ANNABEL FRENCH

The Little Lodge in Lapland



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Annabel French



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Dedication

Before a fight breaks out, I better dedicate a book to all my nieces and nephews who are finding their own paths, just as my characters do.

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PRAISE FOR ANNABEL FRENCH

‘A charming and evocative read that will have you wishing you were there.’
Rebecca Raisin

‘A gorgeous escapist read, with a wonderful love story about healing and the power of taking chances.’
Holly Martin

‘Oh la la! This is the perfect escape.’
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‘The kind of romance that ticks all my boxes. The perfect, escapist holiday read.’
Sarah Bennett

‘Beautifully written – a real gem of a read!’
Lucy Coleman

‘The perfect festive book to escape into!’
Kitty Wilson

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Chapter 1

One thing Violet Church loved about her job (there were lots of things she loved actually, but this one was top of her list) was that December was quiet.

For most event organisers the festive season was one of their busiest times of the year with Christmas parties on the daily requiring constant attention and continual firefighting, but for Violet, specialising in the arts and only running large-scale events meant the build-up to Christmas was a time to relax. Most organisations didn't bother with anything huge knowing people had other, more important things, to spend their money on like gifts for loved ones and *all* the Christmas food. Food was one thing she definitely loved about Christmas. She'd always been a fan of anything cinnamon and anything with all those mulled wine flavours.

Thinking about that, she adjusted the camera on her laptop, ready to meet her team and go through the events they had scheduled in for January. Her dark mass of corkscrew curls flew out in all directions, and she adjusted them, trying to tame one or two of the most unruly into some kind of shape. Running her own business was another thing Violet loved about her job. She was her own boss, able to come and go as she pleased, work in her pyjamas if that was what she fancied, and she gave her staff the same freedom. They all worked remotely and thanks to video calls and WhatsApp she'd never needed an office. Her business was booming and she was becoming the go-to person to run events up and down the UK, and even, on occasion, further afield. There'd been a couple of trips to Paris and even one to Lille, but she hadn't managed to break any further into Europe.

As the faces of her colleagues popped up on the screen, she smiled. 'Hey, guys, how's everyone?'

'Good,' replied Ahmed, his dog barking in the background. 'Sorry about __'

'No worries!' Violet cheerily waved his concerns away. If she could pride herself on one thing, it was being a laid-back boss. She was a pretty relaxed person, chirpy by nature and unfazed by catastrophe (so far, anyway). She'd

worked hard to get where she was, and she wanted everyone to feel the same sense of freedom at work as she did. It garnered more loyalty in her mind and a bit of background noise never hurt anyone. ‘How is Harold?’

Harold, Ahmed’s ageing whippet, barked again at hearing his name. ‘He’s knocked my Christmas tree over twice already. Honestly, he thinks he’s still a puppy which is ridiculous given how much he dribbles.’

Ellen, who had become Violet’s right-hand woman, giggled. ‘If anything knocked this down I’d go bananas, though my kids keep bashing into it, which is driving me nuts.’ She pointed behind her to an enormous and exquisitely decorated tree, tastefully scattered with wooden ornaments, with warm white lights twinkling rhythmically.

Her whole house was ready for Christmas with red and green bunting hugging the tops of the walls and Christmas cards covering every surface. It was a perfect family tree and perfect family home. A slight twinge tugged at Violet’s heart. She couldn’t help but glance around her house at the old, slightly manky decorations she’d slung up because while she liked Christmas, she wasn’t that bothered about all the fuss. She enjoyed giving gifts (and receiving them) and she liked the time off, but it was an awful lot of fuss for just a few days’ holiday. Her eye landed on the spindly bit of tinsel she’d thrown over the windowsill and the weird twinge hit again. She suddenly felt the urge to make more effort, to make her home more Christmassy, more … homey. It was new. She decided not to dwell too deeply and focus instead on the meeting.

‘That’s gorgeous!’ Violet said, turning her head as if she could see around the sides of Ellen’s enormous tree, then remembering she was on a video call.

‘What’s that?’ asked the final member of their crew.

Archie had joined the team a few years ago as a favour to a friend, Violet giving him two weeks’ work experience. Then when he’d finished his degree, he’d contacted her again, asking if there were any possibilities for an internship. She’d offered him one on the spot with the idea she could help him build up his résumé ready to enter the world of work. But then she’d needed an extra pair of hands and had ended up offering him a full-time job. He’d soon become a sort of mentee; someone she could pass on her insider knowledge of events planning (and handling all those weird and wonderful last-minute problems that always came up no matter how much

you tried to head them off). He was enthusiastic, loved to get stuck in and was a real people person, which was perfect for this job.

‘What’s what?’ Violet asked, turning around, her eyes falling on the easel still set up behind her. Warmth crept up her neck. Damn it! She should have put it away or slung a sheet over it. For the first time in ages, she’d set it up the day before and started painting, but hadn’t put everything back yet. ‘Are you talking about my tree? It’s one of those pre-lit jobs. Good, isn’t it?’

‘No, the painting! On the easel.’

Double damn! She had hoped she’d gotten away with it, distracting them with twinkling lights and the huge tree she’d bought just to fill the space in the corner of her living room.

‘Oh, that’s nothing. It’s just a hobby. Anyway, let’s get started, shall we?’ Relief inched in as everyone’s heads went down to their notes. Work would get everyone focused back on something she felt truly confident about.

‘It’s really good,’ said Archie, ignoring her attempt.

