fraction of the building and he had to work hard not to keep running to the next display, because he knew the place like the back of his hands. He’d once brought his dad here and it had been a disaster, with his father commenting that it was all very well playing with dead animals but when was he going to get a proper job?

‘Come on, don’t hold back,’ said Belle sweetly, after a while. ‘I’m interested.’

‘Okay.’ He showed her his favourite displays, including one that had special significance because he’d had access to the archives before his last trip to the Galapagos and he’d spent hours here in preparation for a previous exploration in the Amazon.

‘And that’s where you’re going next?’ asked Belle.

‘Yes, although much further south this time.’ Her question reminded him that in another week and a half he’d be boarding a plane to Brazil, and for the first time ever, he was conscious of a slight hollowness in his stomach at the thought of saying goodbye to Belle. Maybe he should think about putting a bit of space between them over the coming week? Pushing that decision to the back of his mind, and despite his stomach, which was tying itself in knots from lack of food, he steered Belle towards the grand staircase and back to the ground floor. ‘There’s one last thing we have to see,’ he said, guiding her to the Dinosaur Gallery.

The sudden roar of a dinosaur hit them long before they saw it, and Finn felt Belle jump beside him, her eyes widening in puzzlement. The darkened room had been transformed from its usual dinosaur habitat of a barren, rocky plain into a winter village of gingerbread houses being terrorised by the huge animatronic T-Rex dominating the scene. Belle burst out laughing at the sight of the fearsome beast, its tiny arms poking out of a brightly patterned dinosaur-sized Christmas jumper.

‘He gets a new one every year,’ Finn told her.

Around them, children were shrieking with fear or squealing with excitement, some jumping up and down while others cowered behind their parents each time the dinosaur roared.

‘That’s hilarious,’ she said, digging out her camera. ‘Go stand in front of him. I need a picture of you about to be eaten.’

‘Charming,’ he said, though obeying.

Belle took a picture of him and then a selfie of the two of them with the T-Rex behind them.

After wandering around the exhibit, they returned via the gift shop, which was selling the same Christmas jumper as the dinosaur wore.

‘I have to have one of those,’ declared Finn, liking the idea as much as being able to support the work of the museum.

‘No, you don’t,’ said Belle, firmly steering him away from the gaudy jumper. When he pouted, she shot him a reproving glance. ‘You’ll thank me later. I’m saving you from yourself.’

She was probably right. How many Christmas jumpers did a man need? The two he already had from here were currently in storage.

Arm in arm they walked towards the exit.

‘Thank you for bringing me here,’ said Belle. ‘It was a great idea. It’s such an amazing place and I love seeing how passionate you are about conservation and the environment. You obviously love what you do.’ She squeezed his arm and turned to him. ‘No wonder you and Dad got on so well.’

‘Yeah. It’s cool when your job is your vocation, too. I got the impression your father feels the same about his work.’

‘Makes me feel inadequate,’ said Belle.

‘But you love your job,’ he pointed out.

‘True, but I worry that I’m not really contributing much. It’s not like I’m a doctor or a teacher or an architect or a conservationist. But I do really love what I do. I look forward to going to work every day. It excites me and I get so much satisfaction when we’ve helped turn a corporation around.’

He lifted a hand to soothe away the little frown line between her eyebrows.

‘Much as I want to discover more about our natural habitat and record as much as I can, there’s this annoying practical element. Conservation and environmental work needs financial support. People like you keep the economy going, you contribute to the finances of the world. Without that, everything grinds to a halt. Without a vibrant, thriving economy, there is no extra money to pay for conservation. There’s a quid pro quo – the two don’t have to be mutually exclusive.’

‘Okay, but when I talk about my work, most people’s eyes glaze over.’ Belle gave a self-deprecating laugh. ‘Except my mum. Although that’s just for the bragging rights. She likes to tell people that I’m a management consultant – even though, technically, I’m one in training.’

‘Tell me what you love about your work,’ said Finn.

‘I love problem-solving, which I do a lot for Elspeth. But with my own projects, I like getting under the skin of a company, finding out how it works, communicating with the people there, who are often totally passionate about what they do. They’re often inspiring and want to do a good job but can’t see the wood for the trees. Being able to help them think laterally or find new ways of doing things is really satisfying.’

‘Maybe you should apply that to what’s going in your life outside work,’ suggested Finn, with a wry twist of his lips.

‘What, management-consult myself?’ she asked, amused but also clearly intrigued.

‘Yes. Look at the things outside your control and the things that you can change. Isn’t that how it works?’

‘Something like that,’ said Belle.

‘So, you can’t change your mum’s attitude to what’s happened. Only she can. But you can change how you react to her and to your dad. He’s happy. Could you be happy for him?’

‘I am happy for him,’ she said. ‘Or rather, I’m glad that he’s not lonely.’

‘Are you happy?’

Belle looked at him and said dryly, ‘I’m not happy that you’re psychoanalysing me.’

‘What makes you happy?’

‘You’re going to think I’m really boring, but my job. I like working with your aunt. She’s inspiring, a trailblazer and she’s fun. I get a kick out of work.’

‘No shame in that. In fact, it’s far worse if your job doesn’t make you happy as it takes up so much of our lives. I love my work, it’s a vocation and a passion. I’m not sure I could ever give it up.’

But as he said the words, for the first time in his life he wondered if they were still true.

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Chapter Twenty-One

FINN

‘Mmm,’ said Belle, with a long heartfelt sigh. ‘That is divine.’

Finn watched as she scooped up another mouthful of gunpowder potatoes, raising an eyebrow at her to tease her about her obvious enjoyment. After leaving the museum, they’d come straight to Dishoom on Kensington High Street, which he loved.

‘And yes, I’m making sex noises,’ she retorted, waving her fork at him. ‘Get over it. This food is incredible.’

He couldn’t disagree. The smell of cumin and coriander perfuming the air was enough to make anyone’s mouth water, but the actual flavours that burst on his tongue were sublime, as always. The slight hint of lime, the hot hit of chilli and the crunch of potato were the perfect combination. Whenever he ate really good food like this, Finn savoured every mouthful, storing up the flavours like treasured memories, because in a few short weeks he’d be eating whatever was available and food would become fuel and a resource rather than a pleasure. Across the table was a delicious selection of small plates to share, including a bright jewel-coloured chilli broccoli salad, a golden fragrant chicken malai, naan breads, samosas with chutney, and charred lamb chops. Every single thing was delicious, and his tastebuds were making an inventory of each spiced flavour. The wine,

which the waiter had recommended to go with the food, was also excellent and he took another sip of the fresh, fruity Riesling.

‘What’s your favourite food?’ asked Belle. ‘I think Indian might be mine.’

‘My favourite food is always the first meal back in civilisation when I’ve been away on a long expedition, but this is right up there.’ He paused. ‘And I like Italian, and Spanish, and Brazilian, and—’

‘Brazilian?’ she asked.

‘Yes, feijoada is one of my favourites. It’s a typical black bean and meat stew.’

‘Is there much call for that on Harris?’ she teased.

‘It’s a speciality,’ he said with a grin. ‘Made with finest Angus beef, and you’re never going to let that go, are you?’

‘Nope,’ she said laughing. ‘You should be grateful I’ve forgiven you.’

‘I thought that was down to my skills in the bedroom.’

‘Finn!’ she admonished, glancing round.

He laughed at her endearing embarrassment, before she added with a quick smirk, ‘You’re not that good.’

‘Ouch.’

She pushed a few plates aside and leaned across the table to pat his hand. ‘It’s all right, you just need a bit more practice.’

He burst out laughing, snagged her hand and brought it up to his lips, giving her a kiss on her palm, loving how she could turn the tables on him.

‘So, what are your plans this week?’ he asked, holding on to her hand.

‘Your aunt suddenly remembered a meeting I have to deputise for her, so I must go into the office tomorrow and also on Wednesday for a few hours, but aside from that I’m free, although I have to do the rest of my Christmas shopping – I’ll be wrapping everything in newspaper if I don’t go out this week.’

‘And what’s wrong with that?’ he asked.

‘It’s fine if it’s a deliberate choice – not if you’ve just not bothered and it’s a last-minute Christmas Eve decision, like Maddie’s brother does every year.’

‘Ach, you found me out.’

‘My dad was a great one for recycling last year’s paper and gift bags – he’d spend hours picking off all the Sellotape and even iron out the creases in the paper so he could use it the following year. Mum chucks everything away,’ she said, and the fondness in her eyes was undeniable.

‘I don’t want to force you into anything you don’t want to do,’ he said. ‘But maybe the carol concert would be a good way of meeting up with your dad without having all the small-talk stuff. The singing would offer some distraction…’

She looked conflicted for a second, and he thought he’d overstepped.

‘Sorry, I—’

‘No, don’t be. You’re right. I do want to see him and … what’s safer than singing together?’

‘Think about it. You don’t have to decide now.’

‘Yes, I do. I want to see him. This is the perfect opportunity. And if I commit here with you, I’m less likely to try and winkle out of it later.’

‘I’ll be with you,’ said Finn.

‘You’d better be!’ she said. ‘Okay, tell him we’ll take the tickets.’

‘Right, boss. I’ll do that after we’ve eaten.’

Belle pursed her lips. ‘Do you always get people to do what you want?’

‘It’s a family trait.’

‘It certainly is, or I wouldn’t be here. Your aunt has got it down to a fine art. Although I benefit if I get that secondment to the New York office.’

‘When would that be?’ asked Finn, already thinking that maybe he could visit her if he was there.

‘It could be as soon as March.’

‘That would be amazing.’ He would be passing through after his trip to Brazil sometime in April or May. ‘Have you been to New York before?’

‘Yes, once. Family holiday, with Mum, Dad and my sister. We stayed in Brooklyn. Dad and I jogged across Brooklyn Bridge and back a couple of times really early in the morning.’

Finn was surprised by an unexpected pang of envy. He couldn’t imagine ever doing anything like that with his father. The only sport his dad played was golf – and that was with his legal network rather than father-son bonding. His dad always seemed to want to spend as little time as possible with him. And vice versa, Finn had to admit. They had very little in common and McAllister Senior had been largely absent during Finn’s formative years. He was glad that Belle had agreed to meet her dad; it was obvious, from the little anecdotes she’d relayed, that she’d missed him a lot more than she’d let on.

They both lapsed into thoughtful silence before he asked her to pass the broccoli salad.

She obliged, and as their hands grazed, they exchanged a small, secret smile. In the dark booth at the back of the restaurant, they were cocooned in a separate world, just the two of them and he realised how much he enjoyed being one of two for a change. Usually, he was either on his own or part of a bigger team, but this quiet, calm, measured time brought a special kind of satisfaction to him. He could unwind and be himself. Belle put him at his ease, but at the same time he felt confident of her responses and reactions. He could trust her with his feelings and emotions in a way that he’d never trusted anyone else. The honesty between them was both refreshing and a source of deep pleasure.

He reached for her hand again, driven by some instinct he couldn’t name. As his fingers touched hers and he relished the contact, he caught himself. Was he getting needy? Was he in danger of missing this when he was gone?

Forcing himself to pragmatism, he asked, ‘So, what’s next on the Christmas agenda? Have you got any suggestions? Did you know there’s an entire gingerbread town display at the Museum of Architecture?’ He picked up his phone and handed it to her. ‘Look. How cool is that? We’ve got to go and see it.’

Belle took his phone, her shoulders shaking in silent laughter. ‘How do you know about these things? I’ve lived in London for years and never even knew there was a Museum of Architecture, let alone that they have a gingerbread exhibition.’

‘I read about it somewhere. I also want to go to this Santa Spectacular at Selfridges. I’ve got a couple of meetings and stuff this week, but do you want to go tomorrow after work? Why don’t I message you in the afternoon, when I know what time my meetings finish?’

‘That would be great. I can get some shopping done.’

‘I think you mean, “That sounds so much fun. I can’t wait”.’

‘Yes, Finn,’ she deadpanned. ‘That sounds so much fun. I can’t wait.’

‘It’s a date. Want another glass of wine?’

Belle glanced at her watch. ‘I’d better not. I ought to think about going home.’ She shot him an apologetic glance. ‘I didn’t pack smart workwear, and tomorrow is a full suit-and-heels job.’

‘Sounds very sexy to me. I like the idea of peeling off the prim suit to find out what’s underneath.’

‘Finn!’ She giggled. ‘That’s such a cliché.’

‘Or a little fantasy of mine.’

‘Since when?’

‘About three seconds ago.’

She laughed.

‘You have to send me a photo from the office. I want to see the heels.’

‘The heels are for me. I like that they make me taller than the guy I’m meeting, who has yet to fathom the concept that women work because they

want to, not because they're filling time until they can find a husband.'

'What sort of dark-age establishment do you work for?'

'One that pays well and also has the best clients. And I work for Elspeth. She's amazing.'

'She's one of a kind,' said Finn thinking how his aunt had managed her career rather well. Her husband didn't seem to mind playing second fiddle to her job.

Somehow his aunt and uncle had found a way to make their marriage work, far more successfully than his parents. He guessed the secret was being in the same country at the same time. Not something he could envisage right now. But the observation opened up a dark, but strangely wonderful thought in his head.

He was getting really quite attached to Belle.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

BELLE

‘I think that about wraps it up,’ said the suited man at the head of the table. Belle put her pen down, grateful that the interminable meeting was almost at a close. ‘Any questions?’ Trevor Coleman liked the sound of his own voice far too much and was incapable of acknowledging anyone else’s input. Today had been no exception when he’d calmly taken the credit for Elspeth and Belle’s successful proposal to a new client. Elspeth would have been livid, and she would not have let him get away with it.

‘Actually, yes,’ said Belle. ‘The timeline you discussed. That’s not quite accurate.’

Trevor glared at her.

‘The second phase would take place in June rather than July because of the Christmas deadlines. That’s what Elspeth and I discussed with the production team.’

Trevor frowned and checked the proposal.

‘I didn’t realise that you and Elspeth had met with the production team,’ said David Donovan, the managing director of Ragtail Tableware, the company they were pitching to, turning his attention from Trevor to Belle.

‘Yes,’ she smiled. ‘It’s important to speak to as many people as possible within the whole retail chain when we’re putting a proposal like this together.’

‘And who else was spoken to?’ The MD directed this at Trevor, who rubbed the inside of his collar in an archetypal gesture of discomfort.

‘All departments,’ he said.

The MD nodded. ‘Can you be more specific? I’m particularly interested in what level of personnel you spoke to.’ He smiled.

Trevor gave Belle an irritated look. ‘Perhaps,’ he said with the friendly smile of a shark, ‘Elspeth McAllister’s *assistant* can answer that question.’

Belle nodded politely, while she seethed at the ‘assistant’ tag. Sure, she was officially an executive assistant, but she was taking on more of a management executive role now and he knew it.

‘We find it useful to talk to the most junior member of the team as well as the most senior. It’s amazing the insights you pick up from different people.’

‘A case in point with the lead times for Christmas,’ said the MD with an approving nod. ‘The head of production would insist July – because he’s not the one doing the work. Whereas the rest of the team would opt for June, which I think makes a lot more sense. Excellent work.’ He turned to Belle. ‘I congratulate you on your thoroughness. Thank you for an excellent proposal.’

Belle resisted glancing over at Trevor, as no doubt it was his turn to seethe.

‘I’ll take this back to the management executive team, and we’ll make a decision in the very near future.’

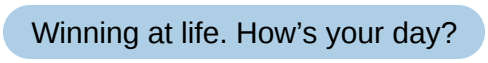
There was a round of handshakes before the Ragtail Tableware team left and Belle heaved a small sigh of both relief and triumph.

‘Nice work, Belle,’ said one of the other directors with a wry smile. ‘Elspeth will be delighted to hear how impressed David was with your work.’

Trevor had already scuttled out of the room, clutching folders of papers to his chest.

Belle returned to her office with the triumphant swagger of a surfer who'd just crested a super wave.

'Yes!' she hissed, and raised a clenched fist as she closed the door to Elspeth's office and helped herself to a coffee. 'Take that, Trevor Coleman.' Some days she relished her job more than others and today was one of them. She smoothed down her skirt and took her coffee through to her own desk, taking a rewarding sip and propping her feet up on her desk, admiring her tan, high-heeled, take-no-shit shoes. She took out her phone and took a picture of her coffee cup and expensively shod feet and sent it to Finn with a message.



With that, she put her phone aside and focused on her work. Elspeth was making the most of Belle's time in the office today, and despite the time difference, had already sent through a slew of emails with various directives. Did the woman never sleep?

'Want to break for some lunch, Belle?' asked Inga, one of her colleagues, who was passing the office and clearly heading down to the subsidised dining room on the ground floor.

Belle lifted her head and checked her watch, surprised to find it was already one-thirty. 'God, yes. I'm starving.' She jumped to her feet and grabbed her phone, joining her as they walked to the lift.

'Nicely played with Trevor this morning.'

'Thanks.'

'I'd have brained him about the assistant comment.'

'It was minuted. It will catch up with him later,' said Belle with a malicious satisfaction.

The lift arrived and they stepped inside, both whipping out their phones. To Belle's surprise there'd been no response from Finn to her picture, although he'd clearly received it. He must be busy today. She knew he was

meeting with the expedition's logistic-and-support teams this morning, so maybe he hadn't had to time to respond.

Quickly, she tapped out another message.

> Christmas Confetti Spectacle starts at six. What time shall we meet? There's an All Bar One we could meet at nearby.

'So… I've booked a later flight back and I'll still be home in time for New Year,' Inga was saying when Belle's phone pinged with a response from Finn. It was short enough that she could read it in its entirety without picking up the phone from the table.

> Sorry. Not going to be able to make it today. F.

Belle's face fell.

'Bad news?' asked Inga from the other side of the dining table, where sunshine flooded in through the large plate-glass windows.

Belle dredged up a smile and avoided her gaze, instead looking out at the city skyscrapers in her eyeline. 'No,' she said blithely. 'Just someone cancelling a meeting. Nothing important.'

Nothing important. The dismissive words caused her pain and she had to fight hard to keep up her nonchalant façade in front of Inga.

'I love it when a meeting is cancelled,' said Inga, tucking into her salad.

'Yes,' said Belle, with faux cheer.

It was a relief when Inga rose and said she had to nip out to buy something, leaving Belle alone. In the lift back up to the office, Belle stared at her phone screen, analysing and reanalysing each word, for other meanings. Where was the funny, flirty, I'll-make-it-up-to-you-later line or the Bummer-can't-see-you-today-but-how-about-tomorrow message?

Finn was obviously busy. Understandable. Now she knew he was in the middle of organising a significant expedition, she understood that he must have so much to do. Probably too busy to even look at his phone. Still …

she couldn’t stop going over the brief sentence. It seemed … so final. Like a brush-off.

She blew out a sigh. Oversensitive or what? And not like her. She of all people understood busy. Nonetheless, Belle returned to her desk and slumped into her seat, reading the message again.

They’d seen each other nearly every day for the last week, and now it was like a big hole had opened up. *Pull yourself together*, she told herself. *You’ve got it bad. See, this was what happened when you got too invested. You started being clingy and needy. For goodness’ sake, he’s busy and sent a quick message. He probably never gave it a second thought.*

She smiled to herself. She’d tease him about it later.

Five-thirty came and went without another message. Belle worked until six-thirty, changed into flat shoes and gathered up her things to take the tube home to Clapham South. On her journey, she stared unseeing at the pages of the book she was supposedly reading, wondering whether to text Finn or not.

Bugger it, they were adults.

> Hey Finn, hope your day wasn’t too manic. I’m all meetinged out Bx

She sent it before she could change her mind, remembering that there’d been no kiss on his message. Was that significant?

And since when did she care about these things? She’d played the dating game long enough to get over playing the games. You took as you found, that had always been her rule. Annoyed with herself, she stuffed her phone in her bag and focused on her book.

‘Thought you were out tonight,’ said Maddie when she came in from work to find Belle half-heartedly eating the pizza she’d grabbed en route from the tube.

‘Change of plan,’ said Belle, watching while Maddie tossed her coat on one of the kitchen chairs and dumped her laptop on the end of the table. ‘And to be honest, after the day I’ve had, it’s good to have a night in. I’ve been in the office and Trevor was up to his usual tricks.’

‘Aha, the male patriarchy never fails to deliver. Tell Aunty Maddie all about it. Want a glass of wine?’ She was already opening the bottle she’d grabbed from the fridge.

Grateful that her flatmate had been so easily diverted, Belle accepted a glass and launched into a highly exaggerated account of her meeting, which kept Maddie entertained while she prepared her own supper. The two of them drifted through to the lounge to watch television before Belle yawned and stretched and said she was going to make herself a cup of peppermint tea and get an early night.

She’d just poured the water over the tea bag when her phone pinged.

> Really sorry. It was a manic day. Can we reschedule for tomorrow? Bring on the Christmas sparkle and shine? I’ll take you out to dinner as an apology. Fx

Something inside her relaxed and she hated the way that suddenly everything was all right with the world again. It was wrong. Her happiness should not depend on a man and yet here she was, her heart suddenly bloody singing because Finn had sent her a message. See, this was why she shouldn’t do relationships. She never wanted to be that woman hanging around waiting on a man. Nor did she want him to ever know how she’d felt today. She needed to pull herself together. As they’d both stressed enough times, whatever this was between them was only until Christmas.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

FINN

Finn took another long draught of beer, his leg jigging on the bar stool. Belle was late, which wasn't like her. What if she wasn't coming? He wouldn't blame her, after jerking her around yesterday. He was a mixed bag of emotions: nerves, excitement, regret. Yesterday he'd suddenly … it wasn't about cold feet, it was a need to prove that he didn't have to see her. He needed to prove he could go cold-turkey. And his attempt had failed spectacularly. After his meetings first thing, he achieved precisely the sum total of bugger all because he'd spent all morning trying to figure out how to let Belle down gently and whether he should cancel their date. After all, they had limited time together and once he'd gone, he'd have no choice in the matter. Round and round he'd gone in completely out-of-character circles. Once he had cancelled their date, he'd been filled with remorse and regret and then spent the evening going round in more circles as to whether he'd done the wrong or the right thing.

Consequently, his nerves today felt like bag of angry spiders, which was not a good thing. His expedition colleagues would have wet themselves laughing at the way permanently single Finn was carrying on.

'Finn!' Belle came flying through the door, her scarlet coat flapping around her and her hands full of shopping bags with a couple of long rolls of wrapping paper sticking out the top of one. 'Sorry I'm late, it took longer

to fight my way through the crowds than I thought it would. It's mad out there. Have you been waiting long? Do you want another drink?'

As the words flowed from her mouth, Finn realised that she was as nervous as he was and that he'd done this to her.

He pushed his drink away and rose, taking Belle's bags, putting them on the floor, taking her in his arms and kissing her thoroughly, because bugger it, he'd really missed her.

'Wow,' said Belle, her eyes sparkling. 'That was quite the welcome.'

'Sorry I blew you out yesterday.'

'You were busy.'

'Something like that.'

With a tilt of her head, she studied him, picking up on his disgusted tone. 'Something wrong?'

'Yes.' He pulled her onto his lap and kissed her again. 'I missed you.'

'Oh.' She turned a delightful shade of pink before wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him back. 'Funnily enough I missed you, too.'

And just like that, they fell into their usual easy rhythm of teasing and laughing. He was especially proud of her when she recounted how she'd put her colleague in his place. That was Belle all over, not showy or loud but practical and determined, with a strong sense of justice. She wouldn't let anyone walk all over her, but at the same time she wouldn't walk all over someone else. It was a particularly attractive quality. If she were his girlfriend, he wouldn't have to worry about her, because she knew how to look after herself and wouldn't stand for any crap but without being arrogant or snotty about it, like some of his previous acquaintances could be. He thought of Lisa, a model in New York that he'd occasionally hooked up with. Like him, she was always on the move and the perfect companion for a few days. Lisa had almost taken pride in being rude to people in her bid to show her toughness. He realised now, it was a form of insecurity.

Belle wasn’t insecure, she knew what she wanted, and she wasn’t going to accept second place from anyone.

Finn had done his research and suggested they head into the store at five-thirty to guarantee a good spot to watch the festive proceedings.

‘Are you sure about this?’ asked Belle looking around the store as they walked past the make-up counters, which were spilling over with sparkly gift sets and stylish perfume boxes done up in silk ribbons. ‘I’ve never heard of it before.’

‘Hello, I’ve done my due diligence. It’s real enough.’

‘Well, while we’re here, I’m going to grab my sister a MAC lipstick. Why don’t I meet you back here in fifteen minutes? You can reserve our space,’ suggested Belle. Her head had been turned by all the sumptuous displays and she was itching to do some more shopping. Also, if she could ditch Finn, she could try and get him some aftershave samples to go in the stocking she was planning for him. Earlier that day, she’d been to Primark and bought two stockings, one for Finn and one for Ariel, along with several pairs of socks, and a bandana with kangaroos on for Greg, the Australian stray. She’d also bought two Terry’s Chocolate Oranges and a pack of playing cards for Finn, and was rather pleased with her day’s haul. She really did love buying presents.

Once she’d purchased Ariel’s favourite lipstick and had succumbed to a beautiful woollen scarf that she hoped her mother might find it in her heart to love – she did like nice things – Belle turned her attention to the perfume counters. Working her way along them, chatting to the assistants and picking up tiny sample bottles wherever she could, she completed a circuit, and by the time she returned to Finn’s side at the bottom of the escalators, she had a pocket full of little sample packs, both men’s and women’s, for

the two stockings. Compared to fifteen minutes earlier, there was a palpable sense of anticipation in the air, almost like a crowd waiting for a clock to strike the hour.

Suddenly, Santa appeared at the top of the stairs in a red lamé Santa suit decorated with golden stars. His booming voice rang out as he counted down from three and confetti canons burst into action, sprinkling coloured confetti over the waiting crowd.

‘Oh, my goodness,’ laughed Belle as Santa came down the escalator doing what could only be described as dad dancing while singing Maria Carey’s ‘All I want for Christmas’. Behind him, danced a fairy decked out in a glittery green dress, followed by a chorus of singing shiny baubles.

Belle thought her wide smile might split her face. ‘I don’t believe it,’ she said, as the singers and dancers reached the bottom of the escalator, the confetti still raining down. They sang and danced their way through the crowd, Santa shaking people’s hands and waving to the excited children. The fairy was tapping her wand left right and centre, with streams of glitter falling in her wake. At the top of the escalator, a gospel choir appeared and came down singing Elton John’s ‘Step into Christmas’ and waving their arms in time with the music, clearly enjoying themselves as much as the crowd who were joining in.

Finn was moving on the spot, his face lit up with pure joy, and Belle couldn’t resist slipping her camera out of her pocket and taking a sneaky picture. He spotted her and pulled a silly face, which she caught as well. Then he put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her in for a quick kiss on her nose.

‘This is brilliant,’ he said, shaking his head to dislodge the coloured pieces of ticker tape that had settled on his hair.

Santa had climbed onto one of the displays and was now rocking out with an air guitar to ‘Rocking Around the Christmas Tree’, while a collection of elves, singing crackers and more fairies circled below, dancing

along to the music. Then the tune segued into a new song and Santa yelled in best Noddy Holder style, announcing the arrival of Christmas, and the band on the middle floor above them began to play the Slade classic ‘Merry Christmas Everyone’. Finn caught Belle’s eye as they both began to sing loudly, joining in. Around them people were dancing, and Finn grabbed her hand and held it up so she could twirl around under it. She laughed up into his face as more confetti rained down on them.

Santa was now giving it some and began head-banging so that his white beard almost swept the floor and his Santa hat bobbed manically. Belle couldn’t stop laughing and smiling, and every time she caught the eye of a stranger, they laughed back, full of Christmas spirit and good will to all men. Yes, it was commercial and glitzy and silly but, as she looked around the room, she realised that everyone was having fun, enjoying themselves and they were happy, buoyed up by the community around them. This was what Christmas was all about, she realised, bringing people together and celebrating their commonality rather than differences. It occurred to her that her dad would love this … Carole, too. And Ariel. Surely her mum would also have enjoyed it, although she might have grumbled about the crowds … but Belle wasn’t going to think about that anymore. Instead, she grabbed Finn’s arm and serenaded him, joining in the chorus of the song, shouting the words at the top of her voice. With his blue eyes dancing as he smiled down at her, she wondered if this might just be the most perfect moment and Finn McAllister might just be the most perfect man. He could definitely be relied on to book the clown, and she wouldn’t give a rat’s ass about whether he’d play his own guitar at a party.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

BELLE

‘You have to have a Christmas tree,’ protested Finn the next morning, over the most delicious breakfast from room service. Belle could get used to fresh strawberries every day, and this coffee … it was pure nectar. The hotel probably had it delivered in from Fortnum & Mason.

‘Shit, the hamper.’

‘What hamper?’

‘The one I had arranged to be delivered to your aunt for Christmas and was supposed to divert. Hell, it’s probably arrived.’

‘The builders are there, so they’ll open the door.’

‘It’s not that, there are some perishables in there.’

‘No problem. I’ll go and get it while you’re at work today and then you can take the perishables home with you.’

‘Good plan,’ said Belle, taking a sip of the very lovely coffee as the tension eased out of her shoulders. ‘Especially as it’s all your fault.’

Finn frowned. ‘And how do you figure that?’

‘Because I never forget things. You’ve distracted me.’

He grinned. ‘Good.’

She rolled her eyes.

‘And you’ve changed the subject. Tree.’

‘Finn, if you want to lug a Christmas tree across Clapham Common to my flat, be my guest.’

‘Sorted, then.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Why not? Although, you have to come and choose the tree.’

And that was how they came to be standing in a churchyard off Balham High Road later that afternoon, as daylight faded. Fairy lights were strung around the entrance where a man in a green elf tunic, plastic pointy ears and green tights called out, ‘Welcome, welcome folks. This way to the grotto for Santa’s finest trees.’

‘Evening,’ said Finn. ‘Guess what? We’re looking for a tree.’

‘You’ve come to the right place. Do you know what you’re looking for?’

‘No,’ said Belle. He might be cheerful, but it was flipping freezing and she did not want to have to deal with his sales patter. ‘We’ll just take a look around.’

‘Fine. If you need any help, you know where I am.’ He shook his head and the bells on his little felt cap jingled, making Belle feel a bit of a killjoy.

‘Okay,’ she said a bit more brightly.

They left Mr Suitably Perky Elf at the entrance and walked down the first aisle of trees.

‘So, do you want a Nordmann fir, a Norway spruce or a Blue spruce?’ asked Finn, his gloved fingers interlinked with hers as they stopped in front of a group of trees leaning against each other like drunken soldiers.

Belle smiled at his earnest expression. ‘Of course, you’re a tree expert.’

‘Well maybe not expert,’ replied Finn with a modest little bow. ‘But I know my firs.’

‘And I haven’t a clue. They all look the same to me.’

‘Sacrilege,’ said Finn in tones of mock horror. ‘Do you want a tree that is the traditional Victorian shape and smells of pine but will drop needles once it gets in the warm, or do you want the more conical shape that doesn’t drop, or a tree that won’t drop and has the silvery-blue needles?’

‘I thought I just wanted a tree. What do you recommend?’

‘I’d always go for the Norway Spruce because of the smell – drops needles like a bugger – but smells bloody wonderful. The scent takes me right back to childhood.’

‘Okay, I’ll be guided by your expertise and the knowledge that Phoebe is our neat freak and she’ll be the one hoovering up the needles every five minutes.’

‘Naughty,’ teased Finn, tugging on the ends of her scarf and pulling her towards him.

‘Not really,’ she said, tilting her face up as he kissed her on the nose. ‘Phoebe will be absolutely thrilled that we’ve got a real tree.’ He lifted a hand and tucked a strand of hair back under her red hat, stroking her cheek in a way she’d come to associate with Finn. He was always looking out for her, and those frequent, tiny touches made her love him all the more.

Love. Belle froze. No. That wasn’t on the agenda. She loved being with him. Loved spending time with him, but she wasn’t in love-love with him, because that would be pointless and stupid and … no. She wasn’t. He was leaving in eight days. This would all be over then.

The thought left a cold shadow and, like the remaining pockets of snow, she wondered if the warmth would ever reach it.

‘How about this one? Belle?’ Finn’s words finally registered and she thought he might have asked her more than once.

‘Too tall,’ she said briskly. ‘We’ll never get it through the front door. How about this one?’ She pointed blindly to another one, trying to get her disordered thoughts back to the job in hand. She did not love Finn.

‘No, too spindly.’

She couldn’t love him. She’d only known him for fifteen days.

‘This one?’ she asked, a little desperate now because she wanted to get out of here.

‘Wonky,’ he declared, with that irrepressible, so very Finn, twinkle in his eye.

She swallowed and turned back, pretending to try and see the wonk.

‘This one,’ she said grabbing a nearby tree, not really looking at it. ‘It’s not too bushy and not too tall. It will fit in our lounge.’

‘No,’ said Finn, who’d insisted that him buying the tree was his Christmas contribution to lunch later in the week.

‘What’s wrong with it?’ she asked, her indignation taking her mind off other matters.

‘It’s not…’ he tilted his head, ‘Christmassy enough.’

‘Finn!’ She laughed and was very grateful that she could, even though it once again underlined how endearing he was because he was taking this so very seriously. ‘It’s a Christmas tree, of course it’s Christmassy enough. And what does that even mean?’

Finn had already walked on down the rows of trees, peering at them with all the intensity of a bride looking at wedding dresses.

She watched him as he moved away, hitching over his shoulder the big tote bag of Fortnum & Mason goodies, which he’d insisted on sharing with her and her flatmates. As he stood in the glow of the fairy lights, a slight golden aura about him, her heart did a painfully slow somersault. Damn it, Finn McAllister was … just adorable.

But she wasn’t in love with him.

‘Woohoo. A tree! A real tree!’ Phoebe bounced up from the sofa almost beside herself with joy, as Finn, obscured by his prize, carried the Nordmann fir into the lounge and then poked his head out.

‘Oh, and a man. Hello.’

‘Hi, I’m Finn,’ he said.

‘What, as in Fit as Fuck Finn?’ said Maddie, darting into the room from the kitchen.

Belle slapped a hand over her mouth, wishing she could have done the same to her flatmate.

Finn merely raised an eyebrow and grinned, taking it all in his stride as usual.

‘Finn, this is Phoebe, and this loudmouth is Maddie.’

‘Nice to meet you,’ he said.

‘Finn Drew. Oh my God. Finn Drew. You brought us a tree,’ squealed Phoebe, hopping from foot to foot. ‘We’ve never had a real tree. This is so exciting.’

‘Yes,’ drawled Maddie sarcastically. ‘Shall we crack open the champagne?’

‘Don’t be so miserable, or the Ghost of Christmas Past will come and shake his chains at the end of your bed tonight,’ said Phoebe. ‘And you can open a bottle of wine.’

Finn propped the tree up in the corner of the room and then put down the stand that Belle had realised they needed to buy.

‘Would you like a drink?’ asked Belle.

‘Do you have any beer?’

‘We do,’ said Maddie who’d fallen into her usual role of hostess. ‘Take a seat.’

By the time Finn and Belle had peeled off all their layers, Maddie had returned with a tray of snacks.

‘Those were supposed to be for Christmas,’ said Phoebe.

‘We have a tree, ergo it’s Christmas,’ retorted Maddie over her shoulder, returning to the kitchen.

‘Fair point,’ said Phoebe equitably, snaffling one of the pretzel sticks from a selection pack she’d bought and thought she’d hidden away. ‘I can always buy more.’ She paused and then suddenly looked at Finn, struck anew by who he was. ‘You’re Finn Drew.’ She coloured and then looked down at her hands, twisting in her lap.

‘I am,’ said Finn gravely, although his eyes did their usual twinkly thing that always made Belle go a little gooey inside. ‘But I don’t bite.’

‘Belle says you’re off to the Amazon Rainforest next. How on earth do you plan something like that?’ Pheobe’s eyes gleamed. ‘What stuff do you need to take? I have problems packing for a weekend.’

Finn laughed. ‘Luckily I have a logistics manager for that sort of thing.’

‘And how many people go with you? Is it lots?’

‘No, as few as possible. We don’t want to put additional strain on the indigenous people and the local resources.’

For the next half hour Belle sat back and sipped her wine, watching Finn with a sense of pride as he patiently answered Phoebe’s endless questions.

‘Enough, Phoebe,’ interjected Maddie. ‘We want to have a normal conversation now, wheedle out all his darkest secrets so we can blackmail him and make sure he’s good enough for Belle.’

‘Maddie!’ Belle shot an apologetic look at Finn who was sitting next to her.

‘She’s right,’ said Finn, nudging her with his knee. ‘You should always get as much leverage as you can, you never know when you might need it.’ He winked at her before turning to Maddie. ‘How many people have you blackmailed? And what’s your top tip?’

Maddie grinned back. ‘You just passed.’ She glanced at Belle. ‘Could he book a clown?’

Finn frowned. ‘What do you need a clown for?’

Belle, Phoebe and Maddie exchanged smug smiles. ‘We don’t,’ said Maddie. ‘But one day we might.’

‘He’d book the clown,’ said Belle.

‘Yee-hah,’ said Maddie and high-fived both Belle and Phoebe.

‘Would I?’ Poor Finn looked utterly perplexed.

Belle kissed him. ‘You would. Now, are we going to get this tree decorated?’

‘Yes. Yes,’ said Phoebe, jumping up and running off to the hall and dragging out a pile of towels and bedding, before unearthing a battered box from the very bottom of the cupboard.

‘Ta-da!’ she crowed, carrying in the box with as much fanfare as if she’d just found the Ark of the Covenant.

‘Shall I cut the netting off?’ asked Finn, producing a sizeable Swiss Army knife out of his pocket.

‘Be still my beating heart, a man with a penknife who knows how to use it. That has to be one of the sexiest things I’ve ever seen,’ drawled Maddie, clasping a hand over her chest.

‘I can do all sorts of things with this,’ joked Finn.

‘I bet you can,’ Maddie replied.

Finn stripped the netting from the tree with quick efficiency and directed Belle to position the stand beneath the sawn-off trunk of the fir tree.

‘It’s quite a good size,’ observed Maddie, very tongue in cheek, as Finn lowered the tree into the stand and held it there while Belle and Phoebe tightened up the screws on each side. ‘Straight, too.’

‘Thank you,’ Finn countered, deadpan.

‘I meant the tree,’ said Maddie, her face breaking into a smile. ‘Good job. Did you cut it down in the forest with your own chopper?’

Belle and Phoebe rolled their eyes in unison.

Finn, unfazed, shook his head. ‘Sorry to disappoint you, but my chopper is for specialised work only.’

Maddie burst into peals of laughter. ‘Nice one, Finn.’

Belle and Phoebe rose to their feet and Finn let go of the tree and they all stood back to admire it.

‘Blimey, that was simple,’ said Belle. ‘At home, it always took us several attempts to get the tree in the stand without hacking bits off the trunk, and then it would take forever to get it straight.’

‘I know what I’m doing,’ said Finn cockily.

She batted her eyelashes at him and murmured, ‘Never said otherwise.’

‘Lights first,’ said Maddie. ‘And enough of this innuendo. Some of us are going through a prolonged drought.’

‘Yes indeed,’ replied Phoebe, already rooting through the contents of the box and pulling out an angel. ‘I mean about the lights, not your sex life – although yes to that, too, because you bang on about it so often. We’re going to have live vicariously through Belle for the rest of the month.’

‘Sorry about these two,’ apologised Belle. ‘We’ve known each other for a very long time. They’ve forgotten about boundaries.’ Although their cheerful banter meant that Finn had been given the official seal of approval.

Phoebe began unfurling the tangled bundle of lights.

‘Check them before you put them on,’ said Maddie who had retreated to the sofa and sat with her wine.

‘This isn’t my first rodeo, sunshine,’ said Phoebe. ‘Sorry, Finn, she’s a bossy cow.’

‘And proud of it,’ Maddie chipped in. ‘I’m the bossy one, Phoebe’s the flaky, creative one and Belle’s the super-organised one.’

‘That bit, I knew,’ said Finn, winking at Belle.

Belle shrugged. ‘It’s my superpower. But I think you’re pretty organised, too.’ She thought of the neat piles of clothes in his hotel room and his backpack. ‘You must be, to organise your expeditions.’

He gave a modest shrug.

‘Belle says you’re doing a book-signing event at Waterstones,’ said Phoebe. ‘I’d really like to get signed copies, for myself and for my brother for Christmas. I mean, I’ll pay. I’m not asking for freebies.’

‘Yes, it’s actually Friday evening,’ said Finn.

‘What time?’ Phoebe’s face lit up.

‘From seven.’

‘Great,’ said Phoebe, looking at Belle. ‘We can see you in action.’

‘Right. Now, can we get on with this tree?’ said Maddie, winking at Belle, which Belle knew meant she was just as excited to go but was far too cool to show it.

The lights all worked, thankfully, reminding Belle of a time when she was little, before LED lights, when every lightbulb had to be unscrewed to find out the defective one. Phoebe began to circle them round the base of the tree, handing them over to Belle on the opposite side, and they spiralled up to the top where Finn took over as he was the tallest.

‘Right, tinsel next,’ said Maddie.

‘No tinsel, it’s tacky,’ said Phoebe.

‘We have to have tinsel. Belle, what do you think?’

‘I’m not getting involved,’ she said, knowing the two of them could be equally stubborn about their points of view.

‘Toss a coin,’ said Finn, immediately cutting through the potential crap.

‘Brilliant.’ Belle gave him a look of grateful admiration. ‘My hero.’

‘Spoilsport,’ said Maddie, although she smiled.

‘Heads or tails.’

‘Heads for tinsel,’ said Maddie.

Finn tossed the coin. ‘It’s tails, I’m afraid.’

‘Bums. Oh well, I’ll put the tinsel around the picture frames.’

‘Okay, you can do that,’ said Phoebe, magnanimous in her victory. Maddie happily skipped over and pulled out the long streams of gold tinsel

and proceeded to hang them around the door frame, the mirror over the mantlepiece and the two large pictures on the wall.

In the meantime, Phoebe and Belle began to open up the tissue-paper-wrapped baubles. The familiar anticipation rose in Belle as she picked up the first little parcel. What would be inside? The decorations had been tucked away for a whole year, along with the now defunct plastic tree, hiding in the dark, like spring bulbs ready to dazzle once again.

‘Love this one,’ said Phoebe, holding up a Cinderella golden slipper like forgotten treasure. ‘This one should go near the top.’

‘And this one,’ said Belle, unfurling the tissue paper to reveal a big red and gold glass bauble covered in a delicate lace pattern of white glitter. ‘I think we have three of these – Marks and Spencer’s sale in January. The posh big ones always go near the top.’

‘And these little gold ones are the filler-ins,’ said Maddie, opening up a plastic tub with dozens of the smaller baubles.

‘Look, remember this one?’ said Phoebe.

‘Oh, we bought that one in Portobello Market two—’ Belle began.

‘No, three years ago,’ interrupted Maddie. ‘When we were doing that Notting Hill film tour.’

‘That’s right,’ agreed Phoebe. ‘And we had lunch in that pub with the enormous turkey and stuffing sandwiches.’

‘No, no, no,’ said Maddie suddenly, when Phoebe unwrapped an ugly three-legged reindeer ornament which had seen better days.

‘Oh please,’ pleaded Phoebe. ‘He’s special needs, he deserves to have his day.’

‘He’s had his day. He’s knackered and needs to be put out of his misery.’

Phoebe held the little reindeer up to her chest, like a protective mother.

Belle rolled her eyes – she was not getting involved. Finn started to speak, and she laid a warning hand to stop him offering the heads or tails

solution. They had the same argument every year. This was a battle of wills beyond any diplomatic intervention. Phoebe would hang the ornament. Later on, Maddie would sneak it out of sight onto one of the lower branches. And the next day it would reappear higher up. This went on for the whole of the lead-up to Christmas.

When Phoebe's lower lip quivered in defence of her beloved Rudolf, Maddie caved with bad grace. 'Prosecco time,' she said.

Belle could have kissed him when he looked at her as if to check that she was okay with him invading their space. 'Do you have any red wine, not really a fan of Prosecco? I'd have brought some…'

'Don't be daft,' said Maddie. 'You brought us a tree and everlasting delight to Phoebs. Wine is not a problem here.' Her cousin imported wines from less well-known wine markets. She had a stash of wines from the Czech Republic, Lebanon, Cyprus and Moldova.

'Why don't we get a takeaway?' suggested Belle, happy that her flatmates had accepted Finn so readily. 'Unless you need to get back, Finn?'

'I'm in,' he said.

The four of them finished the evening full of Thai takeaway, toasting the glittering tree with glasses of prosecco, beer and red wine, with Rudolf glowering out at them from one of the branches. The finished tree looked wonderful and, as Finn had promised, smelled just like a pine forest. Belle sneaked a look at him over the table and felt her whole body glow with happiness and a delicious feeling of wellbeing.

He was absolutely perfect.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

BELLE

Belle's arms were folded and hugged tight to her chest, and she burrowed her face into her scarf, her eyes flicking this way and that, keeping a watchful eye on the people milling around her and Finn. Behind them, the famous circular building of the Royal Albert Hall gleamed with lights, sending a golden glow into the chilly night.

Finn, who was keeping a close eye on her, nudged her, as if to remind her he was there. She gave him a grateful smile, trying to ignore the knots her stomach insisted on knitting itself into. He'd held her hand all the way here on the walk from The Ritz, but had not intruded on her silent ruminations, for which she was very thankful.

'Belle, Finn,' a voice called, and she looked over to see her dad and Carole coming towards them.

'Hi, Frank. Hi, Carole,' said Finn.

Frank took Finn's outstretched hand and shook it, while Belle and Carole looked at each other awkwardly.

Frank turned to Belle and reached out a hand to pat her on the arm. 'Hi, Dad,' she said. 'Carole.' She suddenly felt as if she'd got a mouthful of sand.

'What a beautiful scarf,' said Carole. 'Such a great colour. Have you ever had your colours done?'

Belle held up the end of the deep hyacinth-blue scarf that had been a present from Phoebe last Christmas. ‘Thank you. It’s one of my favourites. The colour is lovely. But I’ve never had my colours done.’

‘Me, neither. I thought maybe you had because…’ she waved a hand, ‘it works, really suits you.’

‘Thanks,’ said Belle, mellowing, realising that Carole probably felt a little awkward, too. And despite Carole being only five years older than her, Belle reluctantly saw the attraction to her dad. He was a good-looking man, and seeing them together like this made the fifteen years between them not as much of a gap as she’d always thought.

They found their seats and while Dad and Finn disappeared to the bar to order interval drinks, Belle was left with Carole. She looked at the excited crowd around them, everyone bubbling with anticipation, lots of people wearing all manner of festive headgear – from reindeer antlers and light-up Santa hats through to bauble-trimmed tiaras and glittery pointed Christmas-tree hats.

‘Not sure if it’s your thing,’ said Carole, a little apologetically pulling four pairs of Christmas novelty glasses out of a tote bag along with several light-up glittery snowflake headbands. Belle didn’t have the heart to say it really wasn’t her thing, so she took one of the least offensive plastic headbands and a pair of snowman glasses. If everyone around her was looking ridiculous, she might as well join in.

When the two men reappeared, quite quickly to Belle’s relief, her dad pounced on the biggest, most sparkly headband and the largest, silliest glasses. Belle cringed inside. What would her mother say? But when she looked at Finn, who was grinning, she couldn’t help an inner smile.

Finn sat down next to Belle. ‘Great idea. I wish I’d thought of it. Can I have the reindeer glasses, please, and the red glittery headband? I think red’s my colour.’ He flicked the switch to start up the lights and put them on shaking his head from side to side. ‘What do you think?’

Carole beamed. ‘Suits you.’

Finn pulled a coy, modelling pose, so clearly enjoying himself that Belle had to smile.

‘Very cute,’ she said, putting a hand on his thigh, unable to resist touching him.

Deciding that the only way to go was full-on Christmas, she switched on her snowflake headband and put on the glasses. She felt a bit of a berk, but everyone else around them was clearly quite happy to make fools of themselves.

The orchestra and choir began to file on stage carrying their instruments, all of them wearing the traditional black but with the addition of Santa hats, tinsel trim and more headbands. The stage was dressed with a huge Christmas tree and a giant fireplace, with several huge stockings dangling from the mantlepiece. As the musicians appeared, there was a universal rustle throughout the concert hall as everyone fumbled for the song sheets, which had been handed out at the entrance.

When the lights dimmed, Belle leaned forward in her seat. The hall looked like a fairy kingdom, with all the lights glittering in the dark. A flutter of excitement danced along her breastbone. It was magical.

As the first chord of music was played, Belle felt her heart lift, and Finn squeezed her hand. She leaned in, managing to avoid a clash of headbands and kissed him on the cheek.

As the joyful strains of ‘I Saw Three Ships’ lilted into the air, the pure notes of the three female singers soaring and their voices blending in perfect harmony, her heart expanded like a balloon in her chest, the emotions too big to be contained. Finn’s hand anchored her, and she clung to it.

Song after song was launched into the crowd like an explosion of joy, and by the interval, Belle buzzed, her mood so high she felt as if she might fly right up to the top of the hall.

‘Enjoying it?’ asked her dad, standing next to her in the bar, while Finn and Carole chatted away.

‘So much,’ she said. ‘I’m loving it.’

‘There’s nothing quite like singing along with five thousand other people. It’s so uplifting.’

‘It is,’ said Belle, exchanging a smile with him.

‘I’m so glad you came.’

‘Me, too,’ she said quietly.

‘I like your Finn, he’s a nice guy.’

‘He’s not mine. He’s only in London for a few more…’ Her voice trailed off as she remembered that it was exactly one week. ‘He’s going off to the Amazon Rainforest for a four-month expedition.’

Recognition dawned in her dad’s eyes. ‘I thought he looked familiar. He’s the explorer.’ He smiled at her. ‘These days, the Amazon isn’t that far away, and four months is nothing … if it’s the right person.’

She let out a mirthless laugh. ‘Don’t go getting all romantic. We hardly know each other. We’re just dating while he’s here.’

‘That’s a shame. I can see he makes you happy.’

Belle’s face softened. ‘You’re looking happy, too, Dad. Marriage to a younger woman suits you.’ As soon as she’d said it, she realised that might sound catty. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I mean you look really happy together.’

Her dad reached out and touched her shoulder. ‘We are. Very happy. I know it was hard on you and Ariel when I left your mum, but we … we were miserable, and your mum … she couldn’t accept that. I’m sorry.’ Looking at him properly for the first time in years, Belle could see that the years had dropped away from him. The tightness around his eyes had gone. It was a bit of a revelation, but she realised that he was more himself. More like the man that used to take her to McDonalds, to football training, who taught her to drive and introduced her to spicy Indian food.

‘I don’t want to speak ill of your mother. She’s a great mum, and we had a very good marriage for a long time. But things change. Life expands, especially as your children get older and start doing things for themselves. You and I got such a kick out of the whole football thing. Me coaching, you training. I never imagined I’d be doing that, but it was so much fun, and we met lots of new people. I met a whole load of other dads. It was a really broadening experience … but your mother, well, I started to realise that as a couple our horizons were limited and would always stay that way. I tried really hard for a long time to get your mum to be more outgoing – which probably wasn’t fair on her. You shouldn’t expect people to change for you – they should be enough as they are. But our differences became too broad for us to connect anymore.’

It was funny: her dad had tried to say some of this before, but it had never really resonated, not the way that it did now. Her dad was right that her mum shouldn’t have had to change for him, because her mum needed to change for herself. She’d become embittered, judgemental of other people, and Belle and Ariel had enabled that. Allowed her to stay in the centre of her spider’s web. But how could they change that?

The second half of the concert rose to a crescendo as there was a lot more audience participation, with different sections of the auditorium being encouraged to battle against each other to sing the loudest, or the women to sing against the men. They sang all the classics: ‘Away in a Manger’, ‘Once in Royal David’s City’ and ‘Ding Dong Merrily on High’ – as well as a rousing version of ‘The Twelve Days of Christmas’ and a haunting arrangement of ‘Silent Night’. All led by the principal choristers, which moved Belle to tears. As the crowd joined in the refrain at the end of the first verse of ‘Hark the Herald Angels Sing’, she looked over at her dad. He

glanced back, their gazes held for a moment and she smiled at him as a flood of love enveloped her, warming her soul and filling the hole his absence in her life had created. The wistful, hopeful smile he sent her back, doused the shame she felt at cutting him out of her world and filled her with hope that they could get back to where they'd once been. The doors were open, all she had to do was find the courage and backbone to walk through to find him again.

When they filed out of the Royal Albert Hall at the end of the evening, walking past the big BBC outdoor-broadcast vans that had been brought in to televise the concert, Belle didn't have to think twice about them all going to dinner together.

She fell into step beside Carole as her dad and Finn lagged behind.

'That was great fun,' said Belle. 'Thanks for inviting us.'

'Thank your dad. He was really chuffed that you agreed to come.' Carole gave her a hesitant smile. 'It's really meant a lot to him.'

Belle nodded. A lump rising in her throat.

Carole went on tentatively, 'He misses you. And your sister. I know it must be hard … for your mum. But he would love to see you.'

Belle looked over at the smiling unlined face of the woman in front of her. She wanted to feel angry with her because she was young and enjoying life with Dad when Mum was still miserable, but the honest truth was Carole had come on the scene after Dad had left. Perhaps the thing that had shocked her mother was how quickly they got together. And then, when they got married, it made everything so very final.

Belle couldn't bring herself to say anything. The words inside her were constrained by a mass of conflicting emotions. She merely nodded, knowing it was inadequate, but it was all she had.

‘Cheers,’ said her dad, holding up his glass of wine in the bougie Spanish tapas restaurant that Carole had booked. ‘Merry Christmas, and thanks to Belle and Finn for coming.’

‘Cheers,’ said Finn and Belle together.

She took a sip of the Rioja and relaxed into her seat as Finn and Carole talked about their visits to Barcelona. Around them, she could hear the chink of cutlery on china and hear the chatter and laughter of the other diners. The low lighting in the room created a lovely ambient atmosphere with tea lights glowing on each table.

‘So, what are you up to for Christmas?’ asked her dad.

‘Going home,’ said Belle. ‘On Tuesday. And I’ll come back as soon as the trains are running again.’ As soon as she said it, she realised she’d given too much away.

‘A flying visit, then.’

‘Yes, there’s things I have to do,’ said Belle, not wanting him to know that actually Christmas at home these days was quite miserable.

‘You’d be very welcome to come and have dinner with us one evening,’ he said. ‘Stay over, if you wanted.’

Across the table she sensed Carole stiffening, waiting for her answer, and she saw the hope in her dad’s eyes. The pause was infinitesimal, but Belle understood that a lot rested on her response, and regret crashed over her. She’d been a cow to her dad, not ever considering his feelings or his side of things.

‘I’d like that,’ she said softly, immediately aware of Carole relaxing and the happy light that filled her dad’s face.

Finn nodded at her, and it was the approval on his face that made her feel ten feet tall.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

FINN

Finn's hand cramped and he stretched his fingers, grateful that the queue had finally been conquered. Book signings were fun but also exhausting. He glanced up to where Belle and Phoebe were chatting away to his publicist, who apparently they knew slightly through a mutual friend.

'Well, that was a huge success. We've sold nearly all of your books,' said the assistant manager of the store.

'That's great.'

'And thank you so much for coming,' she added.

'Thanks for having me.' He rose to his feet, suspecting that she and her staff were keen to get packed up so they could close the shop.

'You were wonderful,' said Phoebe. 'My brother is going to be so chuffed with his book. And I'm going to get major cool-big-sis points for having met you.'

'Glad I could oblige,' laughed Finn.

'I had no idea you were a proper celeb,' said Maddie, with the usual sardonic glint in her eye.

'Shh, I'm not really. Don't tell anyone.'

'Right, well this is our Christmas Eve. I vote we find somewhere for a cheeky cocktail,' said Maddie.

'It's Friday night, we'll never get in anywhere,' said Phoebe.

‘I know a very nice cocktail bar not too far from here,’ said Finn, winking at Belle.

‘Oh my God, oh my God,’ shrieked Phoebe ten minutes later as they were walking down the street. ‘We’re going to The Ritz, aren’t we? I think I’m going to hyperventilate.’

‘Cool your jets,’ said Maddie, laying a hand on her arm. ‘At least try and pretend to play it cool.’

‘Like you’re not excited,’ retorted Phoebe.

‘Of course, I am. I’m just not showing it. Some of us are naturally bougie.’

Belle snorted, and Phoebe grinned at her and looped an arm through hers. ‘This is so neat.’

Finn steered them towards The Rivoli Bar which was a glorious tribute to all things Art Deco. It glowed with decadence, golden scalloped domes above them, glossy walls that looked as if they were made of tortoiseshell interspersed with typical Art Deco classic reliefs from Greek mythology. Lalique glass panels separated booths which were filled with ornate onyx tables and velvet-upholstered club chairs.

‘This is rather nice,’ observed Maddie with classic understatement.

Phoebe and Belle smiled at her deliberate refusal to be impressed. Neither of them could contain their awe.

‘Oh my God, have you seen the prices of the cocktails?’ whispered Phoebe.

Finn smiled at her. ‘My treat. What would you like?’

The girls perused the extensive menu.

‘Ooh. A Churchill’s Courage,’ said Phoebe. ‘Apparently he stayed here.’

Maddie snorted. ‘Along with Marilyn Monroe, Princess Di, Coco Chanel, Anna Pavlova, Queen Elizabeth, Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway.’ She pointed to a piano in the corner of the bar. ‘Noel Coward wrote some of his songs here. This place is iconic.’

‘How do you know all this?’ asked Belle, impressed and doubly excited that she was staying here again.

‘Celebrity gossip guru, me,’ said Maddie before admitting with a grin, ‘And I looked it up on Google.’

There was much discussion about the menu before they settled on a Kir Royale for Phoebe, Churchill’s Courage for Finn, a Paradise Sour for Maddie and Belle’s delicious-sounding Velveteen Fizz.

When the cocktails arrived, they were beautifully presented in different elegant long-stemmed glasses, with twists of lemon, flower petals, sugar twirls, and when Belle took her first sip she sighed with utter pleasure.

‘Divine,’ she said. ‘I could get used to this.’

‘Don’t,’ begged Phoebe. ‘We’d miss you. You are still coming tomorrow, aren’t you? I need help now that there are more of us.’ Phoebe had rounded up another stray, Georgie, who lived in the flat downstairs, was a doctor and would be working on Christmas Day, so there would be six of them for lunch.

Belle leaned over and gave her a hug. ‘Of course, I am. We’ll be there first thing to help peel the spud mountain and make the pigs-in-blankets.’

‘Yes, we’re going to have a pig-off,’ announced Finn.

‘What?’ asked Maddie.

Belle rolled her eyes. ‘Finn seems to think his recipe is better than mine.’

‘It is.’

‘And you want me and Phoebs to be the judges of that?’ asked Maddie.

Belle nodded.

‘Got to be worth something. I’m open to bribery.’

They all laughed together and already Belle was looking forward to their very own Christmas, suddenly very happy that Finn was coming too.

An hour later with another cocktail each under their belts, Phoebe announced it was time they were leaving. ‘Big day tomorrow. Greg and

Georgie are arriving at ten, so you can sleep in until then. And don't forget party frocks.'

'Yes, boss,' said Maddie, saluting. 'That includes you too, Finn.'

'Damn, I left my Valentino in storage.'

'There's a dress code. No roasties for anyone who doesn't come appropriately attired,' said Phoebe.

'I think I can scrounge something up,' said Finn.

Eventually, Phoebe and Maddie headed off in high spirits while Finn and Belle made the very short journey up to the suite, still laughing.

'So, you dress up on Christmas Day,' said Finn as they entered the suite.

'Yes, we always did at home.'

'Us too, Mum always bought a new dress and Dad and I had to wear a shirt. The habit stuck, so it just so happens I brought one with me.'

'I've not seen you in a shirt.' Belle eyed him suggestively.

'I thought you preferred me out of them,' he said in a low voice, stepping towards her and wrapping his arms around her to kiss her. As always, something clicked inside him when she was in his arms, her head tucked beneath his chin, her hands loose on his hips. They fitted. Like jigsaw pieces, like matching salt-and-pepper shakers, like things that belonged together.

'There is that,' murmured Belle, her hands lifting the hem of his sweatshirt, her fingers softly brushing over his bare skin. He swallowed, the barely-there touch sending skitters dancing across his body.

She held his gaze as she eased his top up over his chest and he held up his arms to help her as she pulled it over his head.

'Mmm,' she purred, tossing the sweatshirt onto the floor. 'Very nice, indeed.'

He stood, letting her look her fill, watching the flush along her cheeks and her eyes sparkle with intent. She leaned in and pressed a series of kisses along his collar bone, her hands smoothing over his chest. He went to put

his arms around her, but she pushed his hands away and shook her head, her hands dropping to his belt, tugging the leather free from the brass buckle.

‘Nuh-huh. Christmas Eve treat. My turn to play.’

Her soft words sent a bright, sharp thrill through him. A sultry promise that, from the intent look in her eyes, she had every intention of delivering on. When she began to kiss her way across his chest, her fingers toying with his nipples, he had to hold back the shudder which became even more difficult when she moved on down to his navel, her lips nibbling and teasing along the way. Steeling himself as she moved lower, he stroked her hair, his fingers tangling in the soft fine length at the nape of her neck. When she pushed her hand into the top of his boxer briefs, he felt a quick urgent tug in his groin. When she eased them down, his jeans around his thighs, she sank onto her knees and looked up at him, her smile too wicked for words. His breath hitched while his body twitched in heady anticipation. Blood rushed south and he had to force himself to stand still.

‘Consider this an early Christmas present,’ said Belle, taking him into her hot mouth. Fierce pleasure flooded over him, the sensations burning a hole in his brain. Dear God. Belle circled his crown and he groaned her name, sucking in a hoarse breath. She was surely going to kill him.

Pressure built at the base of his spine, and he wasn’t sure he could hold on but … not like this. He wanted to be inside her, he wanted her closeness.

He hauled her to her feet and kissed her, guiding her back onto the bed, his hand sliding up her thigh to make sure she was ready.

‘Belle,’ he murmured into her mouth as he kissed her again, wanting to get even closer to her. This wasn’t enough, there was something about this woman that always had him wanting more. He fought the need to tell her. Now was not the moment.

‘I want you,’ she whispered, lifting her hips, urging him on. She opened her legs and he pushed inside, feeling her clench around him. This was what he needed. Her. Just her.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

FINN

When he woke the following morning, Belle's delicious soft body was tucked next to his. He'd slept so soundly, it took him a moment to realise where he was, although it was difficult to mistake the sumptuous surroundings and the amazingly comfortable mattress for anywhere but The Ritz. He lay back on the feather-down pillow, well-rested and at ease, as he always was when Belle slept next to him. He studied her sleeping face, wondering what it was that made him sleep so well when she was with him. Sleep would be a precious commodity over the next few months. When you were out in the jungle, you were always on your guard, sleeping with one eye open. God, he was going to miss this. Not only the luxury, but waking up with someone, the sleepy look of happiness in her eyes as she came to.

Her eyelashes fluttered and she moved in her sleep, her breathing stuttering slightly as she gradually woke up. As soon as she opened her eyes, he smiled down at her.

'Merry Christmas,' he murmured, dropping a kiss on her cheek.

'Mmm,' she said and snuggled into him, her arm snaking across his waist and one leg sliding between his. She kissed along his jawline, her lips rasping against his stubbled chin. 'Merry Christmas. Although it's not really Christmas.' She frowned. 'I hate the thought of you being on your own on real Christmas Day.'

‘It’s fine.’

‘It’s not. I’m going to speak to my mum, invite you.’

‘You don’t have to do that.’

‘I know I don’t, but I want to be with you… Besides, you might lighten things up. I’m warning you, it will be miserable, although Mum might make a bit of effort to spread a little Christmas cheer if you come, too.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll be fine on my own.’

‘Ha! I’m not worried about that. I just want you to come and suffer with me,’ she rolled on top of him and gave him a quick kiss on the mouth.

He hugged her and together they lay savouring each other for a few minutes and his hands crept their way to her bottom, stroking her firm skin.

Belle let out a frustrated sigh. ‘I’m going to need to take a raincheck and save this for later. I need to get up and go home. Lots to do and the other two will never forgive me if I’m late.’

Finn entered the kitchen of Belle’s flat carrying his large holdall.

‘Blimey, are you moving in?’ asked Maddie.

Finn suddenly looked affronted. ‘Are you telling me you don’t do presents? No! This is my Santa sack.’

‘And don’t you scrub up well,’ said Maddie, admiring his Hugo Boss suit. It was always as well to keep one good suit to hand.

‘And presents.’ Phoebe’s face lit up. ‘Belle, he’s a keeper.’

Finn glanced at Belle and saw her stricken expression. He gave her a reassuring smile he was far from feeling. Suddenly the days were racing by. Only five more days before he left. Everything for the expedition was coming together beautifully, and normally by now he’d be itching to be off, counting down the days. Checking his lists constantly.

He sucked in a breath, aware of a peculiar hollowed-out sensation in his stomach, and sneaked a glance at Belle, now chatting to Phoebe and trying to wrest a cork from a Prosecco bottle. Had he imagined the slight sadness he thought he saw? Or should he put it down to the gnawing nerves that had begun to plague him? Saying goodbye was going to be hard. Despite all his denials, he was going to miss Belle. ‘Belle, you’ve made a right pig’s ear of that,’ complained Maddie a minute later.

Belle giggled. ‘Get me the tea strainer.’ The cork that she was trying to remove from the bottle of wine was disintegrating fast, but Finn knew better than to offer to help. These three were fiercely independent and wouldn’t thank him for interfering.

‘Seriously, girl, you’d think you’d show a bit more expertise given your considerable experience,’ said Phoebe.

Maddie glanced at Finn. ‘I hope she shows a bit more finesse in the bedroom.’

Belle giggled again and finally removed what was left of the hapless cork from the Prosecco bottle.

‘For which I’m very grateful,’ said Finn, looking at the mangled remains.

‘Who wants a glass?’ Belle held the bottle up, waggling it a little bit too enthusiastically.

‘Bit early for me,’ said Finn.

‘Never too early for Prosecco, darling,’ drawled Maddie. ‘Especially on Christmas morning.’

‘Anyone want a pre-breakfast? Some toast to soak up the alcohol?’ asked Phoebe, already opening the bread bin.

‘Yes, with Marmite,’ said Belle. ‘Oh God, Finn, you do like Marmite, don’t you?’

All three girls turned to stare at him, and he cleared his throat. ‘Why? Is it a dealbreaker.’

‘Hell, yes,’ said Maddie.

‘You’d really turn me out on the street before I get Christmas lunch?’ he asked.

The three of them huddled together and whispered.

‘Now, I’m getting nervous,’ he teased.

‘It’s all right, our smitten kitten has put in a good word for you,’ announced Maddie.

‘The traitor. She’s got it bad.’

It might be good-natured teasing, but Finn was warmed by their jokey comments. He got on well with most people, but he could tell he’d been accepted by Maddie and Phoebe, and he felt like he belonged here. He wasn’t the odd one out or there on sufferance. Because he was always on the move and hadn’t put any roots down, it had been a long time since he felt he belonged anywhere. It surprised him by how much pleasure he derived from the thought.

Belle shrugged. ‘He’s quite cute, and it is Christmas.’

‘Phew,’ he said, wiping imaginary sweat from his brow. ‘I really thought you hard-hearted lot would throw me out in the snow.’

‘I wish it would snow again,’ said Phoebe, retrieving four slices of toast from the toaster. ‘I’d love a white Christmas. What do you want on your toast?’

Finn grinned. ‘Marmite, of course.’

‘Thank God for that,’ said Maddie. ‘Can we order the bridesmaids’ dresses?’

At her comment, the girls burst into uproarious laughter, Belle almost bending double at the preposterously unlikely thought.

Finn stared at the three of them laughing away, amused by the concept, and suddenly wondered what it would be like to be married to Belle. To come home to her after every trip away. To spend time with her and her

friends, being accepted like this, like a normal couple. Since when had the idea of having a home, and people to come home to, sounded so attractive?

Half an hour later, the women were at their various stations around the kitchen and following the spreadsheet precision-engineered to ensure that everyone knew what they were doing.

‘What can I do?’ he asked. Belle deferred to Phoebe who was chief chef.

‘You can sit at the table out of the way and peel potatoes and carrots,’ said Phoebe, pointing at him with her knife. ‘Belle can make you another coffee. We’ll have proper breakfast in forty minutes.’

Belle winked at him and moved as instructed over to the big cafetiere to pour him a coffee. Clearly Phoebe’s word was law in the kitchen. As he sat and peeled the potatoes, he thought it wasn’t so very different from being around the campfire on a trip, where everyone had a job to do and they slotted in seamlessly around each other. It was a testament to the women’s friendship that they worked so well together. He was a great believer in the old adage that you got the friends you deserved. Belle’s solid friendship with these two women was another tick in the box. How was it that he was already ridiculously fond of them after only a few days’ acquaintance?

Bacon baps with tomato ketchup were served as promised, as well as Bucks Fizz made with orange juice and Prosecco.

After another hour of prep, Finn was left on washing-up duty while the women went to spruce themselves up in readiness for the arrival of the other two guests.

At ten o’clock on the dot, Georgie arrived, and Belle, resplendent in a deep-red velvet dress that just skimmed her thighs, opened the door. Greg arrived a few minutes later. Introductions were made, and a second bottle of

Prosecco was opened, although Greg, living up to the Australian stereotype, opted for a tinny instead.

‘Right, present time,’ said Maddie, excitedly looking at the Christmas tree, which overnight had birthed a small pile of gifts. Finn nipped back to Belle’s bedroom to pull some packages out of his bag, and added them to the pile.

Belle took the first parcel from under the tree. ‘And this first one is for Maddie. One for Phoebe, one for Greg, one for Finn, one for Georgie and one for me.’

Maddie didn’t wait for the others; she was straight into her parcel, which was from Phoebe. ‘Well, it’s not going to be a dry Christmas,’ she said, unwrapping a half bottle of tequila. ‘Thanks, Phoebs.’

‘There’s another couple for you,’ said Belle. ‘Could you pass this one over, Finn?’ He took the small, heavy package and two small and very badly wrapped parcels.

Maddie shook them and prodded them. ‘I have no idea what these are.’

‘Open them,’ said Phoebe.

‘I’m waiting for you to open yours,’ said Maddie.

‘They always do this,’ said Belle. ‘It’s a competition to go the slowest so they have the last present.’

‘Back home, my sister always does that,’ said Greg.

‘Don’t know what you’re talking about,’ said Maddie and took her time opening the first package. ‘A box of chilli salt!’ She held it up and laughed. Her next two parcels contained a lime each and then the final one a bottle of triple sec. ‘Got it. Margarita ingredients!’ She threw her arms around Phoebe. ‘That’s such a cool present.’

‘You might need this, as well,’ said Belle, handing over Maddie’s final present, which Finn knew was the set of vintage cocktail glasses and a notebook of cocktail recipes that Belle had spent some time carefully writing out in her best handwriting.

‘You guys are just the best,’ declared Maddie.

Phoebe was delighted with her needles and wool from Belle and her candle-making kit from Maddie. Greg insisted on wearing his kangaroo bandanna. Finn received a notebook from Maddie with the words ‘Keep Calm and Keep on Canoeing up the Amazon’; and from Phoebe, a pair of woolly hiking socks. He’d given them both personalised London fridge magnets, a board game and a bottle of Champagne.

‘Now open mine,’ said Belle, pushing a present towards him. After their visit to the museum, she’d rethought the navy scarf – it would do for someone else another time. She watched avidly as he undid the Sellotape and pulled out … he burst into laughter. ‘The T-Rex Christmas jumper. I’ve always wanted one.’

He leaned over and gave her a long, lingering kiss, promising an even better thank-you later.

‘I’ve got a present for you,’ he said. ‘But I’d like to wait until nearer Christmas proper.’

‘Right, enough of that,’ said Maddie. ‘Some of us have got work to do. You guys sit and chat among yourselves.’

Finn relaxed back against the sofa, watching through the doorway of the kitchen as the three women flitted about. If only all Christmas get-togethers could be this easy. Maybe the answer was never to have Christmas with relatives. By now, his father would have been barking orders at everyone to clear everything up and insisting all the presents were tidied away into their new homes. No wonder his mum had insisted they went to Elspeth’s for Christmas when he was older.

Phoebe hadn’t been at all fussy about the way he’d cut the potatoes up earlier. ‘As long as I don’t have to do it, I really don’t care,’ had been her words.

By the time they were called to the kitchen table, it had been laid with a bright red cloth, covered in gold confetti stars and sported a stag candelabra

with big fat green candles, and crackers at each of the mismatched place settings.

‘Looks very festive,’ said Georgie.

‘Amazing what you can get from the charity shop,’ said Phoebe proudly. ‘Now come sit down, everyone.’

The table had been designed for four rather than six, and two of them had to sit on the metal chairs that had been brought in from the balcony bistro set; however, no one was about to complain about it being too cosy. Finn, who was seated between Belle and Georgie, had to watch his elbows – but who cared when you were having this much fun? He wasn’t surprised that everything had come together so perfectly as Phoebe loaded dish after dish onto what little space there was in the centre of the table. There were glistening roast potatoes, fragrant red cabbage, a tiny plate of sprouts – ‘For those who insist,’ said Phoebe grudgingly – an oval dish full to the brim of Belle’s pigs-in-blankets, and plates of sliced turkey with crispy skin, along with thick golden gravy.

‘A toast to the chefs,’ said Finn, raising his glass of red wine.

‘Hear, hear,’ said Greg. ‘And thanks so much for inviting me.’

‘And me,’ said Georgie. ‘This is lovely.’

It was certainly the best Christmas meal Finn had ever had, and with a pang of regret, he wondered where they’d all be next year.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

BELLE

‘Afternoon, Mr McAllister.’ The concierge greeted Finn like an old friend, as if he’d been away for ever, rather than one night at Belle’s place. This morning, Maddie and Phoebe had left for their respective homes for Christmas, and Finn had insisted Belle come and stay at The Ritz until she went home to her mum’s. Belle didn’t put up much of a fight. Who would? The thought of not having to do anything for the next few days was bliss, especially as it had taken until lunchtime that day to finish tidying up after the Christmas Day extravaganza, although it had been worth every minute. The girls had planned to stay and help, but Finn insisted that they go on home and he and Belle would finish off. Like they both said, he was a keeper. Except Belle kept remembering that he wasn’t, and that in less than a week he would be leaving. She surreptitiously clutched her stomach as if that might ease the funny griping she felt.

‘Hey, Jonathan. How are you?’ replied Finn.

‘Very good, sir. Do you need anything?’

Finn paused to give this some thought and Belle’s heart melted a little more. Finn knew that Jonathan loved finding solutions, helping guests and showing off his encyclopaedic knowledge of London. He was just one of the amazing hotel team for whom nothing was ever too much trouble.

‘We’d really like to go out to dinner, somewhere not too fancy. Nice, relaxed vibe. What would you suggest?’

‘Do you like Italian food?’

‘Yes.’ He glanced at her. ‘Belle?’

She nodded, although her appetite wasn’t what it usually was.

‘Do you like pasta?’

Finn turned to her again and she nodded.

‘We like pasta.’ Belle’s mouth twitched at his casual use of ‘we’. It sounded very couple-y. Almost like he was her boyfriend. And she hadn’t had one of those for a good few years. And when she had, it had never been this easy. Maybe it was because she knew he was leaving. It took the pressure off – there was no expectation. Her stomach roiled in protest at her pathetic denial. They had a few more days. Suddenly she didn’t want to go out and have to share Finn with other people, but she couldn’t tell him that.

Jonathan proceeded to give them three different options, scribbled them down and handed them over. ‘Let me know if you’d like me to reserve you a table.’

‘Will do,’ said Finn, tucking the piece of paper in the back pocket of his jeans.

Back in the hotel suite, she unpacked her small case with a little shiver of delight and almost pinched herself. She was staying here at The Ritz for four whole days. She hung her clothes up on the padded hangers, inhaling the scent of the lavender bags hanging on the rails of the wardrobe, and put her toiletries in the bathroom. While she was there, she couldn’t resist washing her hands with the gorgeous-scented hand wash and stroking the silky body lotion up her arm. With a happy sigh, she went through to the living room where she found Finn sprawled on the couch flicking through the TV channels.

She lay on the opposite couch and stretched out, sliding her fingers along the silk velvet of the upholstery. ‘I’m not sure I want to go out again.’

She glanced over at him. ‘It’s so lovely here.’

‘I feel the same. Shall we take a raincheck on dinner and get room service?’

‘Would you mind?’ said Belle.

‘Not at all. I’d rather have you to myself…’ He paused before adding, ‘While I can.’

She swallowed against the familiar jab of pain at the thought of Finn leaving, and avoided looking at him, not wanting her expression to give her away.

‘Mmm,’ she said, studying the palm of her hand as if it held all the secrets to the universe.

Finn put the TV remote down and came to sit on the edge of her sofa, tucking his arms around her and pulling her close, holding her tight.

She buried her face in his chest while he stroked her back. Neither of them said anything, just clung to each other. Finn tunnelled his hand between them to find her chin and tilted her face upwards. For a moment, she fought it, but then gave in, blinking furiously, horribly conscious of her tear-filled eyes.

‘Hey,’ he said, and kissed a solitary tear that had managed to escape and was now tracking its way down her cheek.

‘S-sorry,’ she whispered.

‘It’s okay.’

‘It’s not,’ she said, ducking her head again, her voice muffled by his jumper, trying to burrow into his chest so she didn’t have to have the conversation that weighed as heavily as a dozen elephants in the room.

With a soothing hand, he skimmed his fingers up her back to gently massage the sensitive nape of her neck as more tears spilled down her cheeks.

He exhaled heavily. ‘No, it’s not.’

She lifted her tearstained face to him again.

He lifted a finger and traced the tear tracks and then cupped her face, his blue eyes sombre. ‘I never meant to fall in love with you.’

A sob caught in the back of her throat and she looked back at him, the soft, heartfelt sincerity in his voice sending a tremor through her. It was everything she longed to hear, but at the same time slightly terrifying, because she knew beyond a doubt that she’d fallen in love with him too and she had no idea where that left them.

‘I’m sorry, Belle.’ His tender, regretful kiss made her heart clench with cramping pain in her chest. She took a couple of stuttering breaths.

‘It’s okay.’ Her eyes held his gaze and her teeth gnawed at her lip. ‘I never meant to fall in love with you, either.’ She tried to sound grown up and sophisticated and pragmatic, but the tremor in her voice gave her away. ‘We both made it clear what the score was from the start.’

‘We did but … I wish I wasn’t leaving so soon. It feels like time is running out.’

‘I k-know,’ she replied, gulping back another sob.

‘I have to go,’ he said, stroking her cheek.

‘I know you do. And I wouldn’t ask you to stay.’

‘I don’t know when I’ll be back and … I can’t say I will be back. My parents had a long-distance marriage, and it was a disaster. I never want to put myself or anyone else through that. It isn’t fair.’

‘And I’ve seen what happens when you invest your whole life in a man. I never want to do that.’

Finn clasped her hand. ‘I don’t regret meeting you.’

Belle smiled sadly up at him. ‘Nor me … although I think you might have ruined sex for ever more.’

‘If it’s any consolation, likewise. I love you, Belle, and I’m really going to miss you.’

‘I love you, Finn, and I’m going to miss you like crazy.’

They lay in each other’s arms, with the television on in the background, and she quietly listened to Finn’s breathing as he toyed with her hand, tracing up and down her fingers as if trying to imprint their shape for ever.

The sound of the television had faded into the background until a loud voice said, ‘And this evening, I’d like to welcome you to the Royal Albert Hall for an evening of Christmas Carols.’

They lazily turned to look at the television and smiled. ‘We were there,’ said Belle.

‘We certainly were. It was a great night.’

‘It was,’ said Belle, thinking of her dad and Carole. She really ought to get in touch with them and fix up a date to see them very soon. That would be one lovely legacy from Finn.

‘Do you think this is the one we went to?’ asked Finn.

‘I doubt it – they do three of those concerts a day over five days. What are the chances?’

They lay there listening to the carols and smiling at the memory.

‘I’m going to get in touch with my dad and see if we can go out to dinner in the new year,’ said Belle.

‘That’s good news. I’m sure he’ll be delighted.’

‘Yeah, he and Carole seem to be a really good match.’ Her conversations with both her father and Carole had been doing the rounds in her head a lot for the last few days. Everyone had a right to be happy.

Her phone began to ring, and Finn passed it to her from the coffee table. When she glanced at the screen, she handed it back to him. ‘It’s my mum. I’ll call her tomorrow.’

No sooner had Finn put the phone down and it rang off, than it promptly began to ring again. Belle frowned and ignored it for a second time. When it rang for a third time, she picked up.

‘Mum, is everything all right?’

‘No, it isn’t,’ her mother cried down the phone. ‘You … you … and with that woman. How could you do this to me? Your father left us. Walked out. Remember. I can’t believe you’ve betrayed me like this.’ Belle glanced at the television screen and her heart plummeted like a stone in freefall from a skyscraper. ‘Shit,’ she murmured, watching herself singing along next to her father and them smiling at each other.

‘You’re watching the carol concert.’

‘Oh, yes,’ her mum snarled. ‘Watching you mooning at your despicable father, like butter wouldn’t melt. Just like you did when you were little and thought the sun shone out of his backside.’ She burst into angry sobs. ‘How c-could y-you, B-belle? I’m … I’m your m-mother.’ She collected herself with a loud sniff. ‘Remember. He didn’t want any of us. He walked out.’ Her voice grew louder as she yelled down the phone. ‘Me. It was me that was left behind. Have you forgotten that he traded us in for that … that woman, who’s no older than you?’

Belle winced. It wouldn’t be prudent to point out that he hadn’t met Carole for a long time after he’d left.

‘Mum, I…’ What could she say? ‘Look I’m sorry, let me explain.’

‘How long has this been going on? You creeping around behind my back?’

‘It hasn’t. I wasn’t. I bumped—’

‘Well, if you think he’s so wonderful, go to him for Christmas, because I don’t want you here.’

At the vehemence in her mum’s voice, Belle felt as if she’d been punched.

‘Mum!’ But she spoke to dead air. Her mum had hung up.

A little punch-drunk, she let out a long exhale of breath. ‘Phwooo!’

Finn reached for her hand. ‘I got most of that.’

‘Mmm.’ Belle was close to tears again, and clenched her fists in her lap, straightening and taking deep breaths.

‘I’m so sorry, Belle.’

She shook her head and lifted her chin. ‘No, I haven’t done anything wrong. I’m a grown woman. If I want to see my dad, I’m perfectly entitled to. Mum is out of order.’

‘I know, but she’s your mum.’

‘She’s being totally unreasonable. It’s well past time that she moved on. She’s choosing to be unhappy, and making me and Ariel miserable, too.’ She gave him a wobbly smile. ‘Mum will calm down and change her mind. I know she will.’

He swept her up in a hug. ‘You know you’d be more than welcome to stay here, and I’d make sure you have a Christmas to remember.’

She managed a wan laugh. ‘I didn’t say I wanted a Christmas sexathon.’

‘Your mind. Always in the gutter. We can do exactly what we what. Christmas is our oyster. I’ll tell you a cool thing I’ve heard about.’

‘What’s that?’ she asked, her crazy heartbeat starting to subside. She was fine with confrontation in the workplace, with friends, but with her mother, it always left her shaky and more upset than she should be.

‘A walking tour of London on Christmas Day. The streets will be virtually empty.’

‘It’s a date,’ said Belle, her spirits already lifting. It was a lovely fantasy, especially as she’d been dreading going home for Christmas, but her mum would see sense before Christmas Eve, she was sure of it; which was a shame, when she and Finn had so little time left.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

BELLE

‘Where are you?’

Ariel’s querulous voice came down the phone the following morning at seven-thirty as Belle crept out of the bedroom, leaving Finn asleep. ‘Mum’s really a mess. I’m at your flat. You’re not in. Have you any idea what you’ve done? She is so upset.’

‘So am I,’ snapped Belle, quietly closing the door to the bedroom behind her. When Ariel’s call had come through, she was already awake, having ruminated over the situation for much of the night. Finn had been a huge help, talking through the different tacks she could take.

‘Why? You’re the one that’s betrayed Mum. Sneaking off with Dad.’

The language was the same as Mum’s. Was it wrong to think that maybe Mum had indoctrinated them? Overnight, she’d realised that it was their mother who had made seeing Dad difficult – well-nigh impossible, in fact – portraying him as the enemy who’d abandoned them as much as her. But they weren’t children when he left. They were both adults, over the age of twenty-one.

Belle understood now that she, and Ariel, had avoided seeing their father because it was easier than having to justify it to their mum, easier to avoid the sulking and emotional blackmail. Sadly, the habit had fossilised into a way of life.

‘One: no one has betrayed anyone. He’s our dad. Two: I wasn’t sneaking. I bumped into him, and he invited me to the carol concert because he had a spare ticket. There’s no law that says I can’t see him.’

‘Have you forgotten what he did?’

Belle ground her teeth. ‘Tell me. Tell me what he did?’

‘He walked out on us. He didn’t want us anymore? He’s married a woman young enough to be his daughter. Yet he didn’t want us.’

‘Ariel, he left seven years ago. We were both adults. He left because he and Mum weren’t happy. Mum still isn’t happy. It was seven years ago. And he’s been remarried for three.’

‘There isn’t a finite time on grief,’ snapped Ariel.

‘No, there isn’t and I’m not ever going to tell Mum how to grieve, but she’s not making any effort to move on. And it’s ridiculous blaming Carole who wasn’t even on the scene then. You can’t be jealous of her—’ Eek, the last sentence slipped out. She’d been trying to be factual and not get personal.

‘Jealous! Why would I be jealous of that tart?’

‘Because you think she’s replaced us, and that he doesn’t need us anymore.’ Belle spat out her deepest fear.

‘W-what are you talking about?’

‘The truth is, Ariel, we froze Dad out. He’s never given up. He still sends cards and gifts on our birthdays and Christmas. He tries to stay in touch.’

‘You mean he bloody stalks us on social media.’

‘He wants to know how we are. He wants us to be happy. Does Mum?’ Shit, had she really said that out loud?

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

She was in full flow now, why not go the whole hog? ‘Mum makes an art form out of being unhappy. Christmas – no stockings, no presents, no

turkey, no effort.' She mimicked her mum's dismissive tone: 'It's just another day.'

'Christmas isn't about spending money,' said Ariel slowly.

'You used to love a stocking,' reminded Belle.

'Yeah … that was when—'

'Mum uses Christmas as a punishment, harking back to when Dad was with us. There's no reason why we can't make Christmas our own, create new traditions and rituals. Mum doesn't even want to try. Christmas should be about spending time together, but be honest … aren't you finding it a trial to spend time with Mum these days? She doesn't have a good word to say about anyone or anything.'

'She's … she's unhappy,' admitted Ariel.

'That doesn't mean you should be unhappy, too.'

There was a silence. 'She's adamant that she won't have you home for Christmas.'

'Fine,' said Belle, gripping her phone tightly. 'But what does she want me to do? Grovel for forgiveness? Promise never to see Dad again?'

'I don't know,' said Ariel wearily. 'I'll try and talk to her.'

'No,' said Belle. 'She's not your responsibility. Don't put yourself in the middle. Just don't fall out with me over it. I want to see Dad. Please don't hold it against me. He hasn't done anything wrong. People are allowed to finish a relationship if it's not working.'

'I know.' Ariel's voice sounded dull.

'I'm sorry,' said Belle, 'that Christmas is going to be so shit.'

Ariel's laugh was brittle. 'To be honest, it was going to be shit anyway.'

'I got you a stocking and a present.'

'Have you?' Ariel brightened.

'Yes … you love your stockings. Don't know when you'll get it. Or your present.'

'What did you buy me?'

‘Not telling,’ teased Belle.

‘Oh well, something to look forward to while I watch the King’s speech with a cup of tea and a slice of roast chicken.’

‘It won’t be that bad.’

‘Yes, it will – even if you’re here. It’s got progressively shittier over the last couple of years. You’re right, Mum has successfully sucked the joy out of the day, and I’ve been trying to pretend it’s all okay because I didn’t want to upset her.’

‘Well, you’re in the clear now. You can’t possibly upset her as much as I have.’

‘There is that,’ said Ariel, a little more cheerful. ‘So where are you?’

By the time they’d finished the call, Belle had cheered up a lot. It had helped speaking to Ariel, making her realise that there was nothing she could do or say at the moment that would change her mum’s mind.

Finn appeared at the door.

‘You okay?’

She smiled gratefully up at him, realising he’d been giving her privacy but at the same time was on hand to offer support. He really was one in a million.

‘All good. And I’m starving. Let’s go down to eat. I want to see this fancy breakfast buffet and drink Bucks Fizz.’

‘You’d better put some clothes on, then. I’m not sure robes are acceptable in the Ritz dining room.’

It wasn’t every morning you started the day with smoked salmon on gilt-trimmed bone china, Bucks Fizz made with champagne in lead-crystal glasses surrounded by solid-silver cutlery, crisp white damask napkins and a

handsome lover on the other side of the table. Even the yoghurt and homemade granola with fruit was served in a long-stemmed crystal glass.

‘What are you looking so pleased about?’ asked Finn.

‘This…’ She waved a hand to encompass the swagged curtains in a rich, fringed silk, which hung at the floor-to-ceiling windows, the touches of gilt on the plasterwork features on the walls and the intricate sets of lights decorating the room. Around them, the waiters glided, unobtrusive but attentive on the thick-pile carpets, and there was a genteel hush in the room. It was the last word in luxury, and Belle kept thinking what a treat it was. ‘It’s … heaven.’

‘It is pretty swanky,’ agreed Finn. ‘I should be trying not to get used to it. Next week I’ll be eating refried beans for most meals.’

Belle’s smile dimmed a little. ‘But you love it.’

‘I do. Although this time, leaving will feel a lot harder.’

He linked his fingers with hers across the table.

‘I’ve been thinking about this,’ said Belle.

Finn stiffened.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not…’ Belle waved a hand again because she didn’t want to say the words and have him agree. ‘I know that this … this will be over.’

‘Long distance is impossible.’

‘I know and I’m not… What I was going to suggest is that we go cold turkey.’

‘What?’

Belle took in a breath to ease her through the conversation. ‘After we say goodbye. That’s it. No messaging. No staying in touch. I think it will be easier. Kinder to ourselves. Then neither of us will be checking our phones … you know…’

He stared at her and she saw his Adam’s apple bob at his throat, his fingers tightening around hers.

‘Wow. I didn’t expect you to say that.’

‘What, you thought I’d want to cling on … stay friends?’

‘God no, Belle. We’ll always be friends. I don’t want to say goodbye. You must know that. But I can’t see how it can work. I can’t make any promises.’

‘And I’m not asking you to. This way … it will be easier … on me, anyway.’ She had to pause to keep it together and stay practical. ‘I’m guessing you won’t have your phone … electricity, charge, signal. That sort of thing.’

‘No, we rely on a solar-powered satellite phone. Communication is tricky.’ The hoarseness in his voice made her stomach tighten.

‘I know.’

‘So, what are you saying?’

‘We go out with a bang.’

‘Okay. We go out in style. Deal?’

‘Deal.’

When Finn’s phone rang strident and urgent on the table, she slumped in her chair, relieved by the interruption. This conversation was too hard.

Finn declined the call but it rang almost immediately for a second time.

He sighed. ‘Sorry, if it’s Adam, it must be urgent.’

She nodded. She understood.

Since the date of the expedition was nearing, Finn’s phone rang more regularly.

‘Hey, Adam. What news on the tents?’

Finn listened intently and Belle watched as his face fell and his shoulders rose.

‘Shit. Yeah, of course. I understand. No, you have to. I get it.’

When he finally finished the call, his eyes were glassy.

‘I take it everything isn’t all right.’

‘That was my logistics manager. The lifeline of the expedition. He’s got a family crisis. He can’t come.’

‘Oh no. What does that mean?’

‘It means I need to find a new one, pronto, and bring them up to speed. Sorry, Belle, I’m going to have to spend the morning on the phone.’

‘No problem. Is there anything I can do?’

‘I was going to say no, but actually you could, and I think two heads might be better than one.’

Hours later, Finn rubbed his temple and sat back on his heels, looking at the pile of paper in front of him. He swiped a hand across his gritty eyes. Outside, it was dark and the lights of London glowed. He hadn’t even stopped to get up and close the curtains.

Losing a logistics manager this late in the day was an absolute disaster but, by some miracle, Adam had found a replacement. A guy called Caden. As a result, Finn had spent all day on the phone, in crisis-management mode, liaising with Adam when he could, as the poor sod was dealing with his parents, both of whom had been involved in a car accident. Although they weren’t that old, each of them would be in a wheelchair for at least the next few weeks. There was no way Adam could leave them.

‘How’s it going?’ asked Belle softly, bringing him yet another cup of coffee.

‘Slow but sure,’ he said with a sigh. He took the coffee and looked at his watch. It was ten past five, and they hadn’t stopped since breakfast.

‘We’ll get there,’ she said, making the task sound so simple and straightforward. He felt a kick of pride at her response and the way she automatically thought of them as a team. She sank down beside him on the floor with her own cup of coffee and a sheaf of paper clutched under her

arm. ‘I’ve called and emailed everyone on your list, and they all now have your details and Adam’s replacement, and I’ve copied Caden in on everything.’

‘Belle, I could kiss you right now.’

‘Feel free,’ she said.

‘I’m too tired to move.’

‘Then, I’ll come to you,’ she said and crawled to his side across the carpet, careful not to move any of the notes around him.

She kissed him on the cheek and he leaned into her. ‘I’m not sure what I’d have done without you today.’

‘I’m glad I was able to do something. And not just fanny about trying to make you feel better.’

He laughed. It was such a typical Belle response. Talk about absolute star. She’d been meticulous, diligently contacting everyone on Adam’s list of suppliers and contacts – variously in New York, Rio, Manaus and the UK. The job hadn’t fazed her, she’d simply worked her way through the list with dogged determination. It was obvious why his aunt rated her so highly.

He sipped his coffee. ‘Do you want something to eat?’

‘I’m too knackered to go out. Just a sandwich or something.’

‘I’ll ring for room service. And I’ve got an idea for tomorrow. We deserve a treat.’

Belle eyed him. ‘I’m not sure I want to do anything but lie down in a darkened room.’

‘That can be arranged. Let me have a word with Jonathan. Stay here.’ He jumped up and went into the bedroom to phone downstairs.

‘Hey Jonathan, it’s Finn McAllister. I’ve got a challenge for you.’

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Chapter Thirty

BELLE

Christmas Eve

Belle almost floated out of the Corinthia Hotel the next day.

'Now, that is how you spend Christmas Eve. It was absolutely blissful.' They'd just spent three hours in the spa luxuriating in a hydrotherapy pool, sitting in the sauna, lying on heated marble loungers and being thoroughly lazy.

'I think, after yesterday, we deserve it.'

'Absolutely,' said Belle. The two of them had crashed out by ten last night, Finn almost falling asleep over his sandwiches, not waking until after nine this morning. She sneaked a surreptitious look at her watch. There were still a few things she wanted to get for tomorrow before the shops all closed.

'I still need to make a couple of calls,' said Finn as they walked along Northumberland Avenue towards Trafalgar Square. 'But now that Caden's on board and I've had a morning off, I'm feeling a lot better.'

'Why don't you go back to the hotel, and I'll catch you up? I still have a few things to do.'

'Like what?' he asked. 'I don't need anything. I've got everything right here.' He hugged her and held on tight.

‘Christmas things,’ she said. They’d managed to get a table for dinner at the hotel, which Finn was very excited about. ‘Go on, off you go.’

She watched as he headed away, and then walked towards the huge Christmas tree in the square. The Norwegian spruce, sent each year from Oslo, never failed to raise a smile from her. The simply lit tree was a testament to the relationship between two countries, sent in thanks by Norway for British support during the Second World War. For Belle, it embodied the Christmas spirit and was a symbol of enduring friendship and loyalty. Of a time when people did the right thing. She pushed back her shoulders. She was doing the right thing. Her dad didn’t deserve to be punished any longer. She’d seen how happy he was with Carole and … she understood, because Finn made her feel happy.

She gazed up to the very top of the tree, against the background of a grey, flat sky, and vowed that when Finn had gone, she’d think of him positively, remembering the pockets of joy spent with him. Him leaving was out of her control, but she could be happy for him because he was doing what he loved.

Leaving the tree, she walked quickly up St Martin’s Lane until she reached the little turning into a quiet street that few tourists even noticed. Cecil Court, a pedestrianised street with shops on either side, was full of specialised bookshops and was reputedly the inspiration for Diagon Alley in the *Harry Potter* books. She could well imagine that. Any one of these shops could have doubled as Ollivander’s wand shop.

The store she was looking for was towards the far end. She loved Goldsboro Books, a quaint bookshop with floor-to-ceiling wooden bookshelves, wooden floorboards and an antique air. Here, books old and new rubbed spines and it was where she’d tracked down a first edition of a book for Finn. Although she’d given him silly fun gifts at their Not Christmas, now she wanted to give him something he would treasure and maybe, just maybe, it would make him think occasionally of her.

It was probably foolish to spend so much money on a mere book, but it had to be something special. A gift that meant as much to him as to her. The thought of him opening it tomorrow gave her butterflies and she couldn't wait to see his face. He was going to love it, she was absolutely sure of it.

With her purchase in her bag, she hurried on to Covent Garden, feeling the slight panic in the air as shoppers hurried and scurried around her, with bulging bags. The last-minute merchants who prided themselves on leaving everything to Christmas Eve. There were a couple of guys in the office who positively boasted about this, as if it were something to be proud of. Belle shuddered: she couldn't have borne the stress. These last bits and pieces she wanted for tomorrow weren't essential but would be fun extras. Top of her list was a Christmas card for Finn to go on the mantlepiece in their suite, along with two Santa hats for their walking tour and a couple of miniature whiskies. She also grabbed a box of Celebrations and a game that two people could play, because you had to play games on Christmas Day.

By the time she returned to The Ritz, enjoying the sensation of stepping back into a haven of luxury as the scent of Christmas enveloped her, the shops were closing. There were still a few panicky shoppers about but most of the laughing groups of people, linking arms, bundled up against the cold, seemed to be heading for the packed pubs.

'It is freezing out there,' said Belle, coming into the hotel suite, rubbing her hands. 'The temperature has really dropped. They're saying it might snow again.'

'Really? Why don't I run you a bath? And we've been invited to cocktails with the hotel manager this evening.'

'Have we? How posh. And despite being submerged in water for half the day, a hot bath sounds wonderful. Coming in with me?'

Finn smiled and began removing her clothes before she'd even put her bags down.

When they were both naked, she held on tight to him, realising that time really was running out. Finn was leaving in two days.

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Chapter Thirty-One

BELLE

Christmas Day

‘Merry Christmas.’

Belle stretched and snuggled into Finn. ‘Merry Christmas to you. Was that my present?’ she asked with a giggle, her body limp and sated by Finn’s thorough attentions.

‘The first of many,’ he said, sitting up in bed and dragging up a pillow before leaning out of the bed to pick up something from the floor. ‘Happy Christmas, Belle.’ He handed her a gift-wrapped parcel with a big red bow on the top.

‘I’m not going to say you didn’t have to get me anything, because this looks so gorgeous, I don’t want to give it back.’

‘You don’t know what it is, yet.’

‘I don’t care. But wait a minute.’ She ducked out of bed and opened the wardrobe, to withdraw his gift.

‘You already gave me presents.’

‘You got another one,’ said Belle with a shrug.

Finn accepted the present and immediately began to carefully peel the silver wrapping paper off.

His smile broadened as he opened the gift. ‘Is this what I think it is?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know. What do you think it is?’ she teased.

‘Is it a first edition?’

She nodded, a lump in her throat at the sheer wonder on his face as he turned the copy of *My Family and Other Animals* over in his hands. ‘Belle, this is amazing. You know it’s my favourite book of all time and my copy is falling apart.’

‘I know, and I know it’s a stupid present because you probably can’t even take it with you and you don’t have a home to keep anything in, but I just—’

‘It’s perfect.’ He kissed her and raised a hand to one cheek, before saying softly, ‘Thank you. I love it and,’ he looked into her eyes, ‘it will be coming with me.’

She wasn’t going to ruin this moment by crying, she told herself, locking her jaws together as they held each other’s gazes.

He dipped his head and kissed her again, murmuring, ‘Oh, Belle,’ as he rested his forehead against hers.

‘So, what have you got me?’ she said, moving away, ignoring the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. ‘I hope it’s something really big and expensive.’

Finn’s laugh was forced. ‘Yeah, because you’re really that woman.’

‘Don’t kid yourself. I love presents.’

‘I’m sure you do, and you’re the sort of independent woman who’s too busy to buy what she wants for herself.’

‘True,’ said Belle, peeling back the wrapping paper. Inside were several more paper-wrapped boxes. Intrigued, she grinned at him.

‘There’s an order. You have to open this one first,’ he said, pointing to a flat square-shaped present.

‘Okay.’ She unpicked the paper and withdrew a box. Her mouth dropped open. ‘Oh, Finn. You shouldn’t have,’ she said, looking down at the Tiffany blue box, her heart practically jumping into her mouth. Inside was a silver link bracelet with the traditional Tiffany padlock. ‘Oh, Finn.’ She held out her arm for him to affix the shining silver chain around her wrist. ‘It’s beautiful … and how did you know?’

‘Let’s just say that I … I knew you from the first day we met. When you were looking in the Tiffany window, I had a feeling.’

‘Oh, Finn,’ she said for a third time, because she simply didn’t know what else to say.

‘Open the next one,’ he urged.

She took out the much smaller box. Inside was a tiny silver ice-skate, the blade picked out in tiny diamonds.

‘To remind you of when we went ice-skating. I couldn’t find a giraffe or a magic wand or a pantomime dame.’

Belle burst out laughing as she held up the delicate silver charm. ‘It’s beautiful, absolutely gorgeous and perfect and … oh, Finn, thank you.’ Tears shimmered in her eyes. She knew she’d treasure it for ever.

‘There’s another one because you can’t have only one charm on a bracelet, can you?’

Belle rather thought you could, but Finn looked so excited, she opened the third box.

‘Aw, he’s lovely,’ she said, pulling out a tiny dachshund charm. ‘And perfect.’

‘Sorry they’re not attached. There wasn’t time. But if you take them into the store, they can arrange for them to be put on. But I got you something else to make up for it.’

‘That’s okay. I can wait.’ She looked up at him, thinking she could wait for him forever. Her smile faltered. Not that she would ever tell him. They’d agreed and she knew it was the right thing for both of them. She would

never hold him back and it was the sensible thing: she never wanted to be like her mother, relying on someone else for happiness.

Finn disappeared and came back with a larger parcel, grinning from ear to ear.

‘You’re going to have to do some modelling for me,’ said Finn. Belle wrinkled her nose. Surely, he hadn’t bought her lingerie?

No, he definitely hadn’t. This parcel was hard, unyielding and heavy.

‘Oh my goodness. You bought me cowboy boots!’

Needless to say, she modelled them for him immediately, strutting around the bedroom, and one thing led to another.

Wearing her reindeer mittens, red hat and new charm bracelet, along with a chunky wool sweater, jeans and her already beloved cowboy boots, Belle set out from The Ritz with Finn a little later.

‘It’s good to get some fresh air. We usually spend all day cooped up on Christmas Day,’ she told him as they walked along the almost deserted streets towards Trafalgar Square.

There had been a thick frost overnight, although it was slowly receding under the glare of the bright sun in a cloudless sky, which made the ice glisten and sparkle like piles of diamonds abandoned in shop doorways, on windowsills and rooftop ledges. Every now and then, Belle would surreptitiously lift her arm and give her charm bracelet a shake under her sleeve, smiling to herself before glancing up at Finn. She sighed, focusing on being present, enjoying every moment.

Their guide was waiting by the huge fir tree and Belle was surprised to see that there were at least fifteen other people waiting for the tour.

‘Welcome and Merry Christmas.’

Everyone chorused Merry Christmas back to the cherubic-looking man with a cheerful gleam in his eyes behind his little round metal-framed glasses. He put Belle in mind of a balding Santa.

‘I’m Simon and I’m going to take you round this part of London for the next hour and tell you a bit about the fascinating history of this incredible city which dates back to at least forty-three AD. Of course, there’s no way without a Christmas Miracle that we can cover all of it today – but I’m sure you’ll find plenty of interest. Is everybody set?’

Like biddable sheep, they all trotted along after Simon, who stopped every few feet to introduce a building, explain the origins of a street name and point out hidden passageways along with some of the oldest pubs in the West End.

‘Funny, I lived here for years, but I never really explored it like this,’ said Finn. ‘I forget how much there is to see and do.’

Belle nodded. ‘Me, too. It makes me realise I don’t make the most of it. I bet Dad and Carole would love to do a walking tour like this.’

‘Why don’t you invite them?’

Belle glanced at him and his piercing gaze. ‘I might just do that.’

‘It saves on small talk. Baby steps.’

‘It does.’ She smiled at him, knowing she would definitely suggest this to them. She wanted to see her dad, but there was a chasm to get over before she could regain her old, easy relationship with him and have a heart-to-heart, but … she realised she wanted to work towards that. Something like this would be perfect.

By the time they returned to the hotel, rosy-cheeked and ravenous, there was just time to change to meet the dress code for the formal six-course lunch down in the restaurant. As they did, there was a sea-change in their

mood. Belle paused halfway through pulling on her red velvet dress, the one she'd worn back at the flat for their Christmas meal, to watch Finn shrug into his shirt. The white cotton slid across his skin with a crisp rustle. She followed the movement of his hands as he drew the fabric across his chest. It might be the last time she saw him like this. The bittersweet pang made her cross the room. She stood in front of him and without meeting his gaze, did the buttons up, one by one, her eyes fixed on the task, aware of every inch of his skin disappearing from view. It felt as if she were sealing a part of him away, packing it up, ready to be put on the top shelf, out of sight and out of mind. The thought made her feel slightly sick. How was she going to say goodbye to him?

Finn stood stock still, his hands resting lightly on her hips, as if he knew that she was drinking in these moments, storing them up for a rainy day when she might take the memories out and dwell on them a time before tucking them back where they belonged. With a swallow, she fastened the last one and tipped her head up to look at him. Understanding glowed in his eyes and he lowered his head to give her a slow, tender kiss, before turning her and pressing a kiss to the nape of her neck then pulling up the zip of her dress. They finished dressing in silence, not a comfortable silence, but one prickly with awareness, prompted by a fear of not finding the right words. Belle gritted her teeth, horribly conscious that incipient tears were threatening.

'Shall we go?' she said, her voice fake with jazz-hands sparkle. If they stayed here, she would most definitely cry. The clock was ticking. There were less than twenty-four hours before Finn would leave.

A festive feeling bubbled in the air as Belle and Finn were greeted in the restaurant by the staff, all looking resplendent in their uniforms as always.

The Christmas enhancements were elegant and tasteful, everything coordinating in a white, red and gold theme. The chairs had been covered in white silk with tiny diamante which glittered under the chandeliers, and the tables were covered with red damask tablecloths. In the centre of each table was a beautiful arrangement of fat white roses and delicate fronds of gold-painted ferns. Pure white crackers, with the Ritz logo embossed on the front and tied up with gold velvet ribbons, had been placed at each bone-china setting.

As soon as they arrived, a bottle of champagne was brought to the table and opened by the wine waiter, wishing them a Merry Christmas as he removed the cork. Finn lifted the crystal glass to make a toast and, as their eyes caught, she saw the words die on his lips and his Adam's apple dip as he swallowed.

'There's so much I want to say…'

She laid a hand on his, aware of the catch in her voice. 'It's okay.'

'To us, wherever we may be.'

'To us,' she repeated. 'Wherever we may be.'

They sipped, holding each other's gaze, and Belle couldn't have been more grateful when the waiter brought their first course, a terrine of smoked salmon, prawns, crème fraiche and caviar. Belle savoured every mouthful, knowing this would be their last meal together.

Finn, as if reading her mind, leaned over and took her hand, holding it while they both ate with their forks.

Course after course arrived, tender scallops in a divine parsnip purée, breast of duck for Finn and venison medallions for Belle, a walnut sable with chocolate and orange mousse which they ate slowly with teasing licks of their spoons, watching each other until Belle started to giggle. It was that or cry, because time was running out.

'Shall we forgo coffee?' asked Finn, when her giggle turned into a sob.

She nodded, wanting to spend the last few hours alone with him.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

FINN

Boxing Day

Finn checked, for a third time, that his passport and documents were all in the little plastic wallet at the front of his rucksack, while Belle stuffed belongings that had accumulated over the last few days into her little cabin bag. He watched her wandering around the room without her usual laser-focused efficiency. Retracing her steps over and over as she retrieved her reindeer gloves from the coffee table and then returned a minute later to collect a hairband and then again to gather up a stray sock. His heart ached when she retrieved her unread book from the bedside table, packed it and then returned to unplug her chargers from the socket by the bed. She packed in silence, her bumbling progress around the room an indicator of how discombobulated she was.

Shed of their personal detritus, the hotel room suddenly looked horribly impersonal. In a matter of hours, it would be as if they'd never been here. The dents of their heads in the pillows would have been shaken loose, the bathrobe scented with Belle's body lotion tossed in the laundry, and the evidence of their gifts – the packaging, ribbons and paper – emptied into the bins.

Belle put her washbag into her case and he heard the familiar sound of the zip closing.

‘All done,’ she said in an overly bright voice. She picked up her scarf and he moved to her to drape it carefully around her neck, his eyes holding hers as he wrapped her up.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered and lifted a finger to touch his lips as if imprinting them on her skin.

‘Let’s go,’ he said gruffly, hoisting up his backpack. They stood in the doorway and gave the room one last look before walking down the corridor together. His hand brushed hers, the backs of their palms touching all the way to the lift, as if each of them knew that, if they linked fingers and held hands, they might not be able to let go.

The lift was half full and they had to stand at the front, side by side, like a pair of soldiers on guard duty.

Jonathan, the concierge, stepped forward but must have seen something in Finn’s eye, because he saluted and stayed put.

In silence, they walked through the lobby for the last time. Piccadilly was virtually deserted, and the quiet was ominous. Finn wanted noise, the usual bustle, so they could hide behind it. This made them vulnerable, their goodbye too public.

‘This is goodbye, then,’ said Finn, taking Belle’s shoulders as much to steady himself as to maintain that final contact.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘And we said we wouldn’t be sad. This will be a good memory in a few months’ time.’

‘It will always be a good memory,’ said Finn, smoothing back the hair from her face, simply to touch her again.

‘Always.’

‘I’d better go,’ she said. ‘And you don’t want to miss your flight.’ She looked beyond him towards the tube station.

‘Okay.’

The kiss was bittersweet, both of them trying to be brave and not let it escalate to more.

They pulled back at the same time.

‘Good luck with everything, Finn. I hope the expedition is a huge success.’

‘Take care, Belle.’

He trudged away towards Green Park tube, willing himself not to turn around, not to call Belle back. Not to make a stupid promise. They were two people who’d collided at the wrong time and in the wrong place. There was no future for them. He couldn’t help it, he turned and watched Belle walking away. His heart seemed to have jumped out of his chest and lodged in his throat. When she, too, turned, Finn lifted a hand, waved and then descended into the tube station.

When he sat in the train carriage and pulled out his phone, he spotted one last message from her, and he almost doubled over in pain.

Travel Safe x

He tapped out one final message and sent it to her.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

BELLE

Two Months Later

Belle glanced at her watch again.

‘Do you need to be somewhere?’ asked Elspeth waspishly, looking over at Belle from her side of the desk.

‘Not for a while. I’m going to my dad’s for dinner. I’m … I’ve got plenty of time.’ Belle had had quite a few conversations with her father since the beginning of January and they’d been on two walking tours, but this was the first time she’d be visiting the home he and Carole shared.

Elspeth tilted her head. She’d only just returned from New York and had been back in the office for one day. ‘I don’t think I’ve heard you mention your father before.’

Belle shrugged. ‘It’s complicated. My parents had a difficult divorce. I didn’t see my dad for a while.’

‘Families, eh. Always complicated. My sister and her husband are a bloody nightmare. Can’t stand each other but can’t seem to live without each other. No wonder Finn cleared off as soon as he could.’

Belle prayed her hands remained steady. Her boss hadn’t mentioned him since she’d come back, for which Belle was extremely grateful, although she had her story ready should Elspeth ask about Christmas.

‘I sometimes think my sister would have been better off leaving Jack. He’s always worked away – and played away, I suspect. Never in the country for more than a month. They never got a rhythm going. Mike and I have made it work. He dropped everything to come to New York with me and I know he will always try to accommodate me, and vice versa. Together we make it work. If Jeanie had got herself a job or something to occupy herself, instead of constantly building her life around him, I think she’d have been a lot happier.’

‘Sounds like my mum,’ said Belle. ‘Which is why you should never rely on a man for happiness.’ She kept saying it, even though she was starting wonder if it were true. But it was only two months since Finn had left. The memory of him would wane over time, she prayed.

‘Talking of family, how was Finn?’ said Elspeth. ‘Thanks so much for looking after him. I didn’t want him to arrive in London without a friendly face to greet him. Not that I expect you saw much of him after that. He’s always so busy.’

‘Er … he was very nice.’

‘Handsome devil.’

‘Yes…’ said Belle as vaguely as she could, immediately thinking of the acronym on her phone and almost giggling; except, giggling wasn’t something she’d done much of lately.

‘All the ladies love him. He’s never short of attention.’

‘He was very handsome,’ said Belle, woodenly, squashing the memory of the first time she’d laid eyes on Finn.

‘He’s very charismatic, too,’ Elspeth continued, like torture. ‘He draws quite a crowd when he does one of his lectures. Although I gave him strict instructions not to try and seduce you.’

‘Really?’ said Belle, overplaying the innocence.

‘Of course, it’s hard to keep up with him because he’s always travelling.’

Belle nodded. ‘So, what do you want me to tell Don Allen about when we’ll get back to him?’

Elspeth blinked in surprise. ‘Right, yes. Let him know we’ll need to set up a meeting with Customer Service first and then get that in the diary. Next week, if possible.’

Belle relaxed into her chair, the tight knot between her shoulders dissipating as she bent over her tablet to scribble furious notes.

When she returned to her desk, she gazed into space for a good few minutes. Hating herself for being so weak, she took a peep at the picture on her phone of Finn in front of the T-Rex and thought about the first time she’d met him. The words, ‘You do know it’s not Scottish,’ echoed in her mind and she smiled, shaking her head slightly. As always, she wondered what he was doing right now. They were five hours behind in Brazil in the rainforest. It would be lunchtime. What would he be eating? Refried beans?

And enough, Belle, she told herself, picking up her mobile and calling the head of Customer Service.

‘Belle, lovely to see you,’ said Carole, opening the door to the modest cottage on the outskirts of Richmond. It was one of a terrace, with long front gardens, currently each full of limp twigs and browning foliage. She suspected that, come the spring, green shoots and blossom would replace the stark and barren landscape.

‘Hi,’ she said, suddenly shy, thrusting out the bottle of wine and the bouquet of flowers she’d picked up at Marks & Spencer on her way from the office.

‘How lovely, I adore roses, thank you. Come on in.’

Belle stepped into the tiny hallway, which was brightened by a big mirror, several candles glowing on a low table and a thick rug on the tiled

floor.

‘Your dad’s in the kitchen.’ Carole nodded to the wooden door at the end of the hallway beyond the narrow staircase that led upstairs.

‘Hello, love.’ Dad, his forearms coated in flour, greeted her, waving with both hands. ‘Sorry, be with you in a minute.’ He turned back to the pasta machine on the kitchen bench through which he was winding a sheet of pasta. ‘Homemade tagliatelle,’ he said as the flat ribbons emerged from the other side.

Belle stared around the kitchen, curious to see where her dad lived. It was obviously an extension to the original building and was light and airy, a contemporary glass wall of bi-fold doors mixing perfectly with the original London brick. Sage-green units filled one side, with an island, and then a rectangular pine dining table, big enough to seat eight.

Cookery books lined several shelves, along with brightly coloured pottery. There were more candles on the windowsill, mingled with lots of houseplants. The table had been laid with colourful Indian block-print placemats and matching napkins, with saffron-yellow wooden napkin rings. It was cosy, chaotic and absolutely charming.

‘Have a seat,’ said Carole, indicating the leather stools at the island. ‘What would you like to drink? We’ve got wine – red, white or rosé. Or you can have a G and T, or beer or a soft drink. There’s also vodka…’

‘Some of that blue stuff, tequila, and I think some sort of chocolate liqueur,’ chipped in her father.

‘Red wine would be fine. I’m guessing we’re having pasta,’ said Belle, a little overwhelmed by how hard they were trying to please her. She hated the thought that they might think she was difficult and needed to be managed … like her mum.

‘How did you guess?’ asked Carole dryly, looking at the flour all over the floor. ‘But at least he’s stopped singing “O sole mio”.’

‘Wow, Dad, I didn’t know you could sing in Italian.’

‘There’s no end to my talents,’ he said, beaming at her as he laid the long lengths of pasta on a tea towel over the back of one of the kitchen chairs.

Carole poured Belle a glass of Valpolicella. ‘He can’t, he sings the same line over and over again,’ she said with a conspiratorial grin. ‘But it makes him happy.’ She shot a fond look at him.

Belle laughed as her dad pretended to look wounded.

On the island, there were several little plates of nibbles, fresh green olives, some tiny arancini and small squares of focaccia, glistening with salt and olive oil.

‘Help yourself,’ said Carole, handing her a napkin and sitting on the stool next to her with her own glass of wine.

‘What about me?’ asked her dad plaintively. ‘I’m the one doing all the work.’

‘Mmm, and making all the mess,’ observed Carole with a good-natured smile on her face as she jumped up and filled his glass.

‘That’s what we artistes do.’

Belle and Carole exchanged eye-rolls.

‘Wow,’ said Belle, picking up a still warm arancini. ‘Did you make these?’

Carole nodded and helped herself to one.

‘They’re amazing. Did you make the bread as well?’ asked Belle, realising that a lot of effort had gone into tonight’s meal.

‘Yes, I’ve got this fabulous new Italian recipe. You’re our guinea pig, I’m afraid.’

‘With food like this, I’m happy to be a guinea pig.’ It was seriously delicious.

Her dad had also made a tangy, amatriciana sauce to go with the tagliatelle and Carole served a fresh green salad.

‘So, how’s work? Still taking over the universe?’ asked Dad, when they finally sat down to dinner.

‘Not exactly, but I’m going to New York in April for a few months.’

‘Oh my God, Belle, that’s amazing news,’ said Carole.

‘Congratulations, darling. What an incredible opportunity. How long are you going for?’

‘Do you know anyone over there?’ Carole put in.

‘Will the company find you somewhere to live?’ her dad wanted to know.

The two of them peppered her with enthusiastic questions and then a series of offers of help. ‘I’ve got a friend who lives there, I can introduce you,’ said Carole.

‘We’ve got two large suitcases if you want to borrow them, you’ll need a lot of luggage,’ said Dad. ‘Maybe we could come out for a long weekend and see you. That would be fun.’

Belle felt positively giddy by the end of the meal, rounded off with the most sensational tiramisù, which of course Carole had made.

They retired to the tiny lounge at the front of the house with shot glasses of limoncello and Belle leaned back into the big squashy sofa opposite the fire, which was burning merrily in the Victorian fireplace, and admired the comfortable and cosy décor with its cheerful splashes of colour and various focal points of interest. Although the room was busy, it didn’t feel cluttered, so it was easy to sit back and relax. Belle couldn’t remember a more convivial evening since Christmas.

‘And what about your young man, Finn? Have you heard from him since he went to Brazil?’ asked her dad in an unwelcome jovial tone.

‘No,’ she replied, through tight vocal cords. ‘And I don’t expect to.’ This comment elicited a brief, sharp look from Carole, which was quickly hidden.

‘That’s a shame, love. I thought he was a super chap.’

‘Super chap!’ Belle teased, grabbing at the opportunity to deflect. ‘What century are we in?’

‘You know what I mean. Seemed very nice. You and he seemed to get on well.’

‘He was very nice but … he’s in Brazil and I’m London.’

‘Not heard of the telephone?’

‘After Brazil, it will be the Andes. And then the Antarctic or maybe the Galapagos.’ She shared an impassive smile with her dad and Carole. ‘Just not meant to be.’

‘Oh well, plenty more fish in the sea,’ said her dad, while Carole shot her an understanding smile.

‘And how’s your mother? And Ariel?’

‘Fine,’ said Belle.

‘Still not talking to you?’

Belle winced. ‘No, she’s talking to me. I was there two weeks ago.’ She thought of the uncomfortable Sunday lunch she’d suffered through, and the pointed barbs about her father. Ironically, it was her mum’s intransigence that had compelled Belle to accept her dad’s dinner invitation.

‘Well, I’m really glad she’s not holding it against you,’ said her dad.

Belle was aware of Carole’s careful study and, although the other woman didn’t say anything, she sent Belle another empathetic smile.

‘So, what have you two been up to? You said you were thinking about going to Spain on holiday.’

‘Oh no,’ said her dad. ‘After buying this cookbook, Carole has decided we’re going to Italy.’

‘I decided! You big fibber,’ said Carole, her eyes dancing with amused outrage. ‘That’s not true. Don’t listen to a word he says, Belle.’

‘Henpecked, I am,’ joked her dad.

Belle just grinned, thinking what good company the pair of them were and what a lovely evening she’d had. Finn would have loved it, too.

When she came to say her goodbyes, Carole gave her a big hug.

‘Thank you so much for coming.’ Her eyes locked on Belle’s. ‘It really meant a lot to both of us. I hope you’ll come again and that we can meet up soon.’

‘Belle, love. Don’t be a stranger. And you will see us before you go to New York to be a starblazer.’

‘It’s trailblazer,’ said Belle and Carole in unison, laughing together.

‘That, too. Now, are you sure you don’t want me to walk you down the road to the station?’

‘I’m sure. You stay here in front of the fire, with your slippers.’

‘Cheeky.’

With a wave she left the two of them on the doorstep, reflecting on the evening. It was obvious they had built a lovely life together and were incredibly happy. Her dad had bloomed like a well-tended flower. He loved his job, his life, his partner. He’d left a barren patch in his life and started again, open to change, and his life had been enriched by being with someone so much better suited to him. Perhaps it was true, there was someone out there for everyone. Being with Finn had shown her that life as part of two could be so much better. Maybe she should consider dating again and trying to find someone who made her as happy as Carole made her dad.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

BELLE

March

Belle woke slowly, disappointment flooding in as quickly as the sensation of Finn's arms around her and his mouth on hers faded. She lay in the dark, her head pressed against her pillow as the familiar dull ache of loss floored her. As she wrapped her arms around her middle, trying to press the feelings away, her sigh echoed with loneliness and her skin prickled with the longing to be next to a warm body. Minutes ticked, elongated by the dark, until she finally reached for her phone. Ten past two a.m. It would be nine p.m. wherever Finn was.

Unable to help herself, she opened WhatsApp, as always drawn to their last conversation. If it had been a piece of paper, she would have worn the words away by stroking them so often.

Travel safe x, she'd messaged him. And he'd responded, with, *There'll always be a little piece of you in my heart. Live and love well x*. Damn him.

She stared at the words, and once again she regretted her bald, sensible final words. *Travel safe*. She hadn't been brave enough to say what was in her heart, that maybe they could stay in touch, maybe they could see each other again. But he'd been clear about how unhappy his parents had been, and it made sense not to stay in touch. Neither of them wanted to spoil the

precious thing they'd shared – that brief and bright love that had shimmered in the sparkle of Christmas. Who knew if it would have lasted, even if he'd had a normal job in London? Maybe part of the attraction and the strength of their feelings was because there was a finite ending. A non-negotiable sell-by date. Maybe it had just been Christmas spirit, overflowing with goodwill to all men.

She forced herself to get a grip against the wave of sadness that threatened to consume her. For goodness' sake, it had been three months since Finn left, she should be getting over him by now. She was going to New York in a matter of weeks, she should be looking forward to that, not moping about the past. Her vision blurred and she was about to put her phone down when the three dots began to dance under Finn's last message. Her heart started to beat so hard it hurt. She swiped away the tears with an impatient hand, sure they were responsible for the mirage. But no, the three little dots were moving in that synchronised, tantalising undulation, that kept you glued to the screen. The silence of the night buzzed in Belle's ears, and she held her breath waiting for words to materialise. The dots continued to snake. They stopped. She waited. Nothing. Then they were back again. They stopped again. Her heart banged against her ribcage. She watched, her breath and curiosity well and truly bated. Hope fluttered like a tiny, caged bird.

The dots vanished.

Without hesitation, she began to type, knowing that somewhere on the other side of the world Finn might see them. What to say? What to write? In the end, all she could manage was a pathetic, needy *Are you there?* She deleted it, because of course he was. Then she typed *Hope all is well?* But that was so inadequate compared to the fluttery, desperate hope circulating her body like a power surge. Now the dots by his name began to move again. Did he know she was here? With a satisfying noise, the dots landed, and she eagerly read the message that arrived.

Isn’t it the middle of the night there?

Yes

Emboldened by the night, she added:

Had a dream about you!

The dots danced and danced and danced and then they vanished.

Shit, why had she said that?

The sudden glow of her phone as it lit up startled her. It was vibrating slightly. Oh God, Finn was calling her. With a shaky hand, she slid the button on screen to open the video call.

‘Finn,’ she croaked, her whole system flooded with sudden joy. There he was, light in the dark. He gave her a crooked smile.

‘Hey, Belle!’ His tanned face looked thinner, some might say gaunt, but she was too busy conducting an inventory of the features so dear to her. Her heart contracted and she had no idea whether it was joy or sadness or maybe both.

‘How are you?’ she asked.

‘Good, better for seeing you. How are you?’

‘Good, you know. Getting on.’ How could she tell him that every day was a slog and she missed him? ‘I’m off to New York in April.’

‘Cool. You made it, then.’

‘I did. How’s your trip going? Everything where it should be?’

‘Yeah. Caden’s worked out well. And apart from the usual hitches you get on any trip, it’s all going great.’

‘Excellent.’

‘How are your crazy flatmates?’

‘Good. Although Maddie broke her Christmas fridge magnet this week… She’s really pissed off about it.’

‘I’d bring her back one from here, if I knew when I was coming back to London.’

His words were, to the conversation, like a candle being snuffed out.

They stared at each other's image on the screen and Belle felt a tug on her heart so strong that she almost crumpled.

'So, dreaming about me, huh?'

Belle almost collapsed with relief that he'd kept the flow going. Deliberately keeping things light, she said, 'Don't let it go to your head. I didn't say it was a good dream.' Without thinking, she wet her lips. Finn's eyebrow lifted. She blushed, knowing she'd given herself away.

'Not going to tell me what sort of dream it was?'

'No,' she said firmly. The burning ache between her thighs was bad enough without adding fuel to the fire.

'I dream of you, too,' he said huskily. 'I miss you.' He caught his lip between his teeth. 'Sorry, I shouldn't have said that.'

'I'm glad you did,' said Belle. 'Because I miss you.' She swallowed.

'I shouldn't have called,' said Finn.

She didn't say anything, not because she couldn't get the words past the huge lump in her throat, but because she didn't want to agree with him.

'This was an impulse. I shouldn't…' He looked helplessly at her.

The call was unravelling, escaping from her and, desperate to keep it going, she said fiercely, 'I'm glad you called. We're still friends, and friends call each other sometimes.'

Finn's mouth pursed and her heart tumbled, like it was falling down an infinite set of stairs.

'But we're not really friends, are we?' he said sadly.

Her fingers grazed the screen, wishing she could touch him, feel the prickles of stubble beneath her fingers, the smooth, taut skin stretched across his cheekbones.

She shook her head. They were so much more, or rather, had been so much more.

'Take care, Belle.'

‘You too, I—’ He shut off the call before she could finish.

She lay dry-eyed for another couple of hours, going back over every syllable of every word they’d exchanged. Analysing and reanalysing possible meanings before she finally drifted into a fitful, dreamless sleep that made her feel groggy when she went into work the next day.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

FINN

May

Finn wiped his brow with the sweatband on his wrist and slapped at a mozzie buzzing around his ear.

‘Did it get you, boss?’ asked Linda, the biologist, with a grin, falling into step alongside him. Although her blonde hair was scooped up in a high ponytail, tendrils of hair stuck to her face.

‘Little bastard. I must have sweated off the repellent.’

‘Close your eyes.’ She sprayed around his face with the foul-smelling spray.

Despite copious quantities of repellent, the little buggers still occasionally got through.

Finn gripped the makeshift walking stick and continued moving forward, ducking under branches and thrashing through the undergrowth with the stick.

‘I can’t wait to get back,’ she said, tapping her backpack.

‘At least take a few days’ downtime,’ teased Finn, knowing that she was itching to start transcribing her notes and getting her samples back to the lab.

‘Oh, I’ll do that. One of the things I’m looking forward to is being dry again and not having a permanent dew drop on the end of my nose.’

‘Tell me about it,’ said Finn, conscious of his sweat-soaked back. The humidity here was an absolute killer.

When the guide ahead signalled the group to stop, he pulled out his canteen, drinking the tepid water down quickly, and massaged his aching knee. Normally it was okay, but four hours of solid trekking on a fairly sparse diet could wreak damage on the most physically fit person.

‘Giving you grief?’ asked Caden, who’d turned out to be a brilliant addition to the team, with his ready wit, physiotherapy skills and the ability to charm anyone out of a funk. Being out of touch with civilisation for long periods took a special kind of person and Caden had blended well with everyone.

‘Needs a couple of days’ rest and it will be right as rain.’

‘By my reckoning, we’ve only another two hours before we meet the ground crew and the jeeps.’

‘I’ll be glad to see them,’ said Finn, giving his knee another rub.

‘Make sure you ice and elevate when you get to the hotel.’

‘After a shower, a long cold beer and something to eat that isn’t beans,’ said Finn with a wry grin.

‘There is that,’ said Caden. ‘I’m looking forward to seeing my wife. And then a beer.’

Finn stared at him. ‘Wife?’

Caden grinned at him. ‘Wife. You know, one of them there females,’ he said in his broad Irish accent.

‘I didn’t know you were married. You never said.’ Finn heard the accusation in his voice.

‘Does it matter?’ asked Caden.

‘No, not at all. I’m surprised, that’s all. Doesn’t she mind you being away for so long?’

Caden laughed. ‘No! Emma’s glad of the peace. She’s a sculptor. She doesn’t need me hanging around, and I’m not really one for the arty crowd. So, it suits us both. We’re happy to see each other and when we’re apart we’re happy in our own lives. It works fine.’

‘But you don’t talk about her,’ said Finn, genuinely perplexed that he hadn’t known this about Caden.

Caden’s thin shoulders shrugged. ‘I don’t say much because it’s easier on everyone, isn’t it? I reckon we’ve all got someone back home that we miss. I compartmentalise while I’m away, but as it gets towards the end of the trip like this, then it’s a fierce ache.’

Finn flexed his hands by his side. ‘Yes,’ he murmured to himself, grateful that Caden’s attention was caught by the sight of a small black howler monkey running across the branch above them.

‘And there they are,’ said Linda a couple of hours later, pointing to the circle of jeeps parked at the foot of the hill on the dirt track road a few hundred metres ahead of them.

‘Hallelujah,’ said Heather, the wildlife camera operator, lengthening her stride. ‘A sight for sore eyes. I will be glad to put this baby down.’ She indicated the long-lens camera she carried everywhere.

The group all picked up their speed, galvanised out of their weariness by the thought of getting off their feet.

It took a while to load everything into the jeeps and say farewell to the guides and the support team who’d been with them the whole time, but then the seven of them bundled into one jeep, their kit in the other.

Finn, sitting in the front seat, leaned back and closed his eyes as the jeep bumped and rattled along the rutted track to civilisation.

‘I am so looking forward to a long cold beer,’ said Tom, the other field biologist. He’d been with Finn for the last four of his trips. Finn grinned. Tom would be wasted after two beers and would have to be persuaded up to bed. Their tolerance for alcohol declined dramatically while they were away, a fact Tom always forgot.

‘It’s been a brilliant trip, though,’ said his other colleague, Nate.

‘It has,’ said Finn as the team reflected on the two-week trek back from the campsite, which had for once passed without incident. As Heather pointed out, the highlight was seeing a jaguar one night, which she’d caught on camera, even though it had kept its distance.

‘And we couldn’t have had a better campsite,’ chipped in Linda, and Finn agreed. The spot they’d settled upon had been located well, sheltered from the heavy rain by a rockface with the added bonus of a couple of useful caves. Returning was always easier because they had a bit less kit to carry. Dry food and water-decontamination tablets had been run down and they’d donated equipment to a local tribe, along with some unused medical supplies.

Yes, it had all been a huge success, so why was he feeling just a little bit dissatisfied, a little out of sorts?

Now it was almost over, his mind kept straying to England, to Belle. He laughed to himself, mocking the lie. He’d thought of Belle constantly in the wee small hours of this trip, alone in his tent. Going to her flat had been a big mistake, because it allowed him to picture her so clearly in her own bedroom at night, sleeping in the bed they’d shared. Of course, now, he had no compass as to where she was, because she must be in New York, and he had no idea where. The thought irked him, and he kept going back to it, like a sore tooth with his tongue.

He glanced over at Caden, envious of how he made his marriage work. It was all very well saying they had different interests but what about the logistics of someone being away for months at a time? What about when

one person returned home and upset the balance, like his father had done? Interrupting the normal schedules and routines. And when the other person, like his mother, had huge expectations of how it would be and was upset when their time together didn't pan out the way she hoped? Could it really be the yin and yang of their personalities and interests, complementing each other, allowing each other space, then coming back together again? Finn swallowed back emotion and straightened his spine. Belle would have moved on by now. It wouldn't be fair on her to expect her to wait for him for months at a time. It wasn't as if he were in Europe, like his father had been, and could pop home for the weekends. Even then, that hadn't been enough to keep his parents' marriage happy.

Finn's phone, newly connected to an energy supply, beeped as he stepped out of the shower and, wrapping a towel around his waist, he forced himself not to dive onto the bed and snatch it up to check his messages.

It was impossible to resist his WhatsApp messages. Top of the list was a group message.

Maccy Ds in an hour.

Below that, was the thread between him and Belle. No notifications. Had he really hoped there might be? A claw of disappointment raked through him, the sensation raw and shocking. He didn't feel things like this. Not strongly. Not him. Still, he opened up the thread. The last notification was the call he'd made to her in March, when he'd had a brief visit to Manaus to meet with the National Institute of Amazonian Research. He let out a frustrated sigh. He was an idiot. What did he expect? He'd made it clear he didn't want to maintain contact and now here he was, half-hoping to hear from her. Creating a false expectation, just like his mother.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard, his whole being itched to say something to her. But what? She must have moved on. Must be having the time of her life in New York. They loved a British accent there. They'd love her industry, her energy and the honey-blonde hair – he'd give anything to bury his face in it right now, to smell the floral scent of the shampoo she used.

Unable to help himself, he flicked through his photo album, homing in on his favourite picture of Belle, surrounded by dachshunds, laughing up at him. As usual, the sight of her brought that familiar squeeze to his heart. He wrenched off his towel and grabbed his clothes, needing to get out of there. The four walls were giving him a headache.

Within ten minutes, he'd taken the four flights of stairs at a run and burst out into the sunshine, striding towards the familiar golden arches. He was the first there and unable to resist the lure of French fries, ordered himself a portion along with a beer. It never ceased to amuse him that he could buy beer in McDonalds in South America but not in the UK or the US. The cold beer slipped down his throat like nectar and the salty chips were everything he'd dreamed of. An involuntary chuckle slipped out at the thought of Belle's face when he'd first suggested he'd like to try a McDonalds. It still amused him that she'd had to gently tell him that it wasn't Scottish.

'What you laughing about, boss?' asked Caden, appearing at his side.

'Nothing,' said Finn, taking another long swallow of beer. 'Just enjoying the simple pleasures in life.'

'Talking of which, can I introduce you to my wife, Emma?'

The woman, a lot taller and broader than Caden, gave him a playful nudge in the ribs. 'An' who are you calling a simple pleasure, you cheeky badger?' Her Irish accent was even stronger than Caden's, who beamed at her.

'Now would I, love of my life?' he said.

The easy humour between them made the beer in Finn’s stomach sour with rare jealousy.

‘Nice to meet you,’ he said, plastering on a smile.

‘And you,’ she said, shaking his hand with a fearsome grip. When he winced, she apologised.

‘Don’t know me own strength. I worry I’ll break Caden one day.’ She winked and Caden roared with laughter.

‘I’ll go down a happy man,’ he said.

Finn managed a laugh, but throughout the afternoon, when the rest of the team had joined them and were fuelled up on Big Macs and beer, he watched the two of them more carefully than he meant to, as if he might uncover the secret of their happiness.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

BELLE

June

‘Cheers, and thanks for an amazing few days,’ said Maddie, raising her glass.

‘A Manhattan in Manhattan,’ said Phoebe, holding up her coupe glass and studying the orange liquid with the satisfied smile of a Cheshire Cat.

‘Cheers,’ replied Belle, taking a sip of her new favourite cocktail and looking around at the bougie bar just three blocks from her apartment. ‘So, highlights?’

‘The Empire State Building,’ said Phoebe without pausing for breath. ‘It was just like in all the movies.’

Maddie rolled her eyes. ‘You’re such a cliché. I love the vibe here. Everyone and everything is so busy. It feels like life moves so much faster here.’

‘It does, because everyone works so frickin hard,’ said Belle. ‘You do know they only get two weeks’ holiday?’

Phoebe covered her mouth with horror. ‘No!’

‘Yes,’ said Belle, who’d been making the most of her weekends and visiting as many places as she could. Her favourite place was still the Hamptons, an easy train ride out of the city on a Friday night. One of her

colleagues, Amy, who she'd become good friends with, had family out there, so she'd been three times since she'd arrived in April.

'I'm going to miss you guys when you leave tomorrow. I'm sorry I couldn't take any time off … but like I said, we don't get much, and I'm headed to San Francisco in the morning for a three-day conference.'

'Don't fret, pet,' said Maddie. 'We did all the touristy stuff that I bet you've already done a million times.'

'Not a million, but I've been trying to do as much as I can at the weekends.'

'And you don't get lonely?' asked Phoebe.

'No, I'm too busy,' said Belle, glancing over at a couple on the table next to theirs. 'Busy, busy, busy.' Her smile was forced, because every now and then when she saw a tall, broad figure on the street in the distance, she was almost felled by the loneliness of missing one person.

'You are coming back to London, aren't you?' said Phoebe, worriedly putting a hand on Belle's arm.

'I'm definitely coming back. Next month, or the one after.'

They wrapped up the evening with one final cocktail and then walked back to her apartment.

'Cup of tea, anyone?' asked Belle, leading the way into the teeny-tiny kitchen, which just about had room for the kitchen table pushed up against one wall with three chairs.

'Oh yes, just like old times,' said Phoebe. 'Have you got any peppermint?'

'Of course, I've got peppermint,' said Belle who'd stocked up in anticipation of their arrival. She'd had such a good time seeing them. 'Thanks so much for coming.' While she boiled the kettle on the stove top, the other two sat in what had become their respective seats over the last three days, and within seconds were idly scrolling through their phones.

Belle didn’t have much reason to check hers. Elspeth would definitely be asleep, and her WhatsApp messages were usually dominated by the two people here in the room with her.

Feeling left out, she opened up her phone for a cursory check.

‘Oh my God.’ The words slipped out on a gasp before she could stop them.

‘What?’ Maddie looked up, curiosity shining in her eyes.

‘What is it?’ Phoebe’s face radiated quick concern.

Belle’s hands shook as she opened up the messages.

‘What?’ asked Maddie, impatient as ever.

‘It’s … it’s a message from Finn.’

‘Fit as Fuck?’

‘Who else would it be, you moron?’ said Phoebe, punching Maddie in the arm.

Belle hungrily read the message and then sank down in the chair, her body slumped as she put her head on the table.

‘Belle, are you okay?’ asked Phoebe, her soft words tentative.

‘Of course she isn’t,’ snapped Maddie.

‘Finn’s coming to New York.’ Belle pressed her fingers to her lips, not sure whether to laugh or cry. He was going to be here.

‘And…’ prompted Maddie.

‘Tomorrow.’ Her face crumpled. ‘For two days.’

‘Is this the first time you’ve heard from him?’ asked Maddie, sharpness in her tone.

‘Since that time in March, yes.’ Belle’s voice wavered, thin with shock.

‘Oh shit,’ said Phoebe, realising the issue.

‘I don’t bloody believe it,’ said Belle, with a slightly hysterical laugh, looking at the brief message.

> Hi Belle. I’m in New York tomorrow and Tuesday. Are you around? Do you want to meet up for dinner? Finn

She looked up at her friends.

‘He’s in New York for two of the three days that I’m away. Oh, the irony.’ Inside, her heart was doing a happy dance. Finn wanted to see her. Was there any way she could change her flights? Go later? Come home earlier?

She read the message again. No kiss, she noted. Did that mean something? Was it deliberate? Trying to tell her something. Making sure she didn’t get her hopes up?

‘Why the hell didn’t he tell you before?’ snapped Maddie, bringing Belle down to earth with a horrible bump.

‘What?’ Belle stared at her.

‘You can’t tell me that he just decided to fly over now. The dipshit,’ said Maddie with excoriating scorn, blasting a hole in Belle’s brief moment of hope.

‘What?’ This time it was Phoebe who asked the question.

‘Why the hell didn’t he get in touch before? Who gives twelve hours’ notice that they’re going to be in the same city?’ continued Maddie. ‘If he really wanted to see you, surely he would have let you know well in advance.’

Belle felt as if she’d been doused by a very large bucket of cold water.

‘Sorry to rain on your parade and all that.’ Maddie squeezed her hand in apology.

But Maddie was right. If Finn had really wanted to see her, he wouldn’t have left it to the last minute. No one booked a flight to New York only the day before. People like Finn had schedules booked out months in advance. With a scowl, she looked at the message, her heart cracking wide across. What was she, nothing more than a bloody booty call? Had she misremembered their time in London together? Or maybe he’d moved on, as he’d told her to do. She was just another contact in his phone. One of many to look up when his ship was in port.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Phoebe.

‘What can I do?’ Belle shrugged, irritation, anger and disbelief fighting it out in her head. ‘I have a flight out of New York at nine a.m. tomorrow. I need to be at the airport before then.’

‘You could ignore him,’ said Maddie. ‘Give him a taste of his own medicine.’

‘No! You can’t do that to him,’ cried Phoebe, ever the romantic.

‘I’m not playing games,’ said Belle, surprised by the evenness of her voice when inside she was in a complete spin.

‘What will you say?’

‘The truth,’ said Belle, aware of the avid gaze of her two friends. ‘And I’m not doing it while you’re watching me. It’s not a committee job.’

‘Spoilsport,’ grumbled Maddie.

‘Too right,’ said Phoebe, giving Maddie a remonstrating poke. ‘Let Belle do it in her own way.’

‘Okaaay.’ Maddie picked up her tea cup. ‘I’m going to hit the sack. Tomorrow is going to be a long old day. See you in the morning. Personally, whatever message you write tonight, I’d sleep on it before you send it.’ On that note, giving Belle a quick, tight hug, which belied her concern more than her practical words, Maddie left the kitchen.

Phoebe followed a minute later, leaving Belle at the tiny kitchen table staring down at her phone.

Annoyed with herself for second-guessing the bloody message, she stood up and went to get ready for bed. Once she was snuggled under the covers, she immediately picked up her phone. She switched off the light beside her and stared at the glowing screen. Should she reply? And if she did, what should she say? Did he really want to see her? Or was meeting up a mere convenience because he was here? A friendly check-in for old times’ sake?

Or did he miss her the way she missed him – with a keen ache that never seemed to dull, no matter how hard she tried not to think of him? It had been nearly six months since she'd seen Finn, and the longing for him hadn't waned. Not one bit.

Part of her was extremely grateful they'd agreed not to stay in touch, because that would have been even more unbearable; constantly on the look-out for messages, always wondering where he was and when he might reach out. It was better this way, and surely one day she'd be able to think of him without the tight pull of longing like an invisible thread connecting them.

Sorry, I'm flying to San Francisco in the morning. I'm not back in NY until Wednesday evening. Belle

What time's your flight?

She swallowed and tapped in.

9.25 a.m.

Travel safe x

She stared at the screen through blurry eyes for a long time before she fell asleep.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

BELLE

Belle thought her lungs might explode as she raced from the air train into the terminal at JFK. Her eyes scanned anxiously for a board to tell her where to check in her luggage. If only she could have travelled with only hand luggage.

Rushing up to the board, she stood, catching her breath and trying to find her flight. There it was: 09.25 to San Francisco. Despite the air-conditioning cooling the building, her underarms were clammy, and her face probably looked like a boiled tomato. *Breathe, Belle*, she told herself. She was here now, admittedly later than she'd planned. Bloody hold-ups on the subway.

The check-in desk was the opposite end of the terminal – of course it sodding was. Belle hauled her heavy case, containing half a ton of company literature which she'd been nominated to take to the conference.

'Hallelujah,' she said when she spotted the American Airlines desk, mercifully without a queue. Although she was probably the last to check in.

'Cutting it fine,' drawled the clerk on the desk.

'I know. Transport problems.'

Once her boarding card had been issued, her passport checked and her case had disappeared along the belt, she turned to take her leave.

‘Make sure you go straight through security now. There’s quite a line in there.’

‘Thanks,’ she said, head down, stuffing her paperwork into her handbag.

Someone loomed in her path and she glanced up, irritated, ready to swerve.

‘Belle.’

‘Finn!’

For a moment they stared at each other. Belle drank in his familiar features absorbing each one with manic desperation, as if fearful something might have changed. Inside, a tiny bit of her relaxed at the sight of the familiar dark freckle below his left cheekbone, the sandy-gold stubble highlighting his chin, so at odds with the dark hair on his head, and those reliable, broad shoulders encased in a dark denim shirt. The tips of her fingers tingled with a desperate itch to trace the contours of his face, which looked weary and strained. Her heart ached a little at the sight of the lines etched around his eyes.

Finn stared back, his blue eyes fierce and direct, pinning her to the spot. She couldn’t miss the aching hunger in them. A flash of elation coursed through her.

She threw herself into his arms, driven by longing. And, oh, the relief when his arms closed around her. Suddenly, they were holding each other, hanging on so tightly she wasn’t sure where she ended and Finn began.

‘Belle,’ he murmured in her ear, pulling her close. ‘How I’ve missed you.’

‘Oh, Finn.’ She closed her eyes, savouring the smell and feel of him. She gripped his arms as if to hold on to him so he could never leave her again.

They stood like that for several seconds. Belle could hardly bear to let him go. It might break a spell, let a reality she didn’t want flood in. She savoured every one of those seconds, conscious of the thud of her heart and

his, the floor swaying slightly beneath her feet and the sensation of being apart from the rest of the world. When they finally took a step apart, they stared at each other again until Finn lifted a hand to touch her face, his fingers shaking.

‘Hello,’ he said, his eyes glowing with warmth.

‘Hi.’

Belle’s heart was now doing a giddy dance in her chest, and she was only breathing at half capacity. Finn was here.

‘What are you …’

‘I’ve been waiting for you.’ He reached for her hand and threaded his fingers between hers.

‘I’m late.’

‘I thought I’d missed you. Although, I’d have waited all day.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me you were coming to New York? Why leave it until the last minute?’

Finn sighed. ‘Because … I thought it was best if I didn’t contact you, and I kept telling myself I wouldn’t. That it was better if I didn’t…’

Belle’s eyes watered. ‘Better for whom?’ she asked with a gentle smile.

‘For both of us. But then, at the last minute, I had to. I couldn’t be in the same city and not … at least see how you are.’

‘Finn.’ If her heart were made of chocolate, it would have been a pile of goo on the floor right now.

‘I miss you,’ he said simply and lifted her hand, kissing each of her knuckles, making her want to weep.

‘I miss you, too.’

She gave an anguished glance up at the screen and squeezed his hand, her Tiffany bracelet and charms jangling on her wrist. They both glanced down at it.

‘I…’ she looked at the screen again. ‘My flight…’ Her words petered out.

She could miss the flight. Catch the next one. Spend an hour or two with Finn.

‘Belle, it’s okay.’ He cupped her face, oblivious to the people tutting and moving around them. ‘I shouldn’t have … I wanted to … I’m sorry.’

She threw herself at him again, squeezing him tight and burying her nose in his neck, smelling him. Sod the flight. There’d be another one. ‘God, I’ve missed you so much, Finn McAllister,’ she said, and sniffed as tears leaked out. She was so overwhelmed that she had no idea whether she was happy or sad. ‘I think about you all the bloody time.’

Finn’s body stiffened and he tried to draw away, but she wouldn’t let him. Pride cast aside, she clung to him.

‘I don’t want you to think about me,’ he said in a hoarse, desperate voice.

‘It’s too sodding late for that,’ said Belle, gazing up into his face. ‘You’re always there. In my head. In my heart. I think about you all the time.’

‘No, Belle. I don’t want you to. I don’t want you to miss me. This was wrong, sorry. I’m being selfish. I shouldn’t have done this. A moment of weakness. I’m going back on expedition next week. I’ll be away for two months this time. And after that … there’ll be another trip and then another and another. I want you to be happy. I can’t … I’ll never be able… I’m sorry.’ He took a step back, putting a metaphorical mile between them.

Belle stepped back too, reeling as if he’d hit her, and her eyes blazed at him with sudden fury.

‘Can’t, or won’t?’

‘It’s not that simple, Belle.’

‘Nothing in life is.’ She gazed at him.

Above their heads, the sign changed.

Belle swallowed. Her flight was boarding. Should she go or stay? But she wasn’t going to beg.

‘My flight’s boarding. I’ve got to go.’

She held his gaze, hoping he’d relent, pull her into his arms again. Say there was a way, that they could try, but instead Finn stepped back. ‘Bye, Belle. Travel safe.’

‘You, too,’ she said, swallowing hard. Turning on her heel, she strode to the security gates, without looking back.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

FINN

Finn watched her go, his heart heavy. He didn't know how long he stood there, more than half hoping she might turn around and come back, holding himself back from running to catch her. But there was no future for them. There couldn't be. It wasn't fair on either of them. But even though he'd told himself the same thing, a million times, it didn't alleviate the ache inside him.

Lifting his chin, firming his resolve, he hitched the handles of his holdall on his shoulders and strode towards the air train, headed for downtown Manhattan. At two-thirty, he and Caden, who'd flown in a few days ago to meet up with his wife, had a meeting with a possible donor. If they could secure the proposed hefty contribution, it would mean an additional team member on the next expedition. That was the sort of thing he should be thinking about, he told himself, as he boarded the train and sat down on the unforgiving plastic seat. As they departed, he watched his own grim reflection in the windows of the carriage and hated himself for the anguished expression on Belle's face when she'd said, 'I think about you all the time.'

Shit. He thought about her all the time, too.

He clenched his jaw tight, remembering his parents, as if in a bid to justify his behaviour. He reflected on the manic anticipation in the days

before his dad would come home from wherever he'd been. He couldn't forget his mum's obsession with everything being perfect, her desperation to manage every little detail, and that included him. Without fail, she'd coach Finn on what not to say and admonish him to keep quiet, not bother his dad if he was in his study or reading his paper or watching the television.

Initially, when Finn was much younger, he'd shared the excitement. *Daddy's coming home*. Finn winced now, realising he was in public, surrounded on the train by fellow passengers clutching the handles of their wheelie cases. A woman across the aisle from him gave him a look, like he was a serial killer or something.

As he'd got older, he realised that the same old pattern panned out with each of his dad's visits. At first joy and happiness upon his arrival, quickly doused when his father turned tired and grumpy and didn't want to take part in the social whirl his wife had arranged: the dinner parties, theatre trips or days at the races. As far as his dad was concerned, he'd come home for a break from his hectic work schedule, ready for rest and some solitude, while his mother craved Dad's company, wanted to spend every minute of every day with him. Inevitably, within a few days of his father being home, the atmosphere had soured. His mum did everything she could to get his attention, while his father retreated at every turn. Finn was always caught in the middle.

He shuddered, and the woman opposite, who'd been studying him, turned away again. Realising she was probably now convinced that, if he wasn't about to kill someone, he was up to no good, he took out his phone and began tapping out a to-do list into his reminders app.

Top of the list was *Contact Lisa*: a model he'd hooked up with a couple of times on his previous trips to New York. Maybe he simply craved female company, not one particular woman.

And maybe pigs might fly across the skyline of Manhattan. He was never going to contact Lisa.

A few hours later, Finn and Caden were saying goodbye and leaving the swanky downtown offices of their potential donor, George Du Pont.

They waited in silence for the elevator, but as soon as it arrived and they stepped inside, Caden spat, ‘What the fuck was that?’

Finn gave him a direct look.

‘Seriously, you were all over the place. You couldn’t even remember the name of the mountain range!’

‘I know,’ said Finn, grimly.

‘And then you fluffed the figures. What the hell happened?’

‘Caden, I apologise. My head wasn’t in the game. I should have been better prepared.’

‘Finn, that’s bollocks. You’re the most prepared person I know. What is going on with you today?’

‘Thanks for stepping in and picking up the slack,’ said Finn, ignoring the question. ‘And I appreciate that “jetlag’s terrible with Finn today” comment in your broadest Irish.’ Even saying that reminded him of Belle and how he’d teased her with his over-the-top Scottish accent.

‘Well, I had to say something. It’s a hell of a long way to come for a meeting and not get what we came for. It’s a miracle the guy’s agreed to meet us for dinner this evening to celebrate the funding. Are you going to show up? Because I can tell you, having an extra team member on the conservation side will help you attract more grants and funding. You can’t afford to screw it up. Tonight, you need to be on your A game, buddy. I suggest you drink a vat of black coffee before we go.’

‘Message received, Caden,’ said Finn, his voice taut with self-loathing. ‘I screwed up. I won’t do it again.’ He pushed his shoulders back as he said it, annoyed with himself for the moment he’d lost his train of thought. It had been the bloody blue Tiffany bag on George’s personal assistant’s desk that had distracted him, bringing back that earlier hopeless encounter with Belle. She still wore his bracelet, which he was pleased and dismayed by. He didn’t want her to carry a torch for him, because he sure as damn it carried one for her, and it hurt like hell.

He had done the right thing this morning. Hadn’t he?

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

BELLE

September

Belle finished applying her lipstick and studied herself in the mirror. She didn't want to look like she was trying too hard. Maybe her hair was a bit too much. She'd spent ages blow-drying it. Now she was worried it was a bit too retro-80s, like a Barry Gibb from the Bee Gees bouffant. Whatever. It would have to do. She picked up her handbag.

'Ooh, hot mamma,' said Maddie, looking up from the TV. 'Are you going to sleep with him?'

'I don't know,' said Belle irritably, sliding her hands down her wide-legged jeans. Did she even fancy Josh? After four dates the jury was still out. He was nice enough, maybe a little too serious but … what about the spark?

It's not about instant fireworks, she told herself sternly. *But you have to fancy them a little bit*, whispered an annoying voice, which had taken up residence in her head of late.

'Is this P.J.?' asked Phoebe.

'Mmm,' said Belle, wishing she'd never said anything. Josh Timpson was a thirty-five-year-old banker with Deutsche Bank in the city. He had light brown hair, stood at six-foot one (*not as tall as Finn*, whispered

Annoying Voice), wore a suit exceptionally well, was ambitious, owned a coffee table and two bedside cabinets – yes, she'd gone back to his place, but hadn't slept with him – and she had yet to find out if he would book the clown.

She'd described him as 'promising', which promptly led Maddie and Phoebe to refer to him as Promising Josh which they'd subsequently shortened to P.J.

The truth was he hadn't been that promising at first, but she had to move on. Make an effort. She couldn't hanker after Finn forever, and it was now two-and-a-half months since she'd seen him at the airport. And still her stupid brain had been trying to make stupid calculations. If he'd left for his expedition a week to the day after she'd seen him and it had been exactly two months, then … he'd have been back for two weeks now, back somewhere where he had a phone and a signal. But as promised, there was complete radio silence.

'Belle!' Phoebe waved a hand in front of her face, and she realised she'd tuned out – something she did a lot more often these days. 'Did you want anything to eat before you go out? I've just made some soup.'

'No, we're going out to dinner.'

'But you haven't had anything to eat all day,' said Phoebe. 'You ought to have a little something to line your stomach.'

'I'm not hungry.'

Phoebe sighed and exchanged a quick glance with Maddie.

Belle pursed her lips. 'I'll see you later.'

'Hopefully not,' said Maddie. 'Give P.J. a chance.'

'I am,' Belle snapped, wishing the two of them would get off her case.

'Have a nice time.' Maddie's tone was surprisingly conciliatory which made Belle feel even worse for snapping.

'I will … and thanks for looking out for me,' she said.

'Someone's got to.' Maddie gave her a cheery wave.

‘I’m lucky to have you two,’ she said, adding quickly, ‘and I must go,’ because suddenly she was teary. She clattered down the four flights of stairs trying to get her equilibrium back. At the moment, she was just a bit off-kilter and a bit hormonal. Maddie and Phoebe were the best friends anyone could have, and they worried about her, but they didn’t need to because she was absolutely fine. Work was busy, her job was going well. She’d been promoted and now had the office next door to Elspeth. The only fly in the ointment was Elspeth’s new assistant, Daisy, who was terrified of her. Poor thing got flustered and then everything went pear-shaped. Belle had set some time in her diary next week to advise Daisy that she needed to push back with Elspeth and ask her to give her some time and distance instead of hovering over her like a malignant fruit fly.

These thoughts got her through the tube journey to Goodge Street where she was meeting Josh in a pub in nearby Fitzrovia. Full of chic bars and trendy restaurants, it was a lot less crowded than the West End, as the tourists had yet to discover it. Emerging into the cold brisk air from the tube station, Belle only had a short walk to the Italian restaurant Josh had booked. That was another point in his favour. He knew his restaurants, always booked a table and managed to find interesting, quirky or up-and-coming places to eat. Belle straightened her shoulders and forced herself to try and be enthusiastic. Josh ticked all the boxes.

The smell of cheese and garlic hit her as she walked inside, and the front-of-house guy greeted her with a warm smile. ‘I’m with someone. They’ve made a reservation,’ she said. And just as well, the place was already packed. Clearly very popular. Always a good sign.

‘Let me show you to your table, the gentleman is waiting.’

Of course he was. Josh was punctual and never left her sitting on her own waiting for him. She should have been impressed by the punctuality, but some contrary part of her wished that just once he’d surprise her or be

human and be late. It irritated her that he was so perfect, because she was desperate to find a flaw.

‘Hello, Belle,’ he said, rising to greet and kiss her respectfully on the cheek, reconfirming one of the things she should like about him. Even after a couple of dates, he never assumed it was all right to lunge in for a kiss on the mouth. Just once, she’d love to be ravished, kissed as if he could never get enough of her.

‘Hi,’ she said, conjuring up starry eyes. ‘How are you?’

‘Good. I haven’t ordered you any wine because I wasn’t sure if you’d want red or white.’

Another plus in his favour. He was considerate. Never presumed. Never challenged her to try something new, do anything different. He wouldn’t take her to see spiders.

‘What are you drinking?’ she asked, pushing away her stupid, irrelevant thoughts.

‘I’m going to have red because I’m thinking pizza, but happy to have white if you’d prefer.’

‘Let’s have red,’ she said.

The waiter hurried over, hailed by Josh’s discreet signal.

‘We’ll have a bottle of red. What do you think about the Montepulciano, Belle?’

It was slightly more expensive, but again she liked that he consulted her.

‘Sounds good.’

‘Belle,’ said the waiter. ‘You have the perfect name.’

Belle blushed. ‘Thank you.’

‘He’s right,’ said Josh as the waiter scurried away, adding with a teasing smile, ‘Belle in name and in person.’

‘Get away with you.’ She batted at his hand. ‘What are you after?’

He gave a cheerful shrug. ‘Brownie points. Let’s face it, us men can never have too many of those, can we?’

‘No,’ said Belle, laughing and picking up the menu, relaxing into her chair. Josh was easy company. There was absolutely nothing wrong with him. This evening was going to be fun.

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Chapter Forty

FINN

November

Of all the places he might have met his father for dinner, this was the least expected, Finn decided as he strolled down the Champs-Elysées on a very chilly November evening. Across the Seine, the Eiffel Tower lights began to sparkle and flash as they always did on the hour. Finn quickened his pace. The restaurant reservation was for eight-fifteen and he needed to get a move on. Being late wouldn't go down well, and meeting his father was always … 'uncomfortable' was too strong a word, but they were never fully at ease in each other's company. Not that they disagreed: they didn't allow themselves to get that emotional about anything in each other's presence.

Finn was still surprised by the summons – couched of course as an invitation. Although, what were the chances that both male McAllisters would be in Paris at the same time? Finn was here as a speaker on a panel at an international conference and his father was attending a legal symposium on human rights. It made sense to meet up.

When he pushed open the door to the restaurant, Finn smiled to himself. So typically French and so typically his father, ever the staunch traditionalist. When in France eat French. To eat a McDonalds here would

be sacrilegious to his father – actually it probably would be anywhere in the world. Finn wondered if Belle had been for a Big Mac and fries recently and immediately quashed the thought, but it was too late. Belle had arrived in his head along with the memory of his parting words to her in New York. '*I'll never be able to…*' The hurt on her face. The punch of anguish that had crumpled her features. He hated himself for doing that to her. It never left him.

He'd lost count of the number of times he'd be somewhere and a memory would not so much pop into his head, but explode with an unwelcome blast leaving him a little out of sync, as if he were in the wrong place and didn't know which way to turn next.

It was a relief to spot his father at a table for two in the corner. 'Hey, Dad.'

'Son, how are you?' His father rose and shook his hand. 'Good to see you.'

'You're looking well,' said Finn with surprise, taking in the slight weight loss, the golden tan and the shorter grey-templed hair, which suited him. Jack McAllister had always been distinguished-looking in a rather severe way, but now … he was a handsome man. Younger. Finn realised with a start that his dad was only fifty-five. Not old at all. It was just he'd always *seemed* so much older.

'Thank you. I'm feeling well.' He beamed at Finn. 'Would you like a drink? I was thinking about ordering a bottle of red.'

Finn blinked. Where was abstemious Jack McAllister, who only ever drank one glass of wine as if to prove he could keep a tight control on enjoying himself? Who was this man and what he had done with his dad?

'Great,' said Finn, more than a little uncertain. He felt as if he'd pitched up to the cinema to sit back and watch a film, and instead found himself on stage during a live theatre production and expected to take part.

'A Bordeaux, all right with you?'

‘I’ll be led by your better judgement,’ said Finn, prepared to relinquish the court to his father. Invariably around him, he took a step back. Again, to his surprise, his dad chuckled indulgently – again another diversion from normal operating procedure.

‘I’m not so sure about that. But the waiter recommended it. You can have a look at the wine list, if you’d like.’

Now Finn really was wrong-footed. His father relinquishing control?

‘The Bordeaux is fine.’ Finn leaned back in his seat, making a covert study as his father ordered the wine. There were other tiny changes. His father wore a new watch, a sleek stylish affair, and he’d shaved off his sideburns… And was smiling and chatting to the wine waiter like he was a human being and not a lackey.

‘So,’ said Finn once the waiter had gone and they’d ordered their food, two rare steak frites with salad. ‘What brings you to Paris?’ Of course he knew, but talking work was always a good, safe, reliable subject that allowed his dad to waffle on quite happily, and there’d be no awkward breaks in the conversation.

As predicted, his father launched in about his meeting of international human-rights lawyers. To be fair, it was interesting, because his father always exhibited passion for what he did, which Finn never failed to admire.

His dad paused when the wine waiter arrived to perform the usual ritual of uncorking the wine and inviting his father to taste it. With their glasses full, Finn expected Jack to pick up where he’d left off, but his father lifted his glass. ‘To happiness,’ he said. Thrown, Finn lifted his own glass and tapped it against his father’s, repeating the unexpected sentiment.

‘Actually, Finn, I need to tell you something. That’s why I wanted to meet. And when I heard you were in Paris it seemed serendipitous.’

Finn found himself blinking again. His father did not use words like serendipitous. He used providential, convenient, commodious – logical,

precise words, not fanciful, lyrical descriptions.

‘Your mother and I are getting divorced.’

Finn’s wine went down the wrong way and he began to cough, conscious that whatever he did, he mustn’t spit it out all over the pristine white tablecloth. He snatched up a glass of water and drank it down. It took a few more splutters and coughs before he regained his equilibrium.

He wiped his eyes and met his father’s amused gaze.

‘I wasn’t expecting quite that reaction,’ Jack said calmly.

‘I wasn’t expecting that statement,’ countered Finn tartly.

‘No, I’m sure it’s come as a surprise.’

‘You can say that again.’

His dad sighed. ‘Long overdue, really.’

‘And that, again,’ said Finn, emboldened by the admission.

‘Yes, I think we both owe you an apology for limping on as long as we have. We should have gone our separate ways years ago, instead of making each other thoroughly miserable, and ergo you.’

Finn was caught off-balance by the honest admission. ‘Why didn’t you?’ he asked, stunned. ‘And why now?’ He glanced at his father’s open-necked shirt and it dawned on him. ‘You’ve met someone.’

His father winced. ‘Yes. Am I that much of a cliché?’

Finn didn’t know what to say to that, so held his tongue and took a sip of wine.

‘Although your mother has also met someone – a man in her yoga class. They’re planning a trip to an ashram thing in India.’

Again, Finn choked on his wine, and after another protracted bout of coughing and spluttering, finally said, ‘Can you stop doing that? At least warn me when you’re about to drop another bombshell.’ He seriously could not imagine his neat, immaculately groomed mother going to a yoga class, let alone an ashram in India.

‘Sorry, son.’ His father gave him a mischievous smile so unexpected once again that Finn was shocked into silence. ‘I met someone a long while ago. I’m not proud of it, but I did have an affair for six months while I was in Belgium. When I went home, your mother had found out, and I agreed to stop it. Then, last year, she met John at her yoga class. She asked me for a divorce in January.’

‘January?’

‘We didn’t want to say anything to you until it was all settled and we knew what was going to happen. We’re selling the house in Edinburgh. Your mother is moving up the coast to Fife and I’m buying an apartment near Holyrood. Clare, my partner has a place in The Hague and we’ll fly between the two.’

‘Bloody hell.’ Finn knocked back the rest of his wine in one gulp. ‘Another long-distance relationship?’

Hadn’t his father learned anything?

Jack McAllister huffed out a laugh. ‘It wasn’t the distance that killed the relationship between me and your mother, Finn. We fell out of love; in the end, the only thing we had in common was you. If a relationship is worth keeping, you work at it. You make compromises. Clare’s in the States at the moment and will be away for at least two months. We speak as often as we can on the phone. Most of the time it’s the thought of when I will see her that makes it all worthwhile.’

‘Call me officially gobsmacked,’ said Finn.

Over dinner his father gave more details about Clare, and his and Finn’s mother’s plans for each of their futures. For the first time, maybe, Finn saw his dad as a red-blooded human being, a man full of enthusiasm and excitement.

‘I’m looking forward to introducing you to Clare.’

‘Please tell me she’s older than me,’ said Finn, immediately thinking of Carole and Belle. How were they getting on? Had Belle seen more of her

father? He hoped so. He really hoped so, for both their sakes.

‘Of course, she is.’ His father gave him an outraged stare. ‘She’s older than your mother and a year younger than me. What do you think I am?’

‘A dark horse,’ suggested Finn a little more irreverently than he planned, and was rather pleased when his father burst out laughing.

‘I’ll give you that one.’

When they finished the bottle of wine, Jack suggested they order a couple of glasses of Cognac. Finn couldn’t remember when he’d talked so much to his father or believe how easy it was.

‘So, the last expedition. The Andes: whereabouts were you?’ his father asked, and then asked more questions when Finn filled him in. They talked on and ordered a second glass of Cognac.

When it arrived, his father swilled it around in the glass, looking deep into the amber liquid.

‘Finn, I don’t think I’ve ever told you how proud I am of you.’

Finn swallowed, oddly discomfited by the weird pricking sensation in his eyes.

‘I should have done. I know I tried to push you to go into law … it was my passion and I’m sorry for that … but I am delighted that you have found your passion. The success you’ve found is the icing on the cake … it is wonderful to do something you care deeply about. And I’m happy for you.’

The warming Cognac allowed Finn to compose himself.

‘Thanks, Dad.’ It felt too awkward to be more effusive. They’d never had that kind of relationship. Hopefully this might be the start of a footbridge between them.

‘I’ve not been the best father … I’d like to change that. It would be wonderful if you could perhaps … come and stay and meet Clare sometime.’

Finn nodded, still bemused by the entirely unexpected way the evening had turned out and by his own discomfort. His dad was reaching out and he

was struggling with it.

‘I should also say your mother sends her love … funnily enough, now we’ve got the divorce ball rolling, we get on so much better. She also wanted me to ask you about your love life.’ His look was a little arch. Clearly, he was nosy, too.

Finn rolled his eyes. ‘You can report back to Mum that you asked,’ he said. Maybe he could foresee a time when he’d be more easy talking like this with his father, but Rome wasn’t built in a day.

‘Ah well. All I can say is, if you do meet someone you feel strongly about, don’t make the mistakes I made and keep them at arm’s length. Relationships need work and compromise. Life is better as a pair. As Noah knew.’

Remembering that he’d made the same joke with Belle, a sudden, devastating ache swamped Finn. What if she’d found someone else?

Suddenly his head was full of visions of Belle smiling up at another guy, walking hand in hand with them through Covent Garden, ice-skating, eating Big Macs and fries. Someone who was with her, who wouldn’t leave her for months on end. Someone who would be there when she needed them. Though she deserved all that and more, the thought only deepened the hollow ache inside him.

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Chapter Forty-One

BELLE

December

Belle was finishing up an email before heading out to meet Josh for lunch, when a loud wail made her jump up from her desk and rush out to find Elspeth's new assistant, Daisy, sprawled on the floor, awash with files and papers all around her.

She hurried over and helped her up. 'What happened?'

'I was trying to balance everything in one pile,' moaned Daisy. 'I've got to file it all. Then it tipped over and I tried to catch it and fell out of my chair.' She rubbed at her elbow which was oozing blood, but Belle was more worried by the darkening bruise on her forehead.

Daisy began to scrabble about trying to gather up the papers around her while drops of blood leaked in little spatters.

'Daisy, sit down. Don't worry about that. You're bleeding and you've hit your head.'

'But Elspeth is going to kill me. I'm supposed to have got all this sorted out before she gets back tomorrow.'

'Sit down,' insisted Belle, guiding the young woman up off the floor to a chair. 'I'll get you an ice pack.'

'We have ice packs?' said Daisy. 'I didn't know that.'

Belle shook her head, wondering how Daisy would fare with Elspeth long-term. She was lovely, willing and superbright – always good at drilling down to the nub of an issue – but her organisational skills were a disaster.

Raiding the first-aid kit, Belle patched her up and gave her an ice pack from the freezer compartment in the kitchen. ‘I think you need to take a break.’

‘I can’t. I’ve got to get this done and…’ she burst into tears. ‘I’m so behind with filing.’

‘Tell you what. Why don’t you take it easy this afternoon? Do only what you need to do, and I’ll come in early tomorrow morning and we’ll do it together. I know Elspeth’s systems.’

‘I can’t ask you to do that, you’re my boss.’

‘We both work for Elspeth, and you didn’t ask, I volunteered. In fact, it’s an order.’ Belle looked at her watch again. ‘And I have to go out. I’m late already.’ She patted the young woman on her shoulder. ‘Okay?’

‘Thanks, Belle, you’re the best.’

‘I’m not so sure about that. You won’t think that if you stuff up my monthly report.’

Daisy lifted her chin. ‘Figures are easy … it’s the paperwork that gets me.’

‘You’ll be fine,’ Belle said, thinking back to when she’d been as nervous as Daisy was. ‘Look, I’ve got to go, but I will help you get on top of everything later. I promise it gets easier.’

When she arrived at the tiny sandwich bar, Josh had secured seats in the window and her sandwich was sitting waiting for her.

‘You are a prince among men,’ she said, slipping onto the stool next to him.

‘I know.’

‘You shouldn’t have waited for me,’ she said, looking at his beef-pastrami roll.

‘I should, because if I’d finished mine first, I’d have eaten yours as well.’

She laughed and took a bite. The coronation chicken here was to die for, but then so was the prawn cocktail.

‘So, what’s the big news?’ she asked. He’d told her on the phone he had something big to report.

‘I,’ he began with a big grin, ‘have been offered a two-month secondment in Australia.’

‘Oh wow, that’s amazing. Congratulations. Especially as … isn’t the English cricket team on tour?’ Belle’s words spilled out in genuine pleasure for him because, from the way he was grinning from ear to ear, he was clearly delighted.

‘I might get to see one match. But it will be … quite a big promotion, and … I might get to keep it when I get back. I couldn’t really turn it down.’

‘Oh Josh, that’s brilliant. Why would you turn it down?’

‘Well.’ His face dropped a little and he fixed his gaze on her. ‘There’s you.’

Belle arranged her features in an earnest expression, because that aspect hadn’t even occurred to her.

‘I know we haven’t been dating very long – so I don’t expect you to wait around for me. I mean two months is one sixth of a year.’

Two months was nothing, thought Belle, with an unexpected pang in her chest. A sudden flash of anger filled her. Ten months would be nothing for the right person, if they came back eventually.

She realised she was gripping her hands together tightly. Josh noticed and covered them.

‘I’ll understand if you don’t want to wait, but if you did, then … I guess I’m asking. I know it’s still early days, but I really like you and … would you be prepared to do the long-distance thing?’

Belle opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

‘Sorry, I’ve sprung it on you. You probably need some time to think about it. I don’t need any answer now. I just wanted to be totally upfront about. It’s not until after Christmas.’

She turned her palm up and took his hand.

‘Stop apologising. It’s fine, but … it’s a surprise, that’s all.’

‘I know. Worst possible timing, really.’

She nodded, while inside that Annoying Voice, which had been quiet of late, suggested it might also be perfect timing.

Belle didn’t have time to think any more about Josh’s news until she was on the tube at the end of the day, on her way to meet Carole, her step— No, she couldn’t do it. She could not call Carole her stepmother. There were only six years between them – it just felt weird.

She hung on to the overhead bar as the train lurched through the tunnels, going over Josh’s announcement in her head, working through the possible permutations of her response and wincing to herself with far too much animation. Anyone who noticed her would have thought she was a little bit mad. She had yet to reach a conclusion when the train pulled into Leicester Square, and she and most of the carriage disgorged themselves on the platform in readiness for an evening of revelry.

The bar that Carole had invited her to was a stone’s throw from Covent Garden, and as she hurried along Long Acre, Belle glanced up the side road to Slingsby Court, to the Burmese restaurant, and closed her eyes in bittersweet amusement. Up there against the wall, she and Finn had kissed,

culminating in a conflagration neither could ignore. Had they really left the restaurant before their meal even arrived? Belle winced again, still hardly believing she'd been that woman with Finn. How could she ever forget the urgency, the desperate need and the complete lack of inhibition? With him, she'd enjoyed life at maximum speed. With Josh, things were fun but a little more sedate. None of the all-or-nothing, what-the-hell vibe. Life then had been brilliant technicolour; now it was still in colour, but without the high definition.

Tonight, London was in full flow. The Christmas season had already kicked off and the lights in Covent Garden had been switched on a few days earlier. Belle battled the tide of people, all ready for a post-work drink, walking along the main street before turning off into Seven Dials to find the new bar on Mercer Street where they were meeting.

'Hello,' said Carole, from a stool at the bar when Belle arrived.

'Hi, this looks very nice.'

'Perks of the job.' Carole grinned. 'My counterpart is reviewing a new fine-dining experience in Soho, where you're not allowed to talk and you have to check-in your phone on arrival.'

'That sounds hideous,' said Belle. 'Not so much the phone bit, but not talking.'

'I know. Apparently, you can say a lot more with your face than words and it's all about learning the *language of love* properly.'

'Sounds like a load of bollocks to me,' said Belle cheerily.

'Me, too. Hence being here instead with on-tap margaritas all night. What are you having?'

'Be rude not to have a margarita.' Belle slid onto the stool next to her, admiring Carole's boxy, cropped androgynous shirt in deep cream, teamed with wide, navy culottes that finished just above the ankle to show off deep-rust socks and Doc Martens. She always dressed with such great style, kind of modern-minimalist and architectural.

‘How’s Dad?’

‘He’s good. Busy tonight with a work dinner. If they get finished, he might join us later … although if we’re still here, I’m betting we’ll be trolleyed. The cocktails are supposed to be amazing.’

‘You have such a cool job,’ said Belle as she took the first heavenly sip of her margarita, the sharp lime juice making her eyes water. ‘Ooh, that’s good.’

‘Yes, it is.’ Carole widened her eyes, her mouth forming an ooh shape, too.

Over the last couple of months, Belle had started spending more time with her dad and Carole. The first time Carole invited her out on her own, she had been a little suspicious, wondering if the other woman might have some agenda and wanted to get something off her chest. Belle quickly learned that Carole simply wanted to make friends, and in the intervening months, much to her Dad’s utter delight, they’d developed a strong friendship.

Belle’s relationship with both of them was still a bone of contention with her mother, but Belle refused to be dictated to, and her mum was resigned to the fact that her dad was in her life, although she never missed the chance to get a dig in.

‘Have you any idea what I can get Dad for Christmas?’ Belle asked Carole.

‘Me? You’re joking. He is so hard to buy for. He doesn’t want anything.’

‘Oh, Carole. I was relying on you.’

‘To be honest, he’s so happy you’re in our lives, it’s more than enough.’

‘It’s also more than enough cheese!’ retorted Belle.

Carole smirked. ‘You know what I mean.’

‘I do, but I would like an idea.’

‘Well, talking of cheese. He loves cheese. Oh shit, I’ve given you the best idea I could come up with.’ Carole’s face fell and Belle crowed.

‘Excellent, I shall come up with a cheese-themed gift.’ Belle giggled. ‘Maybe you could knit him another scarf.’

‘Don’t you mock, you might be getting one,’ said Carole, licking at the salt on the rim of her glass.

‘Surely you’ve improved,’ teased Belle.

‘Yes, I have,’ said Carole, lifting her chin and laughing. ‘Although, to be fair, I couldn’t have got much worse. Bless him, your dad refuses to throw that scarf away. I have tried to smuggle it out with the rubbish, but he always finds it in time.’

Belle smiled and sipped her drink. Carole and her dad had so much fun together.

‘And talking of Christmas, we were wondering if you’d come to us for Boxing Day this year. We’d love to have you. Obviously, you’re welcome for Christmas, but that wouldn’t be fair on your mum.’

‘Yes, please,’ said Belle. ‘Will there be pigs-in-blankets?’

Carole, who was lifting her glass to her lips, halted and scowled at Belle. ‘Bugger, I’ve just lost a tenner. He said that would be the first thing you’d say.’

She and Belle began to giggle.

Another margarita later, Carole asked, ‘How are things going with P.J.?

‘Not you, too.’

‘I thought it was such a good name,’ said Carole.

‘They were going okay … until today.’

‘Oh no, he didn’t finish things?’

Belle sighed and hunched over the bar, putting her chin in her hands. ‘No.’ She lapsed into brooding silence for a few seconds and Carole respectfully waited. That was the great thing about Carole, she never

pushed – unlike Belle's mum, who wouldn't have let it rest until she had the full story.

'He's got a job in Australia for a couple of months,' she said.

'Oh.' Carole winced. 'A couple of months isn't so bad. With FaceTime, or WhatsApp. Or does he not want to do that?' She paused and then said with a dramatic gasp, 'Don't tell me he wants you to go with him?'

Belle laughed at her. 'No, no, nothing like that. He completely gets it that my job is important to me. He wants to keep on seeing me, but he says he'd understand if I wasn't prepared to wait.'

'And are you?' Carole gave her a searching look.

Belle sighed because that was the nub of the matter. 'The truth is … I don't actually care. Am I an awful person?'

She slumped a little more in her seat and Carole leaned over and gave her a hug. 'Is it still Finn?'

Belle closed her eyes, the words striking deep like a knife stabbing her. Carole was the only person who'd brought up his name in six months, and just hearing it out loud hurt.

'How did you know?' she asked in a whisper, as if that made their conversation less real.

'I recognise the signs.'

Belle rubbed her hand over her mouth, concerned she was going to do something stupid like burst into tears.

'Thing is, I'm completely ambivalent. Josh could go for two months, six months, a year, and I honestly don't think I'd miss him that much.'

'And Finn?'

Belle bit her lip, the familiar churning in her stomach starting up. 'I still miss him, so much it's like a hole inside me when I think about him. Josh is lovely, but he's not Finn. I thought that, maybe in time, I'd … but when he said he was going to Australia, it was a Eureka moment. I … didn't mind him going to Australia, or for how long. Whereas if Finn said he'd be back

in twelve months, it would be worth it. If I knew I was going to see him one day… Am I being stupid?'

'No, not at all.' Carole pulled her stool closer and put a hand over Belle's. 'If you feel that way, you have to tell Finn.'

'But he's … not been in touch. Part of me thinks it's because he's not interested, but there's another part of me that wants to know if he's sticking to not seeing me and not being in contact because he thinks it's better for me. Apparently, his parents' marriage is pretty dysfunctional because they've always had a long-distance relationship. I think that's why Finn was adamant he wouldn't do long-distance.'

'Ha!' said Carole, jumping in. 'Men. That is so typical. Your father was exactly the same. Assuming they know what's best for us. Don't stand for it, Belle. You fight for what you want. Don't let any bloody man tell you what's good for you.'

She was right. How dare Finn assume he knew what was best for her? He should at least have given them a chance to try.

'Your father told me I was too young for him, that I didn't know my own mind and I would regret it. He told me he'd die before me, get sick in old age, and he didn't want me to have to look after him. Honestly, he told me all that and then he finished with me, without even giving me a chance to prove he was totally wrong.'

'I didn't know that.'

'No, because he's too ashamed of himself to mention it.' Carole gave a wicked grin.

'What did you do?'

'He wanted to "stay friends", but I insisted that we go cold-turkey for three months, no contact, no messages, but that he had to agree to meet up with me at an agreed venue and time on the ninth of June.'

'Risky,' said Belle, filled with admiration.

‘More for him than me. Come on, where else is he going to meet anyone as cute as me – at his age?’ Carole’s cocky expression made Belle burst out laughing.

‘You have a point there.’

‘I know,’ she said, a touch smugly. ‘I turned up in the slinkiest dress you can imagine, and I had him at hello.’ Her face sobered. ‘I’m making light of it – those three months were hideous – but I had to keep the faith. I knew he loved me, and I loved him. Sometimes you just have to go with your gut.’

Belle considered her words. ‘Easier said than done when Finn’s not even in the country and doesn’t have a permanent address.’ Belle’s dry tone belied the hollow ache inside her.

‘I’m sorry, sweetie. That is shit.’

Belle nodded. ‘But the last time I saw him – long story, we bumped into each other for all of two minutes at JFK – he gave me the we-can’t-do-long-distance spiel again, but I’m pretty sure he was still in love with me.’

‘Now that does sound an interesting story.’ Carole smiled. ‘I have to say you seemed so good together.’

‘We were,’ said Belle, suddenly resolute. Why the hell had she let him decide what was best for her? Not all long-distance relationships failed.

‘So,’ prompted Carole, ‘what are you going to do about Josh?’

Who? Belle felt guilty. She’d completely forgotten the conversation had originally been about him.

‘I’m going to have to let him go. I can’t keep hoping I might fall in love with him. It’s not fair on him for one thing… It’s not right.’

‘There’s someone out there for you, Belle. I’m sure.’

Belle dredged up a gloomy smile. There *was* someone out there for her, she’d already found him. Unfortunately, she didn’t know what part of the world he was currently exploring.

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Chapter Forty-Two

BELLE

Belle rolled into the office at quarter-to-eight the following morning and was greeted by Daisy bearing two Pret A Manger coffees and cinnamon Danishes.

‘Bribery always works,’ said Belle, gratefully accepting the coffee and pastry. After last night with Carole, she was buoyed up and full of resolution, and this morning the guilt was receding. She’d called Josh when she got home, because it was the right thing to do. It would be wrong to keep him on as a second string and wrong to let him go off to Australia believing she’d wait for him.

‘It was the least I could do. You were so kind to me yesterday when you could have bawled me out for being an idiot.’

‘And how would that have helped anyone? How is the head today?’

‘It’s stopped aching, thank you.’

‘Good. Right, let’s get this lot sorted into piles. Elspeth keeps everything, but she also expects you to be able to lay your hands on it instantly.’

‘I know. What happened to the concept of a paperless office?’ grumbled Daisy.

‘Never going to happen,’ declared Belle. ‘Humans are programmed to hoard things, I’m sure of it. And Elspeth is the worst. First, sort the pile into

personal and business.’

‘Yes, what constitutes personal? Elspeth’s private medical stuff through the company? Her architectural plans? Because she always speaks to the builders here. Or should I photocopy them so she has a set at home?’

‘That’s a neat idea, but she likes to keep everything in the office. Duplication is sound. We’ll go through it, bit by bit. If you’re lucky, we might even find a few things we can throw away.’

‘I doubt it,’ replied Daisy.

They worked together for the next half-hour, sorting the pile into identifiable categories which Belle had set up several years ago when she’d realised Elspeth had an unorthodox way of combining her personal and work filing.

‘What about this?’ asked Daisy, holding up the brochure to a swanky block of apartments. ‘She told me to keep it.’

Belle frowned. ‘Is she thinking about moving?’

‘No, it’s for her … cousin … no, nephew. He’s thinking about buying a place and she picked that up for him.’

‘Her nephew?’ asked Belle, her voice sharper than she intended.

‘Yes, the explorer guy.’ Then Daisy caught her lip between her teeth. ‘Sorry. I’m not supposed to mention anything about him.’ Daisy looked around the office, checking that no one was within earshot, which was ridiculous as they were the only people there.

Meanwhile, Belle’s brain had gone off on a fantastical journey. Finn was going to buy a place in London? Why? Was he going to put some roots down? What had made him change his mind? Why now? And why hadn’t he contacted her? The questions mounted fast and furious, and she realised her mouth was moving in tandem with them and Daisy was staring at her. Belle narrowed her gaze. ‘What do you mean? Mention what about him?’

‘Don’t tell her.’ Daisy looked fearfully around again. ‘I shouldn’t have said anything. Don’t say I told you, but she had me arrange a car to pick

him up from the airport and book him into a hotel. She didn't want me to tell anyone.' She lifted her shoulders in an indifferent shrug.

Belle went cold, numbed all the way through. Finn was here in London and – stupid tears pricked her eyes – he hadn't let her know. He really didn't want anything more to do with her. Or maybe he did. Maybe he needed to keep his distance to survive.

God, she felt so confused. She was either a fool for still loving him when he clearly hadn't given her a second thought for months, or he was going through the same anguish she was and holding firm and doing that stupid trying-to-protect-her act.

'Maybe it's because he's a bit famous, although I'd never heard of him.' Daisy carried on talking as Belle stared at the brochure for the apartments. A sterile block of six sharp-edged glass-and-concrete boxes. As functional and cold as Finn's soul. How could he not have told her he was coming back?

How things changed. So much for her conversation yesterday with Carole, when she'd decided she would find a way to fight for him. Find out where he was and reach out, and the heartless bastard was here all the time.

'Belle? Belle, are you all right?'

Daisy was clicking her fingers in front of her face.

'Yes, sorry, just thinking.' Her voice came from far away. No, she wasn't all right. Her limbs were tight and stiff, and her throat felt choked by an invisible hand. She clenched her hands, deliberately digging the nails into her palms, using the physical pain to distract her from the heartache that spread in her chest like poison, dripping sadness and despair into every last vein of her body.

Was this what having a broken heart felt like? The horrible conviction that you might never be happy again. The awful belief that your body might give up at any second and you'd crumple to the floor, unable to get up. The hopeless view that nothing would ever be the same again but still you had

to find a way to go on. What if Finn had moved on without her? And she'd let him get away.

'We need to hurry, Elspeth will be home today. She's coming straight from the airport. A shame she didn't time it better or I could have arranged the same car for her and Mr McAllister.'

'Mmm,' said Belle, picking up another sheet of paper, trying to block her thoughts out. Focus on the task in hand. Elspeth's last dental bill. 'File that in personal: medical.'

'Right … not medical.'

'No, because this is not a company medical insurance.'

'She seriously has the most confusing filing system in the world,' complained Daisy.

'Yes, but it works for her,' replied Belle in a clipped voice, trying to sound normal.

'That's not how filing is supposed to work. It's supposed to make sense to everyone, so anyone can find anything.'

'You and I both know that, but change it at your own peril.' A thought suddenly occurred to Belle, because things were twisting through her brain like snakes in a maze. 'What did you mean about the car at the airport?'

'What?' asked Daisy, still obviously pondering filing systems.

'You said you could have arranged the same car.'

'Yes, it's really bad timing. The nephew is coming in this afternoon, but Elspeth's flight gets in at ten this morning, so I had to book two cars.'

'Today?' asked Belle, blood rushing into her ears as if she couldn't believe what she'd heard.

'Yes. Today, and that's another thing. Why book a hotel? If he's her nephew, why isn't he staying at her place here? I don't understand.'

'Which hotel?' asked Belle, ignoring Daisy's musings.

Daisy frowned. 'The Ritz. Why do you want to know?'

Belle sat back on her heels, her earlier feelings eclipsed by a sudden mixture of excitement, hope and downright terror. ‘The Ritz. Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I booked it myself.’

‘What time does the flight land?’

Daisy really did look bewildered now. ‘Two-ish. I can’t remember off the top of my head. I can check if you want me to.’ She stepped sideways and opened up her laptop to bring up her calendar. ‘His flight gets in two-twenty-five this afternoon.’

‘Today?’ Belle was barely able to believe it. Finn was arriving today.

‘Yes,’ said Daisy, a little irritably as if Belle was being unfeasibly stupid.

‘Do you have the flight number? Carrier? Where he’s coming from? What terminal he lands at?’

‘Belle, are you…’ At the sight of Belle’s ferocious glare, Daisy thought better of her question and bent her head over her computer. ‘He’s flying BA from Madrid to Terminal 5 arriving at two-twenty-five p.m.’ She rattled off the flight number. ‘And Elspeth’s plane lands in an hour and a half. So, I need to get this done,’ she added.

Belle, suddenly all fingers and thumbs, stood up. ‘I need to…’ She stumbled into her office and shut the door, crossing to the window to look out at the city spread out below.

She gripped her hands tightly, feeling totally unprepared. Finn was arriving today, and he was staying at The Ritz and not Elspeth’s apartment. That had to mean something. Didn’t it?

It was all very well feeling resolute and sure of what needed to be said and done when you were three margaritas in … but stone-cold sober on a Friday morning, her confidence and resolve had faded. Now she wasn’t quite so sure. But faint heart never won anything, and she was done waiting for Finn to come to his senses.

Belle studied her pale, sombre reflection in the tube window on the Elizabeth line as it glided along the rails, marvelling that her expression didn't give away the tumult going on inside her head. At every stop, she considered getting out and going back the other way, but that was cowardly. Now was the time for action. She'd learned a lot from Carole. If something was worth having, you had to fight for it. Carole certainly had, and Belle admired her for going out and getting what she wanted. If she were honest, it had made her a tiny bit ashamed of herself.

At least this way, she'd know once and for all instead of always hanging on to that tiny thread of hope, the one she'd been too scared to tug before because everything might unravel. But what had she got to lose?

The train slowed as it slid with neat, precise efficiency into the Terminal 5 station. It felt like a bookend in life, the click into place as the train arrived. The start or finish of something momentous. Metaphorical butterflies surrounded her in a cloud as she stepped off the train. It was as if every nerve-ending in her body was over sensitised and she could feel the slightest brush against her skin ten-fold. Every sense was heightened, amplified as she walked along the corridor, trying not to run. She glanced at her watch, exactly like she'd done a hundred times on the train. The flight was still over an hour away. A whole sixty minutes. No, more like seventy. That was a lot of seconds. She tried to do the maths in her head. Three hundred and sixty seconds in an hour. No, three thousand and sixty, no, six hundred. And why was she doing this? Trying to distract her brain from all the negative thoughts? No, she wasn't going to think like that.

But the what-ifs had snuck in. What if he wasn't interested? What if he'd moved on? What if he was with someone else now? What if he'd fallen out of love with her? What if he didn't give her a chance? Everything

was beating the inside of her skull like a desperate bluebottle bashing against a window.

When she reached the brightly lit concourse, passing the huge Christmas tree decked out in coloured lights, she had plenty of time. Finn's plane was still in the air, still over three-thousand seconds away. Despite this, she checked out the arrivals area. If she stood in the middle, behind the central barrier, that would allow her to see both doors at either end. She caught her lip in her teeth, but what if he came out of one end and didn't see her?

She couldn't miss him; that would be catastrophic.

There were already plenty of people milling about; everyone was coming home for the holidays. There were drivers holding up names and small family groups clustered around buggies, eager and excited to spot the first glimpse of an aunt, an uncle, grandma or grandpa, sister, brother. Couples waiting for parents. Parents waiting for offspring. And then the people like her: solo, slightly self-conscious, heads down, almost bursting inside, waiting for someone special to arrive. There was something about seeing people waiting for their loved ones that always made Belle a bit teary. She never managed to watch the end of *Love Actually* without crying.

Every time the double doors at either end of the area opened, everyone craned their necks checking the airport identifying tags, to see if passengers from the plane they were waiting for had reached this point yet. SFO, San Francisco, CAI, Cairo, CDG, Charles de Gaulle.

No JFK.

Because the flight hasn't bloody landed yet, yelled a voice in her head, reminding her that she was in danger of turning herself into a basket case, filling her head with busy, irrelevant thoughts.

Annoyed with herself, she wheeled around in search of coffee and took herself off to the nearest Costa. She sat in one of the booths, located as close to the arrivals board as possible, noting the other people around her.

Maria Carey sang from the speaker above her head and Belle, crossing her fingers under the table, mentally replaced the words to the Christmas classic to ‘All I want for Christmas is Finn’. Humming under her breath, she studied the garlands of tinsel and silver baubles looped around the café. At the table next to her, two recent arrivals were cooing over their plates of mince pies with whipped brandy cream and, for a moment, she almost wished she’d ordered one. She’d let so much of Christmas go by this year that by mid-December she hadn’t even had her first mince pie or tasted a cinnamon spiced latte.

The man across from her jigged his foot up and down constantly with nervous tension and she realised she was no better as she’d spent the last few minutes drawing circles in some spilled sugar. The cranberry and turkey sandwich she’d bought remained unopened in front of her and she toyed with the packaging for ages before finally opening it, wishing she’d gone for the mince pie instead. When she took a bite of the expensive sourdough bread, it turned to dust in her mouth and she put it down, her stomach gurgling like a washing machine.

With a sigh of irritation, she opened up the Kindle app on her phone and, taking a sip of her gingerbread-flavoured coffee, began to read, keeping an eye on the time. Still five minutes until the plane landed. She read a couple of pages and glanced up again. Four minutes until the plane arrived. She made a pact with herself she wouldn’t look up again from her book until she’d read three more pages. Still two minutes. The next time she checked, there was one minute to go and then she felt duty-bound to keep watching until the plane had actually landed. Once ‘Landed’ finally appeared on the screen, she eased back into her chair, but then jumped up. He could come through at any moment. She couldn’t miss him. The board now read ‘Arrived’.

Abandoning her sandwich and half-drunk coffee, she hastily grabbed her bag and coat and hurried back to the arrivals area, even though Finn was

probably still on the plane, his luggage still in the hold. She'd jumped the gun. The arrivals area was much busier now with several rows of people in front of her. Every now and then, a group would peel off to greet a new arrival and a space would open. By the time Belle bagged her spot at the front, the details for Finn's flight read 'Baggage in Baggage Hall'. She straightened up and smoothed down her hair, thankful she'd washed it this morning.

Now, every time the doors opened at either side, she frantically scanned the clusters of people coming through. Peaks of excitement and disappointment rolling through her every time.

A family with enough luggage to sink the *Titanic* appeared, presents peeking out of the bags on top of their tower of suitcases, and they were trying to hang on to a toddler dressed in an elf costume while pushing a baby in a buggy. Belle was so busy watching them trying to steer their little ship, she almost missed Finn. But there he was, towering over them.

Her heart jumped up into her throat, and for a moment she couldn't move as she stared at him, her pulse leaping about like a dozen Mexican jumping beans. Every limb froze in excited terror. What if he…

At that moment, he looked over and saw her. His eyes widened and then she was moving, pushing her way through the people around her. Drawn to him as sure as magnetic north to south.

He abandoned his trolley in the middle of the walkway and strode towards her. She wasn't sure whether she launched herself at him or he swept her up; but either way, it was the perfect meeting point, and being in his arms, with him breathing her name as if he couldn't believe it was her, was just right. Then he was kissing her and she was kissing him, both of them hanging on to each other for dear life. Laughing and crying.

'Belle, Belle. God, I've missed you.'

'I missed you, too.'

He kissed her again and groaned. ‘I don’t want to let you go again.’ He clutched her shoulders and set her back a bit. ‘Are you real?’

‘I’m real,’ she reassured him, her heart thumping so hard she was sure it must be knocking against her ribs. Her gaze roved over his face, checking everything was there and nothing had changed; the mole just below his cheekbone, the almost gingery bristles on his chin. New additions were the tiny pale lines fanning out from his eyes, highlighting the dark tan of his skin, and a graze above his right eyebrow.

She lifted her hand to stroke it, already upset that she’d not had the right before to know that it had happened.

‘You’ve lost weight, Belle.’ He frowned and lifted a hand to cup her face, his fingers pressing against the pronounced cheekbones, his eyes narrowing. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said and hauled her against him to kiss her again.

‘So you bloody should be,’ she said vehemently.

‘I know. I’m an idiot.’

‘And you’re only just realising that now?’ she said, putting her hands on her hips, giving him a hard stare.

‘I realised a long time ago.’

‘That makes it worse,’ she growled, trying to get angry. ‘Much worse.’

He smiled. ‘Are you mad at me, Belle?’

‘Too right I am. How could you let me go?’

People were giving them a wide berth, even though they were right in the middle of the lane of people emerging from the baggage hall.

‘I thought I was doing the right thing.’

She tilted an eyebrow. ‘For whom?’

He sighed. ‘For me. I was being a coward.’

‘Ting-ting,’ she said, ringing an imaginary bell. ‘Right, first answer. Although I am prepared to concede that I let you get away with it.’

‘Did you?’ He looped his arms around her waist, pulling her closer, and her whole body sighed, as if all her cells were relieved of every bit of the

anxious tension she'd worked up over the last few hours and were now overcome with happiness. If he hadn't been holding her up, she might have slipped through his arms into a boneless heap.

'Yes, Finn. I was scared, too. Scared that I'd fall in love and end up like my mum with nothing else in her life. So I tried to fight it.'

'And how did that work out?' asked Finn with a teasing smile.

'There's no need to be smug,' she said a little crossly.

'Sorry. Will it help if I tell you I love you and there wasn't a day I didn't miss you?'

Annoyingly, a tear welled up at the declaration, and Belle's throat was too choked to say a word.

Obviously realising it, he leaned in and kissed her again, his lips warm and reassuring, his mouth pressing against hers with gentle insistence, as if to remind her that he was here now and he wasn't going anywhere.

'I missed you so much, Belle.'

'I missed you so much, too,' sniffed Belle.

'But it's unfair—'

She laid a finger over his lips. 'Shut up, Finn. I decide what's fair for me. Not you. I'd rather have you for a couple of weeks a year, than not at all. Yes, I missed you, a lot, but I survived. And you missed me, and you survived. It will be so much better if I know you're coming back and we can be together.'

'I'll be coming back. I'm looking to buy a permanent place. A home to come back to – although that will always be you. I realised I couldn't stand it anymore. Since New York, I almost called a dozen times a day. Belle, I can't let you go… I've no idea how we can make it work but there is … never will be anyone else.'

At which point, Belle promptly burst into proper ugly, real-crying tears.

'Don't cry, please. We can make it work. We will.'

‘N-no,’ she half-sobbed. ‘It’s not because I don’t think we can. I’m crying because I’m so happy that I don’t have to persuade you. I only found out you were coming back today, but I’d already decided I was done with you deciding for me.’

‘Yeah, it was pretty high-handed of me. Will you forgive me? I should have told you before that I was coming back for you.’

Belle’s eyes misted again, and this time she gave him a weepy smile and let the tears flow.

‘We need to get out of here,’ he said, cupping her face and swiping at her tears with his thumbs.

‘I forgot. There’s a driver here somewhere to pick you up,’ said Belle, reluctant to turn away from him and get involved in the practicalities of life. She wanted to stand here and breathe him in until every molecule of her understood that he really was hers.

He leaned forward touching his forehead to hers.

‘We probably walked straight past him.’

Pulling back, he lifted her chin and gave her a gentle smile. ‘Will you come back to my hotel?’

The smile she gave him was a little tremulous, the happiness inside her threatening to burst right out. ’I hear you’re staying at The Ritz.’

‘Is there anywhere else?’ he asked.

‘Not at Christmas,’ she said and linked her arm through his. ‘Enough of the talking. Take me to The Ritz.’

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Chapter Forty-Three

BELLE

Belle giggled as Finn insisted on picking her up and carrying her over the threshold of the room. His elbow dislodged the large bowl of deep-red and white poinsettia, almost sending it tumbling to the ground, which made Belle giggle some more.

‘I can’t believe we’ve got the same suite as last time.’

‘I can,’ said Finn. ‘I was very specific.’

She gazed around at the room, this year decorated in a completely new theme; garlands of crystal, frost-covered branches with dusky red berries graced the stately mantlepiece, twinkling in the low lamplight, and she smiled at the sight of the two giant nutcrackers painted in red, gold and black standing guard on either side of the fireplace. On the sideboard sat an intricate gingerbread Ritz Hotel, the architectural details picked out in white icing, which must have taken someone for ever to create. Next to it was a large bowl of unshelled walnuts, hazelnuts and almonds with a smaller nutcracker, and beside that a tower of satsumas decorated with tiny cranberries, looking like an edible Christmas tree. Best of all was the bucket containing a bottle of champagne tied up with a white bow.

With a happy sigh, she slid down Finn’s body as he released her and pressed her up against the back of the door, his mouth roving over hers as if he were revisiting and reacquainting himself with every bit of her lips.

‘It’s a good job it’s Friday, because I don’t think I can bear to let you out of my sight. We’ve got a lot of catching up to do. I might have to send Jonathan out to buy you some essentials.’

‘He was so pleased to see you downstairs.’

‘I don’t want to talk about Jonathan.’

And they didn’t do any talking while they shed their clothes. His top was tossed aside onto the floor, her jeans pooled at her feet, as they hopped, stumbled and tripped on their way to the bedroom, exploring each new exposed part of the other’s body with fervent desperation.

How had she forgotten Finn’s lovely broad chest? wondered Belle as she kissed his tanned skin, tasting the saltiness. Or the way his stubble grazed her skin, sending a delicious buzz across her nerve-endings?

‘You’ve lost weight,’ said Finn, his eyes shadowed, his fingers tracking her ribcage. ‘Too much.’

She shrugged, not wanting him to know that misery and missing him had taken its toll, but he saw too much.

‘Oh, Belle.’ He leaned down and kissed each one of her bony ribs. ‘I’m sorry. Know that, from now on, I will always come back to you.’

As she lay looking down at his dark head, feeling the touch of his lips pressing onto each bone, something inside her relaxed. Finn was here. He was back. He was real. This was real.

When he pressed her against the mattress, his big body covering hers for several blissful seconds, it was as if he’d never been away, all the longing of the last year eclipsed by a flood of happiness, pleasure and joy that washed over every fibre of her as they kissed, their mouths seeking and searching with urgency. When he slid inside her, she clutched his shoulders, a sense of completeness settling like a welcome blanket as their bodies joined. They were home. The fast, desperate rhythm of their kisses slowed, and when Finn smiled down at her, her heart turned inside out. Together

they savoured each push and pull, the slow slide dragging out the pleasure, relishing the friction of their skin as they eked out the slow build to climax.

Belle circled her arms around his neck. ‘I can’t believe you’re really here.’

‘I’m here, Belle, and I’m not going anywhere until next April at least.’

‘April? What will you do until then?’ Her expression must have shown her concern because he gave her a tender smile.

‘I’ll be busy, don’t worry. Feeding you up for one thing.’ His hands spanned her ribs again and he frowned before pressing his forehead to hers and kissing her nose. ‘And then there’s another book to write. Lectures to deliver. The next expedition to plan and a possible natural history documentary.’ He pulled back and gave her a mischievous grin. ‘Don’t you worry about me getting under your feet and cramping your style.’

‘As if,’ said Belle, scouring his face, examining every feature, checking again that nothing had changed.

His expression sobered. ‘I plan to put down some roots, let us establish our rhythm and spend time together doing normal stuff.’

‘Normal stuff?’

‘Yeah, we can’t spend all our time in bed.’

She giggled, and realised she hadn’t giggled properly for a long time.

‘Although, I owe you some making-up time. So I hope you don’t have any weekend plans.’

‘None that can’t be changed. You still haven’t defined normal stuff.’

‘You realise I don’t even know if you can cook – aside from pigs-in-blankets.’

‘I can cook.’

‘Can you keep a house plant alive?’

‘Mmm, jury’s out on that one.’

‘Put up a shelf?’

‘Yes,’ said Belle. ‘Can you?’

‘Of course,’ he said.

‘I know you’re pretty tidy,’ said Belle. ‘And you’re not a picky eater.’

‘As long as I don’t see another refried bean for a while.’

‘The big question is: if I was organising a party for one of our kids, and I was taking care of the party bags, the cake, the candles, the party games … could I rely on you to book the clown?’

Finn grinned. ‘Clown? I’d book the whole damn circus for you if you wanted me to, and I’d have a back-up plan if they failed to show.’

Of course he would. She tilted her head back and smiled as he kissed her neck. This would never get old, she told herself.

‘Welcome home,’ she said as he traced down her nose with the tip of his finger.

‘I kept telling myself you would have moved on and I should let you. In New York, I was such an idiot,’ he said.

‘You were.’

‘Do you know what the irony is? Now my parents have finally realised they can’t stand living together, they’ve both met other people. After all this time, they’ve decided to get divorced and go their separate ways. What a ridiculous waste of time. They both could have been happy with other people all these years. My dad told me not to mess things up with you.’

‘He did?’

‘I met him for lunch in Paris, which is when he told me about the divorce. And … then the subject got on to my love life. I didn’t mention you, as such. But I think he guessed there was someone … really special in my life, and he pretty much told me on no account to fuck it up. He was absolutely right, of course.’

‘Damn right,’ said Belle, with a quick smile.

‘And how are things with your family?’

‘Better-ish with my mum, although I have to accept she is never going to change. It took her a while to forgive me, and she still can’t resist having

a pop at Dad at every opportunity, but we had it out back in April.' Belle shuddered at the memory. She was making light of it now, but it had been horrible. Finn didn't need to know about the tears, the dramatics or the emotional blackmail, though. 'I told her she had a choice, she could accept me seeing Dad or not. It was up to her, but it wasn't up to me to make her happy.'

'And how did that go down?' asked Finn, sympathy softening his eyes and she loved him all the more for it.

A tear slipped out and Finn scooped her up in a hug. 'I wish I could have been here for you.'

'It wouldn't have made any difference.' She sniffed and kissed his cheek. 'But thank you.'

'So you've seen your dad more often, then?'

'Yes. And I've got you to thank for that. And I've got a new friend in Carole. She and I get on really well. They're both such good company. In fact, they've invited me to go to Portugal next year with them to stay in a villa. They're going to be so happy to see you. I need to tell them you're back. In fact, I'm supposed to be seeing them on Sunday for lunch.' She suddenly grinned. 'Permission to leave the bedroom for a few hours, sir? Maybe I'll ask them if I can bring a friend.'

'And what about Christmas? Where were you planning to spend it?' asked Finn, tracing her collarbone.

Belle gave him a slightly sheepish smile. 'Ah, my mum can't countenance me having Christmas lunch with Dad, but strangely accepts it's not fair if I have it with her – a huge step forward, I might add…' She petered out.

'So where are you spending it?'

'Believe it or not, I'd planned to be on my own, but I told Mum I was going to Maddie's, and I told Maddie and Phoebe I was going home.'

'Why?'

‘Because…’ she looked up at him, ‘it sounds so lame…’

‘I won’t tell anyone.’

‘I wanted to be on my own because … because I couldn’t imagine having Christmas without you.’

‘Oh, Belle.’ Finn kissed her on the mouth. ‘That’s the saddest and sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.’

‘Of course, now I know exactly where I’ll be spending Christmas.’

‘Oh really?’ he asked with a quirk of his lips. ‘And where’s that?’

She stroked his jawline with one hand, the other placed on his chest, above his heart.

‘I’ll be spending it right here with you,’ she said. ‘Christmas at The Ritz.’

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Chapter One

EVIE

‘May I see your boarding pass and passport?’ asked the woman at the desk at the entrance to the business-class lounge – yes, BUSINESS class.

‘Absolutely,’ I said, a tad overenthusiastically. I tried to be cool about it but even at the age of twenty-nine and a half … I couldn’t. She gave me a polite smile, her bright red lipstick so immaculate, I did wonder if it might have been high-gloss red paint.

‘And would you mind removing the sunglasses and hat?’ she asked, peering down at my passport photo. So much for my attempt at a disguise. I’d hurriedly bought the hat and glasses after a couple of girls in the security queue had openly laughed at me and I turned as red as an overripe strawberry.

‘Right this way, Miss Green.’ I sighed with gratitude. Now this was travelling in style, the business-class lounge was huge with big leather armchairs, a free buffet, an open bar and stacks of newspapers and magazines – it was also very busy. After wandering around like a lost sheep for five minutes, I spotted a big wing-backed chair over in one corner. It was only when I staked my claim on said chair that I realised the opposite seat was taken, the high, wide design of the chair, hiding its occupant from view.

With his head bowed, he was intent on his phone. Like me, he wore dark sunglasses and a baseball cap. I'd hoped to sneak onto my chair without disturbing him, but I banged into the coffee table and sent an empty coffee cup rattling. He glanced up, clearly startled, his mouth slashing into an unfriendly flat line.

'Sorry,' I whispered and for some reason saluted the brim of my cap. I think it was to remind him we were incognito allies. For a minute, he stared at me … sometimes you can just tell even behind the dark glasses. Trying to play it cool, I gave him a nonchalant nod, as if I always travelled this way and I was part of the same gang.

He nodded back and ducked his head again, returning to his phone, his mouth crumpling in quick irritation as he read something.

The great thing about wearing sunglasses is that you can be subtle about checking someone out – okay, I admit it, ogling. He was very ogle-worthy. The Henley T-shirt he wore stretched across seriously broad shoulders. A weak spot of mine. What I could see of his hair, a dark chestnut colour, curled around the rim of his navy-blue cap, which had a stylised N and Y embroidered on the front. His face had a strong masculine jaw and aquiline nose. Male model? Actor? And the icing on the cake, he had the sexy, bad-boy stubble going on, which was an absolute killer.

Suddenly I realised that it was really obvious I was staring at him. I glanced away and studied my own phone but a few minutes later, I couldn't help myself.

There was something about the wary stillness of his posture that suggested he was ready for fight or flight at any moment. It drew my surreptitious gaze again and I studied him anew, watching as his mobile mouth mirrored emotions hidden behind his sunglasses. Frustration, anger, hurt … all quickly shaped his lips as he scrolled away, intently focused on his phone screen, holding himself stiffly in the centre of the seat so that it shielded him from view.

I knew exactly how horrible social media could be. I was on the verge of asking him if he was okay when I realised I was projecting. Projecting my recent online experiences. The vile comments, the trolls, the criticism, the complete lack of empathy or sympathy. I could relate to the slight, perplexed frown tugging at his mouth as he read.

‘Excuse me,’ I said, making a quick decision.

‘Mmm,’ he responded, not looking particularly friendly or encouraging. Maybe he didn’t speak English.

‘Er, would you mind,’ I enunciated slowly and loudly, and in case he was deaf as well as foreign, I gestured at my belongings, ‘keeping an eye on my bag.’ For good measure, I actually pointed at my bag and did a walking-away motion with my fingers. There was a long pause, and I was about to rephrase the question when he responded with:

‘Do I look like I offer babysitting services?’

I started at the blunt question, noting his American accent, but then I spotted the wry twist to his mouth. I gave him a careful up-and-down.

‘Hmm,’ I said with a considering nod. ‘I think you probably do, but only low-level assignments.’

‘Low-level?’ Curiosity pitched in his voice as his mouth notched up another peg towards a reluctant smile.

‘Yes, hand luggage and possibly a well-trained Chihuahua.’

He burst out laughing. ‘A well-trained Chihuahua! Where did that come from?’

I took off my sunglasses and grinned at him. ‘Truthfully…’ I paused. ‘I have no idea.’

He removed his own sunglasses to reveal dancing blue eyes and I felt a surge of triumph that I’d somehow managed to lighten his mood.

‘If you don’t mind,’ I nodded towards my bag again. ‘I’d like to get myself a drink.’

‘Okay, I’ll watch your bag,’ he replied with a nod, suddenly serious before he smiled and added, ‘providing it doesn’t contain a small, well-trained dog.’

I shook my head and glanced around before whispering, ‘I packed it myself, I’m pretty sure it doesn’t.’

To my delight, he laughed for a second time.

‘Thank you, that’s really kind. I won’t be long.’

I took a step away and then stopped, remembering the manners ingrained by my mum. ‘Can I get you anything?’

His face sobered for a moment, as if he’d remembered something – it made me wonder if anyone had offered to do anything for him for a while.

‘A drink or something?’ I prompted.

I watched him swallow and push whatever haunted him away.

‘I could use a beer and some chips, thank you.’

‘Chips?’ I asked.

‘Crisps. You know.’

‘Any particular flavour?’ I asked.

‘Cheese and onion,’ he said with a quick grin. ‘Is there any other flavour?’

‘I’m rather partial to sweet chilli, but you only get those if they’re posh crisps.’

‘There are posh crisps?’ His mouth quirked again. ‘Who knew?’

‘You know, the expensive ones,’ I said.

‘I’m not that much of a connoisseur.’ He smiled, reassuring me that I wasn’t making a complete idiot of myself.

‘Back soon,’ I said.

‘I’ll pay close attention to your bag,’ he said, with another smile, producing a very cute dimple in the middle of his cheek, as if someone had poked a finger in there.

It was also as if someone had poked something at my heart and I got a funny fizzing sensation in my chest.

As I turned to go, I managed to knock into the coffee table again – adding a second bruise to my shin – and he jumped up and held out protective hands as if he were ready to catch me. The gesture pierced into my heart like an arrow into wood. No one had looked out for me in a long time.

‘Thanks,’ I said, managing to stay upright and catching the empty cup before it fell.

‘Good save,’ he said in smooth tones.

I walked away a little light-headed. Maybe it was just the human connection but in that moment, it made me feel just a little bit less lost.

I did a quick circuit of the lounge; well, as quick as you can when everything is free. On the surface, in a purely material way, things were looking up. Life had been a bit shit in recent weeks.

I helped myself to a glass of champagne – the proper stuff, not prosecco – before perusing the selection of beer. I ummed and ahhed over what to pick up for my handsome neighbour. He’d been nice to me, when so many strangers of late had been unkind. I knew nothing about beer but as it was free, I grabbed four different bottles. I could always bring them back. When I explained my predicament to the handy bar man, he kindly lent me a bottle opener.

‘Here you go.’

Mr Handsome’s eyes widened as he looked up at the beer bottles I held with one hand, the necks precariously sandwiched between my fingers. ‘I didn’t know what to get you.’

I put them down on the table one after another while hanging onto my flute of fizz.

His eyes crinkled at the corners. ‘Thank you. I’d have been grateful for anything. That’s … er … very thoughtful.’

‘I thought so,’ I said cheerily, sitting down and toasting him before taking my first sip of champagne, impressed that I’d managed to get it to the table without spilling a drop. I almost jumped at the instant effect of the effervescent fizz on my tongue and the sharp acidity of the bubbles.

‘Oh, and I got you your chips,’ I said proudly, pulling a packet from the pouch pocket of my sweatshirt.

‘Thank you. You’ve spoiled me, except…’ He leaned forward and chose one of the beers, looking at the bottle top and the table edge.

‘Oh, sorry.’ I delved into my back pocket. ‘I borrowed this.’ I handed the bottle-opener over. ‘I need to take it back in a minute.’

‘You’ve thought of everything,’ he said with another one of those smiles that did strange things to my insides.

‘This is the life,’ I said with a happy sigh, taking another sip of the champagne. My mum would have loved this. My heart did one of those involuntary little pings when I thought of her. She’d been gone for five years but it was still there, that underlying sadness when I remembered all the things I’d never get to tell her. Like now. Going to New York. In December. Staying at *The* Plaza. It had been our dream. The thing we’d talked about while snuggled under a blanket together watching *Serendipity*, *Home Alone 2* and *Elf*, to name but a few of our favourites. The ‘one day’ that never came but which we talked about more and more as her life faded away, despite both of us knowing that one day was an elusive dream.

‘Mmm,’ said my new friend, taking a healthy slug of his beer straight from the bottle. ‘Thank you again.’

‘No problem, and thank you for looking after my bag.’ I grinned at him. ‘You did an excellent job despite being woefully underqualified.’

‘So, do I get a certificate or something? For work experience?’ He asked, putting his beer bottle down.

‘Oh, yes. Absolutely. Well done.’ I gave him a thumbs up. ‘I could … er … er, WhatsApp it to…’ My voice trailed off. Oh no, did that sound like I was asking for his number?

He gave me a gentle smile, relieving me of my embarrassment. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll manage without.’ He went back to his phone and I eased out a sigh of relief. I really hadn’t been trying to pick him up.

I glanced around the room, still scarcely able to believe that I was really there, eyeing people carefully as if any one of them might snatch this amazing opportunity away from me as quickly as it had been magically bestowed upon me.

When The Plaza’s marketing team contacted me, I’d ignored the email for a week before they emailed again. As a financial journalist for the online magazine *Money Weekly*, I know all about scams … or rather, I should have done.

To cut a very long story short, I’d fallen for a scam and lost a not inconsiderable sum of money.

So, obviously, when I was offered a second, albeit genuine this time, all-expenses-paid trip to stay at The Plaza Hotel, I was justifiably wary.

Thank goodness the lady in the PR department had been persistent.

And now here I was at Heathrow about to board a plane to New York to spend the next three weeks in the Big Apple staying at the five-star Plaza Hotel, right on Fifth Avenue and next to Central Park.

Sometimes good things happen to people. Even me.

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Chapter Two

NOAH

As I returned to my phone, my face almost hurt from the unaccustomed smiling, as if my skin was protesting at the activity. The girl, whoever she was – I guessed, like me, she wanted to remain anonymous – had succeeded where no one else had for over a week, ever since the awful sound of bone cracking when I threw myself into an aggressive tackle.

From behind my sunglasses, I watched her smiling away to herself and envied her carefree attitude as she gazed around the room sipping with obvious delight at her champagne. Suddenly, with a furtive look around, she unloaded a bag of Minstrels from her sweatshirt pocket along with a KitKat, a packet of Mini Cheddars and a small tin of Pringles. She'd stashed them away in her bag like a squirrel planning for winter.

It made me smile again as I realised that being in the business-class lounge was a novelty for her. I'd gotten a bit too used to it, along with all the trappings of being a professional Premier League football player. Despite being able to get whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, I was unaccountably touched that she'd brought me not one but four bottles of beer to make sure she got the right one for a complete stranger. Her confidence and slightly offbeat thinking were endearing. I thought about offering her my number for the 'certificate'; I would have done if it weren't for the fact that I was supposed to be keeping a low profile and leaving the

country for at least three weeks to ‘avert the gaze of the media’ as my agent, Lara, so diplomatically phrased it. Basically, I was running away – on orders from her and my team manager. They’d decided that out of sight, out of mind would make the FA less inclined to push for a stronger punishment.

I stared down at the headline of one of the sports’ news websites, feeling my gloom slip back into place and that familiar nausea burn in the pit of my stomach.

DIRTY TACKLE FROM SANDERSON ENDS MENZIES’ PREMIER LEAGUE CAREER

I inhaled a shallow breath, gnawing on my lip, shame overwhelming me. I wished I could turn the clock back. But no, even now in the busy airport lounge, I was back on the pitch, the Fulham vs Aston Villa game. We were two-one down. Second by second, I could remember the exact decision-making process. We needed a win. I needed a goal. I went for it. Going in hard. Sensing a chance to score…

If I hadn’t been in public, in the busy airport lounge, I would have groaned and dropped my head into my hands.

I scrolled to another page.

TV PUNDIT CALLS FOR EIGHT-MONTH BAN FOR SANDERSON

Currently, I had a six-match ban following the tackle on Rick Menzies which had broken one of his legs in two places, leaving him in hospital and unlikely to play in the Premiership ever again. I deserved everything I got, but I just couldn’t afford to be out of the game for eight months.

For the sake of the team and my future place on it, I was doing as I was told. I owed too much to too many people to let them down, although

ironically that fear had been what drove me to risk that tackle.

After two weeks off due to injury, and the team racking up four losses in the intervening period, I'd needed to make sure my comeback counted. To show the manager that I might be one of the older players on the squad but I was still integral to the team.

I sneaked another look at the girl opposite and she caught me, giving me another one of her smiles. It lit up her face. She clearly had no idea who I was, and that in itself was a relief. I'd got grief in the streets – even here standing in the check-in line.

A text buzzed through on my phone.

> Bon voyage. Have a safe flight. Behave and don't get into any trouble.

Lara. I winced. I knew as my agent she was on my side, but I had enough guilt of my own without needing a reminder to keep a low profile and be squeaky clean.

I pulled off my sunglasses to rub at my tired eyes, dislodging my cap. Sleep had been in short supply these last few days. Maybe going to see Rick Menzies hadn't been such a great idea. He hadn't wanted my sympathy, although he had accepted my offer to pay for surgery with a top orthopaedic consultant in Switzerland.

As I stretched and leaned back in the chair, I caught the glance of a man a few tables over. His eyes narrowed and I saw his muscles bunch like a bull about to charge. I casually looked away as if I was unaware of his sudden sharp interest, praying that he would leave it at that.

But no one was listening. With a menacing swagger, he barged through a group of tables, his Aston Villa shirt stretched over his beer belly, leaving three inches of hairy, bloated flesh on display.

The girl, perhaps alerted by the sudden shift of atmosphere, glanced back and spotted him coming. She shot a glance back to me and then back to him.

‘Sanderson. You fucking arsehole,’ he said, jabbing a stubby finger towards me.

Around us there was a sudden hush as he took a step closer.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ said the girl, in a loud voice, rising to her feet, shaking her head and laughing. Her eyes sparkled as she tossed her coppery curls. ‘If only I had a pound for every time someone mistook my husband … I tell you, I’d be rolling in fifty-pound notes. I know he looks just the same, but I promise you this is Roy Ken … ton.’ There was the briefest hitch in the word before she carried on. ‘My husband – most definitely not famous and as ordinary as it gets. We’re about to go on our honeymoon.’ She paused and tucked her left hand – ringless – behind her back, then said with a world-weary sigh, ‘So, if you want to thump someone, please could you pick someone else as I do *not* want pictures of him with a black eye.’

She dropped into my lap, throwing an arm around my neck and pulling me into her. A well of gratitude rose up inside me which made me want to clutch her close. Instead, I buried my nose in her neck, too surprised to say anything and distracted by the smell of her skin and her soft bottom landing on my lap.

‘Thanks, darling,’ I said, grateful to find the little angry guy’s attention focused on her and not me. I pulled her in protectively.

‘Shit, I’m so sorry, love.’ He peered round her at me. ‘Apologies, mate, you really look like him.’

I shrugged and said in what was my best attempt at an English accent, ‘’Appens a lot.’ Definitely more Dick Van Dyke than charming Brit judging by the snigger the woman made.

‘Right,’ he said, already backing away. He crashed into a table and everyone around us who had been staring suddenly went back to their own business as he turned around and scuttled off.

We sat there for several seconds: me, shellshocked; her – I'm not sure. My hands were on her waist, and I didn't want to let go. She felt like something that had been missing from my life. Then the moment became awkward and she jumped up from my lap. 'Well, that was fun,' she said.

'Roy Ken … ton?'

She grinned and stroked her chin, nodding at my heavy stubble. 'Ted Lasso. But then I realised that sounded like a made-up name so I … elaborated.'

'I can't believe you just did that,' I said, amazed by her sheer cheek and quick thinking and, most of all, her willingness to jump in and save a complete stranger. It could have gone horribly wrong – and she would have been first in the line of fire. She'd put herself between me and a threat. If only she knew how little I deserved her generosity of spirit. Nausea rose up in my throat. Shame almost felled me. I needed to get away.

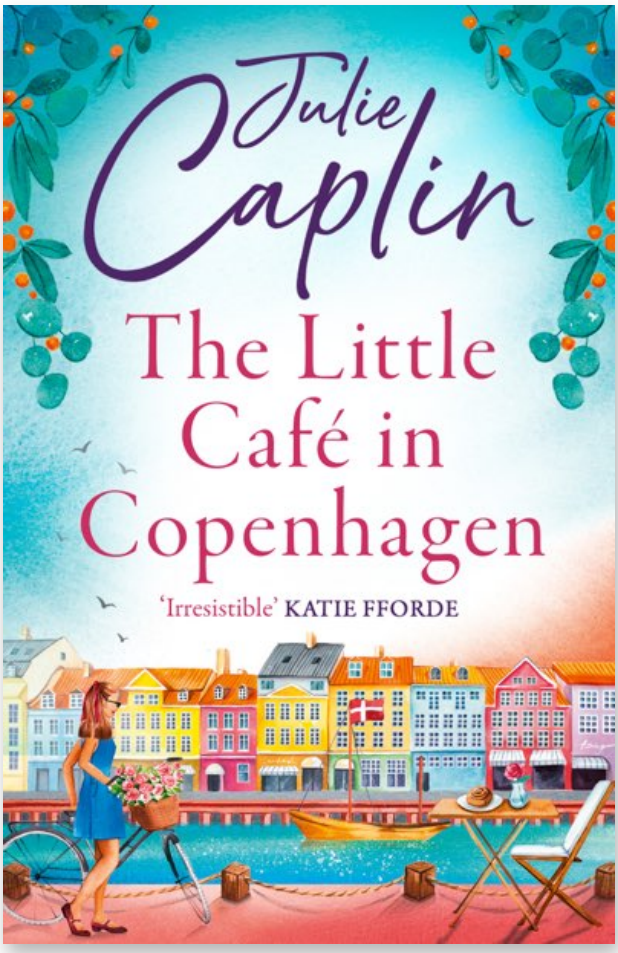
'That was really kind of you. Thank you, but I've got to go. They called my flight.' With that I gathered up my belongings and fled, trying to put as much distance between us as humanly possible. She was so kind, I prayed that she'd never find out her kindness was totally misplaced and that Sanderson was Noah Sanderson, the footballer who wrecked another man's career for the sake of proving himself. I'd hate her to realise that I wasn't worth saving.

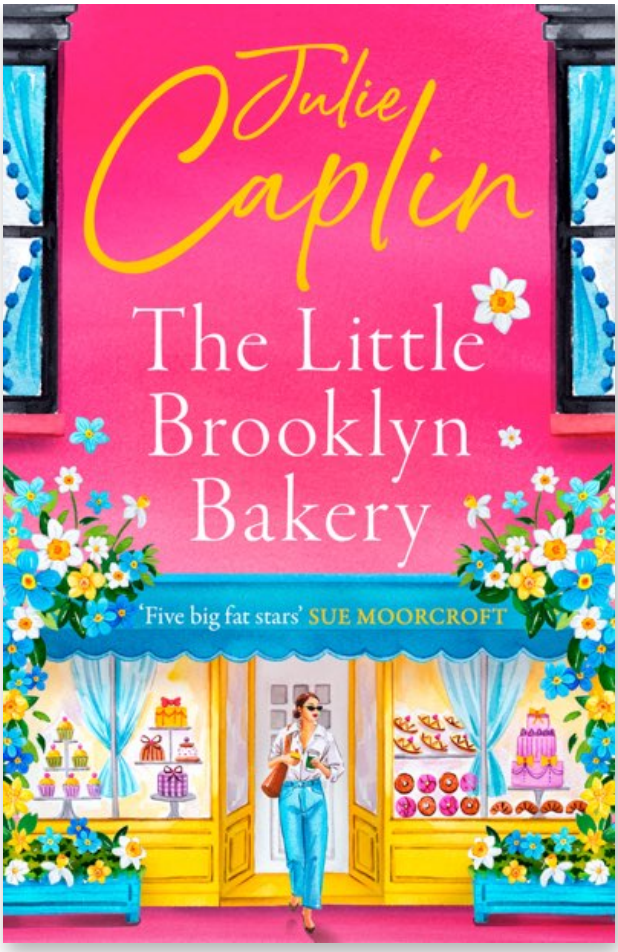
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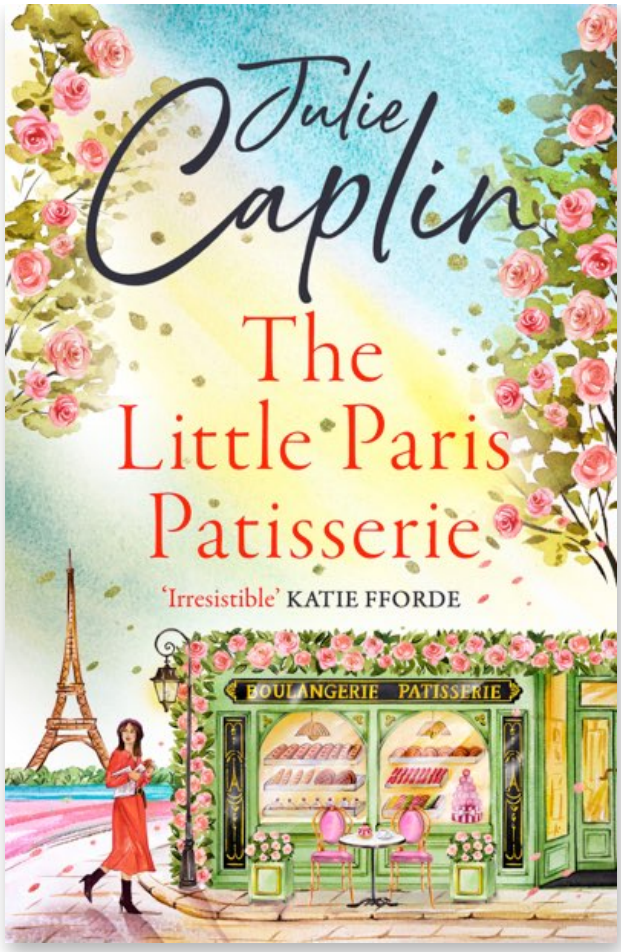
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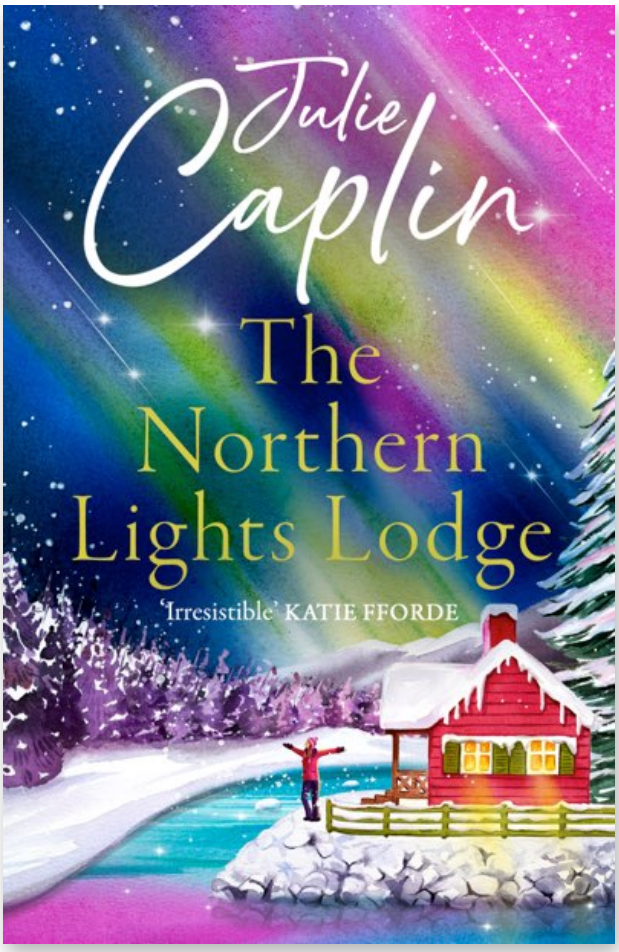
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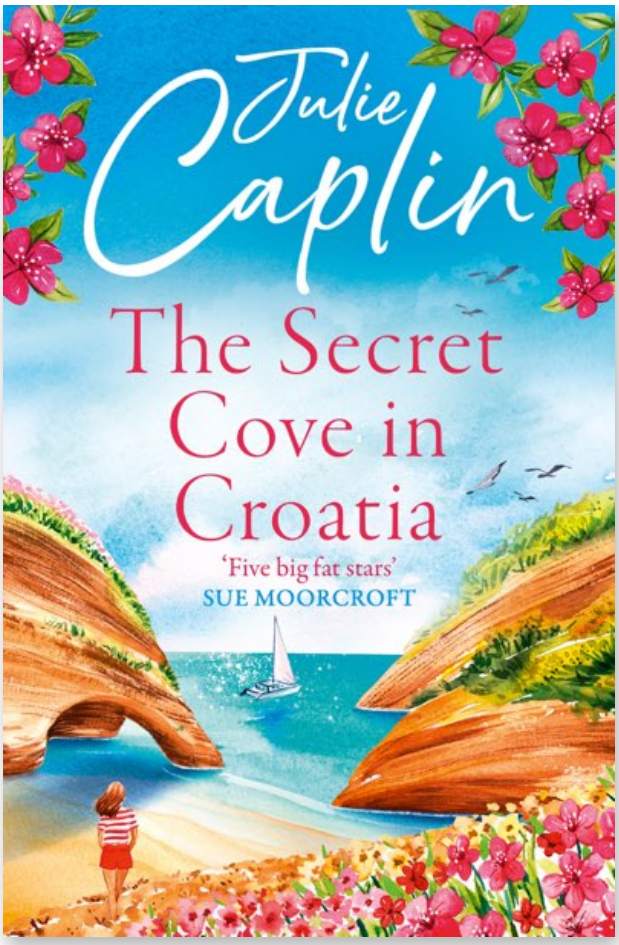
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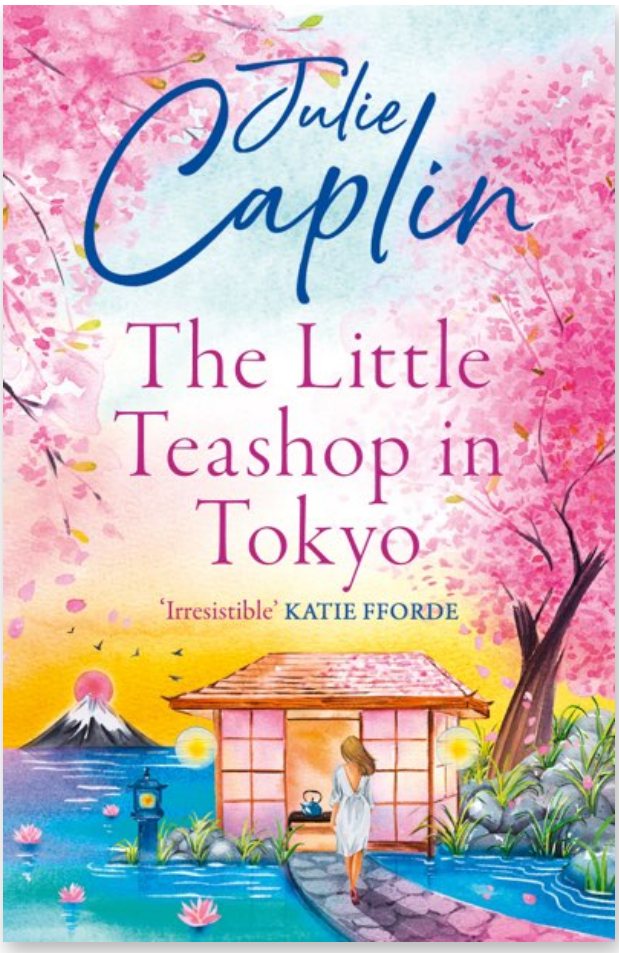


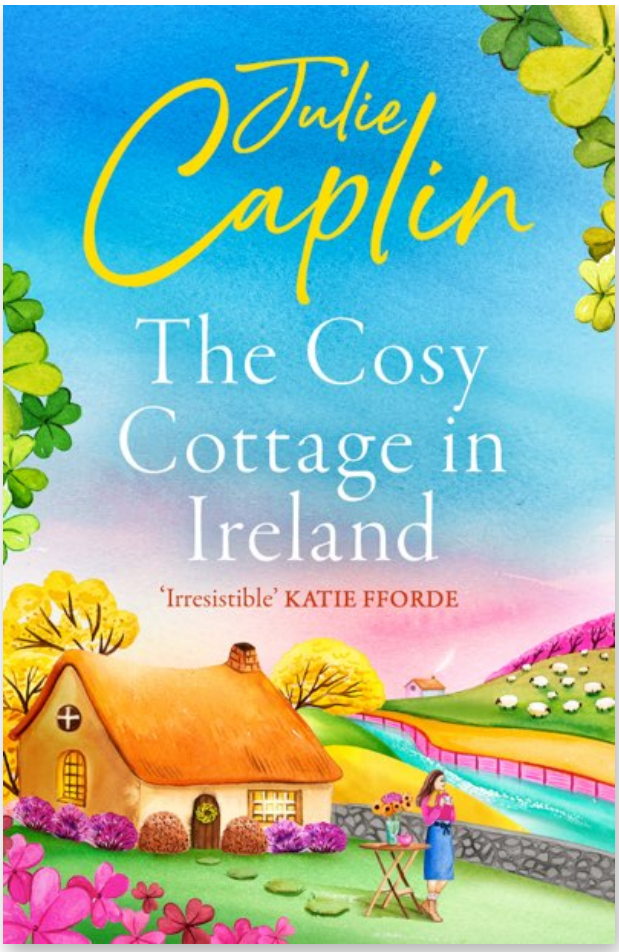

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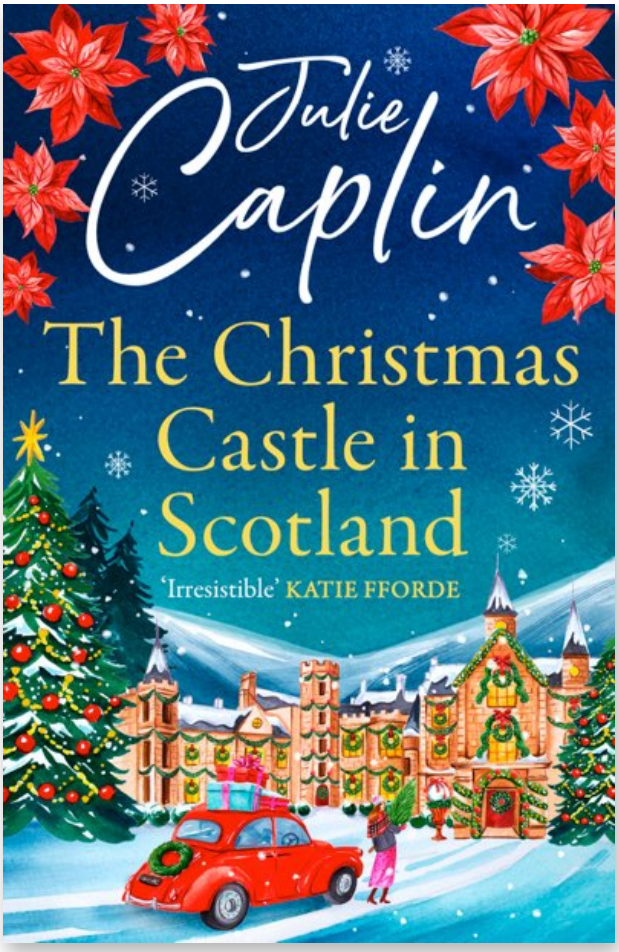

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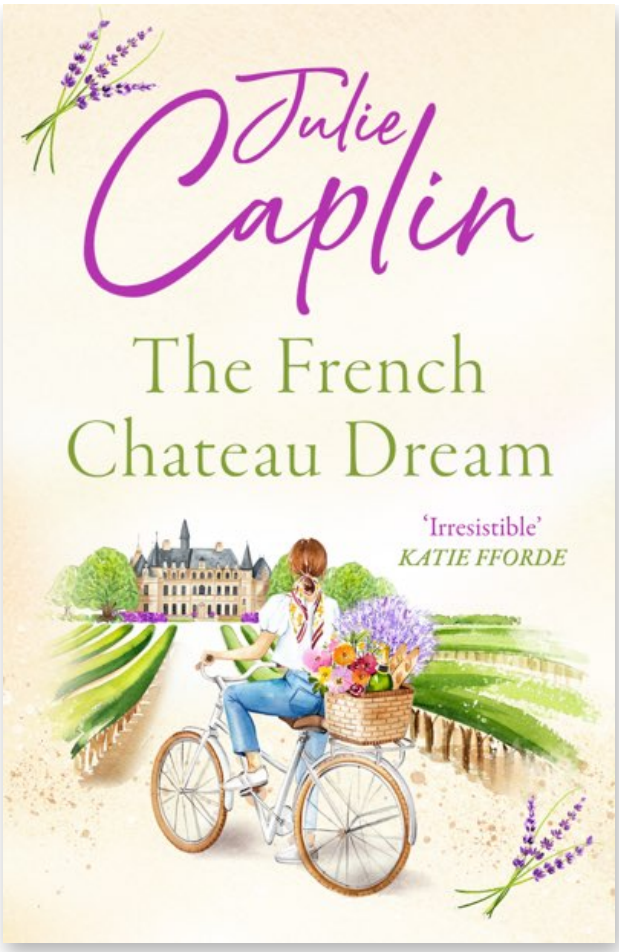

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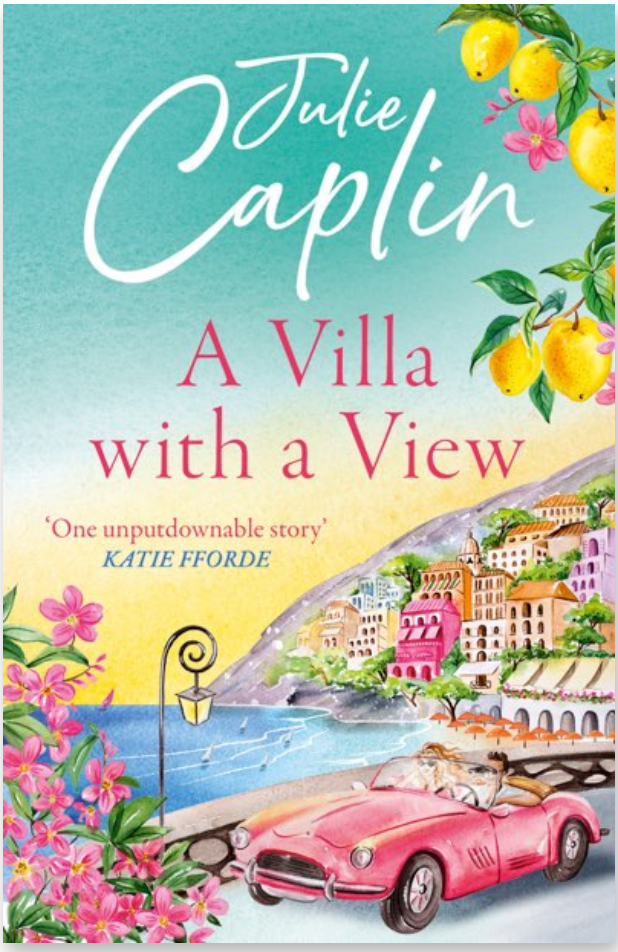

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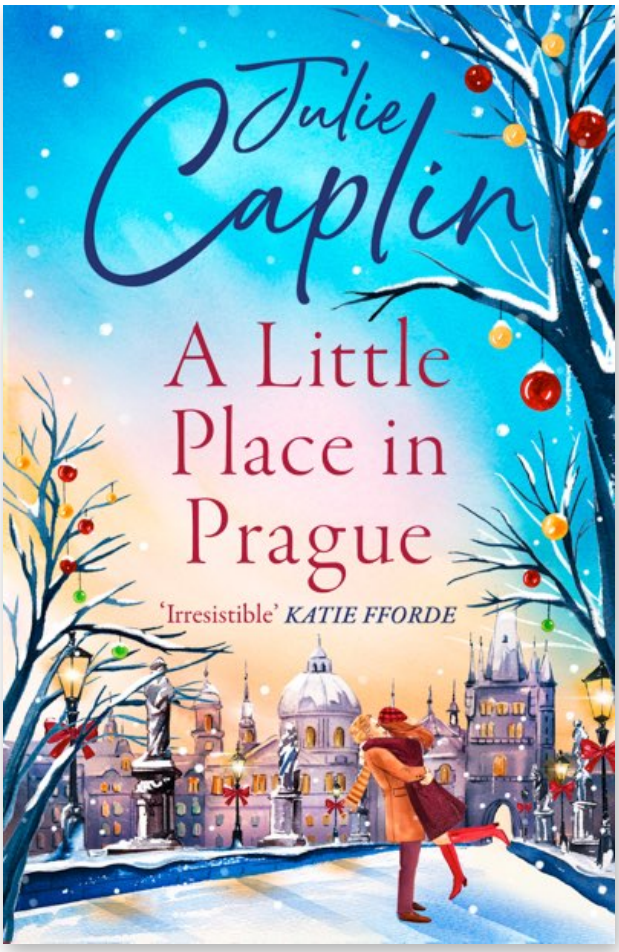

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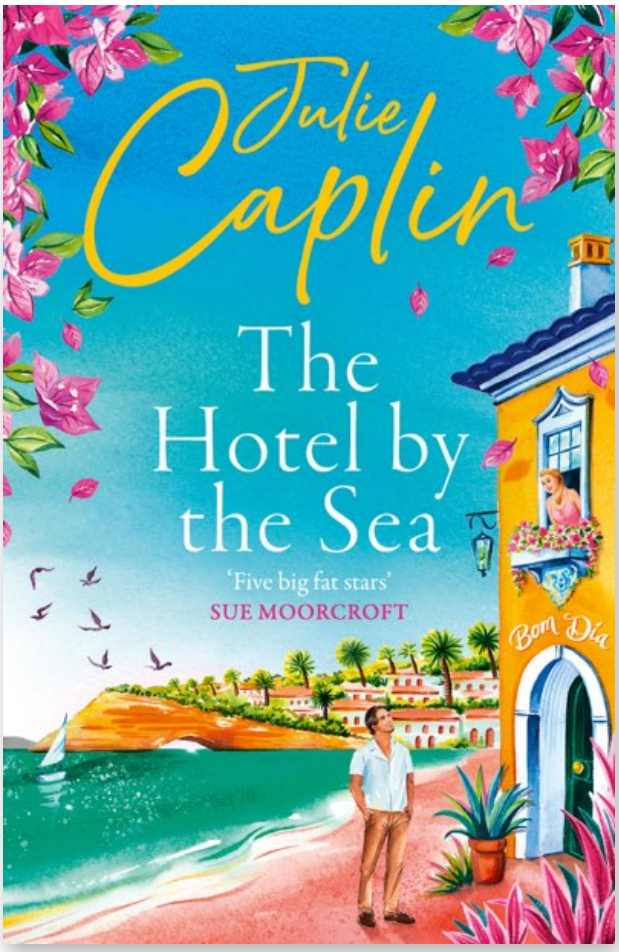

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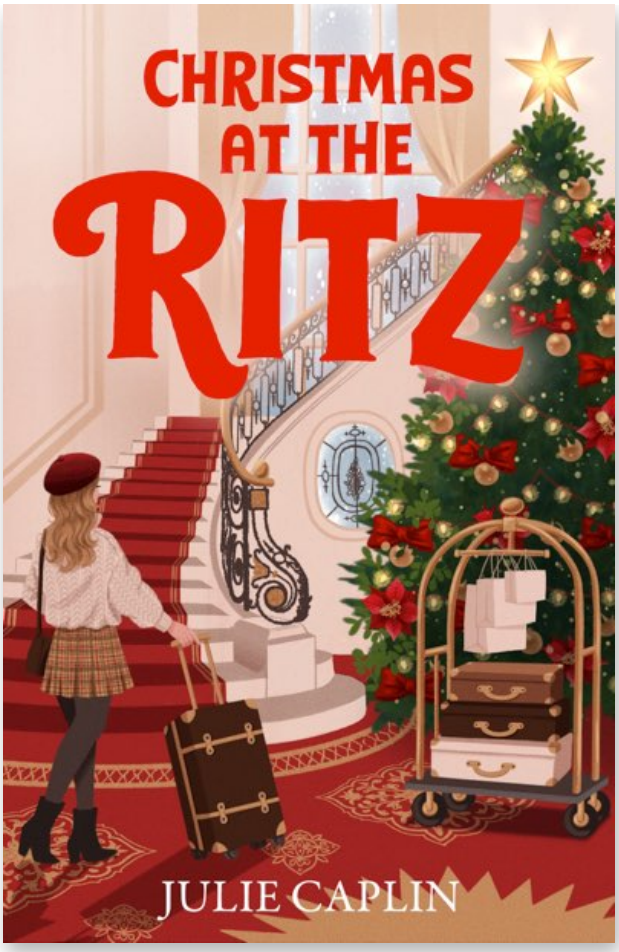

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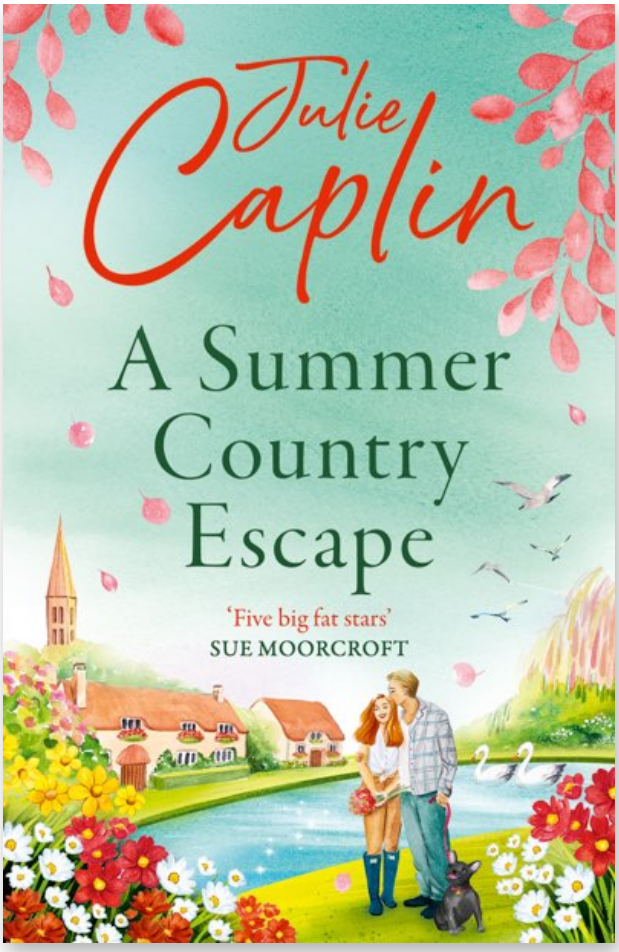


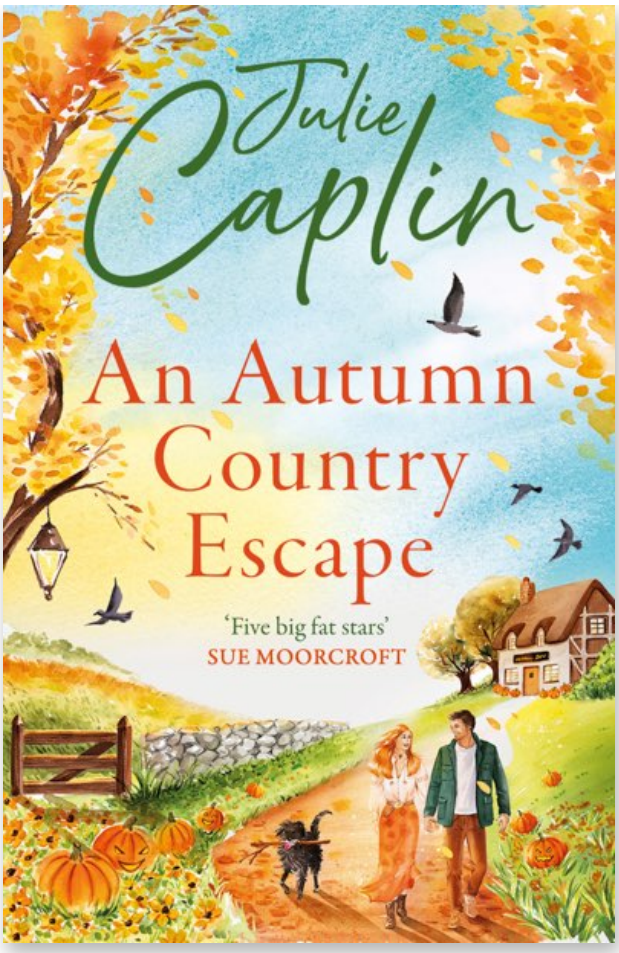
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A spark they never expected

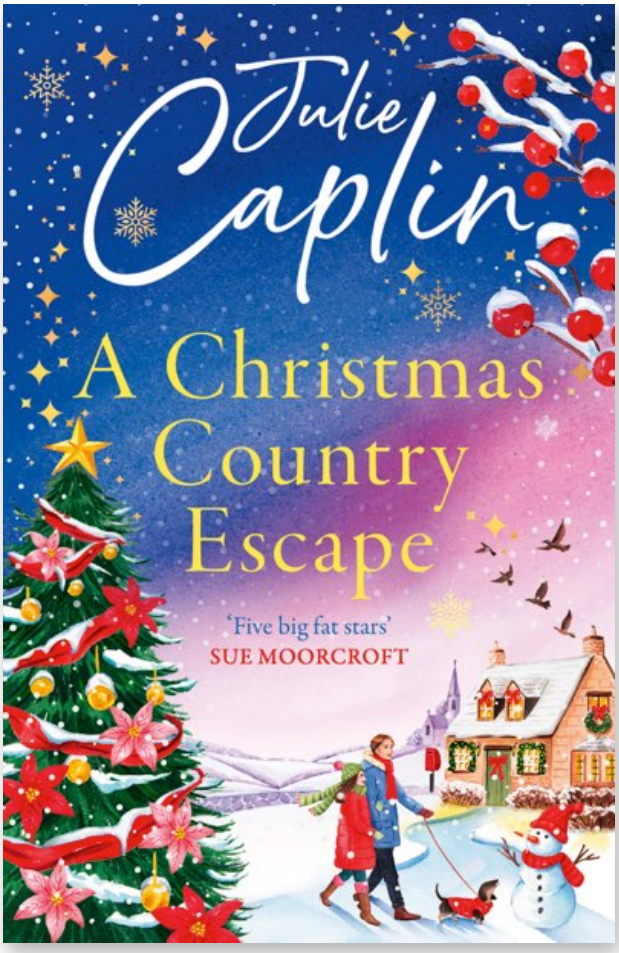


Country Escapes


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A Summer Country Escape
'Five big fat stars'
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Acknowledgments

This book was inspired by my daughter and her friends – fierce, independent women who are forging their own way in life with great humour, successful careers, fantastic social lives and building incredibly loyal friendships. Having not dated myself for quite some time, it was them I turned to, asking for advice on what are their non-negotiables when dating. I've included some of their responses, although, I'm still puzzled as to why my daughter has such an aversion to guitar-playing men at parties. Perhaps the clue is in playing their own guitars. They also inspired Finn's mobile moniker … before it was pointed out one of them has a boyfriend called Finn. I have a horrible feeling he may now get saddled with this name. (Apologies to him.)

Hugest of huge thanks to my writing bestie, Donna Ashcroft, who kept me going writing this book during a summer heatwave of epic temperatures – you try writing snow in that! We were both on very tight deadlines and our daily texts/calls kept each other going. Without her constant reassurance, I'm not sure I would have made it past the finishing line on this one.

While I was writing this book, I was also on a grand tour of European book fairs meeting readers in Lithuania, Germany, Czech Republic, Lisbon and the UK – what an absolute treat. I love meeting you all – I have found that romance readers are unfailingly kind and so welcoming. You make me feel like an absolute queen, which is lovely but remember, without you I wouldn't have the best job in the world, making stuff up. Thank you all for the reviews, for buying my books and for celebrating with me – you have changed my life and I will be forever grateful.

As I’ve said, I have the best job in the world, but writing books doesn’t happen in my own personal vacuum. There is a huge amount of work done by some amazing people beavering away in the background.

Thanks as always to my incredible editor, the legendary Charlotte Ledger – she is simply the bestest.

Just as bestest is my brilliant super agent, Broo Doherty, supportive, wise and just an all-round wonderful person – I’m so grateful I stalked her for so long (not a means of getting an agent I would necessarily recommend).

As I say, there are lots of unsung heroes who work on my books – I’m going to give a shout-out to the Royalty department and Michelle and her team, who are the ones that make sure authors get paid. They are incredibly efficient and rarely receive the thanks they deserve.

Thank you again, lovely readers, I hope you enjoyed the trip to London.

Jules xxx

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Julie Caplin is the international bestselling author of the Romantic Escapes series. Her books have hit the bestseller charts in Italy, Germany, the UK and the Czech Republic and have sold over two million copies worldwide. Her uplifting romantic comedies are set in gorgeous destinations across the globe, providing her readers the ultimate escape.

Formerly a PR director, for many years Julie swanned around Europe taking top food and drink writers on press trips to sample the gastronomic delights of the continent. It was a tough job but someone had to do it. These trips have provided the inspiration and settings for her novels.

Julie also writes romantic and historical fiction as Jules Wake.

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