Internally Violet sighed but her smile remained intact. ‘Thanks.’ It wasn’t. Not to her standards anyway and it had been disheartening to realise she’d lost some of her skills. Despite her self-consciousness, Violet kept her voice cheery. ‘So, let’s talk about the big auction and ball we’ve got coming up for the Artists Foundation on …’ she double-checked her notes ‘… the twentieth of January.’

Everyone began to give their updates, and she sat back in her chair, happy to be on more solid ground.

She loved painting. Grandma Louisa had been a bit of a landscape artist back in her day and had encouraged Violet to paint whenever she was staying with her. Violet had loved it and knew she had some talent, but she wasn’t anywhere near good enough to do it for a living, and that was okay. She actually loved her job more. She just wished she had more time to indulge in her hobby.

At one point, she might have called it more of a passion, but then her job had become a passion too and something had had to give. If she were honest with herself, she totally would have time to paint if she chose to prioritise it, but she had a habit of doomscrolling or plain old working instead, and of course imposter syndrome loved to stop her too. Maybe that could be a New Year’s resolution: do more painting, reignite that passion. Since her grandma had passed, Violet had found it made her feel connected to her in a way simply remembering her didn’t, and she missed that feeling.

For the next hour the team ran through all the events they had lined up for the first quarter of next year. By the time they finished, she was excited for everything that was to come, though a little frustrated there weren't that many outside of the UK. World domination was going to have to wait, or would require more of a business plan.

The meeting complete, she wished everyone a good week, reminded them to contact her if anything came up and unplugged her camera before updating her notes. Rain battered the windows and she grabbed a blanket from the sofa, pulling it onto her lap. Just as she closed the file and switched to her emails, one popped into her inbox. She frowned reading the headline which said, 'You've won!' figuring it was probably a scam. As she read the email's content, a vague memory of answering a questionnaire entered her head. She'd been contemplating holidays (it felt like a long time since she'd travelled anywhere, and she loved to travel) and had done a little bit of online searching one lunchtime. One of those 'fill in the survey and be in with a chance of winning a dream holiday' type things had popped up and for some reason rather than ignore it, she'd begun typing answers in the boxes. She'd filled it in and thought no more of it because nothing ever came of that sort of thing, did it? But this wasn't a marketing email. This was personal. She read out loud.

'"Dear Miss Church, thank you for entering our Christmas giveaway. I'm delighted to confirm that you've won a four-week, Christmas and New Year break in one of our Lapland lodges. We can't wait to welcome you, so please contact us as soon as possible to confirm all the details." What?'

Violet sat back, unable to take it in, reading and rereading the words, checking the name and company, searching to make sure it was all real. And it was.

'Oh my God.' Excitement bubbled in her belly.

She loved travelling. Adored it in fact. It was one of the reasons she'd set up her events business, thinking she could work all over the world. That hadn't quite happened yet, but there was something about visiting new places that always filled her soul. She'd been to so many cities in Europe, America, Asia and each time she'd nearly almost stayed. If Violet knew of one flaw she had, it was her ability to get swept up in new places. She just loved imagining what it would be like to live a life there, to run her events business under the Moroccan sun or from a sandy beach in Bali, or from a beachside café in Miami. That was holiday magic, she supposed, and the

reason people loved to get away. But she'd never, ever thought of visiting somewhere like Lapland. She wasn't quite sure why but now the chance had come she couldn't imagine going anywhere better over Christmas.

Her eyes went back to the screen. 'I never win anything,' she said to no one in particular. Then she called her parents.

'Hey Vi-vi,' said her mum. She was snuggled on the sofa and turned the camera to show Violet's dad right next to her. 'We were just watching one of those Border Force programmes. Honestly, the stuff people think they can smuggle into a country is mad.'

'And where they think they can hide it too!' her dad added.

Violet's parents had both worked corporate jobs, allowing them to retire early. They now lived in a sweet little cottage in Kent, not far from Violet's own small house, and loved a bit of daytime TV and catching up on the programmes they'd wanted to watch when they were working but were too busy to do so. They loved a trip to the local pub and, if it were possible, seemed more in love than they had when she was growing up. One day Violet hoped for a love like that. Relationships weren't something that played on her mind often. She loved her life, loved her friends and family, and loved that she could do what she wanted, when she wanted. But her parents had set such a high bar for what love should look like, she hadn't yet found anyone who measured up.

'Guys,' she said, as her parents' smiling faces filled the screen. 'You'll never guess what—'

'You've bought a Shih Tzu?' said Jenny, her mum, from whom she'd inherited the dark curls, though her mum's were now peppered with streaks of grey that looked chic rather than ageing.

'Umm … no,' Violet replied, not quite sure where that had come from.

'You should, they're adorable. A woman on the TV just got one.' She pointed at the screen, which of course, Violet couldn't see.

Her dad, Felix, chuckled at his wife. 'Have you secured a new event or something? There's no stopping our girl, Jen.' The pride in his voice made Violet's heart swell.

'Neither actually. I've won a holiday!'

Both her parents adjusted their position to sit more upright, and she told them everything about the email she'd just received.

'That's amazing!' her mum said. 'When and where?'

‘Well, that’s the thing.’ Violet wished she’d considered this before she’d rung but she’d been too caught up in the excitement of winning something for the first time since musical statues in primary school. ‘I know I was going to spend Christmas with you, but this is a Christmas and New Year break in Lapland and obviously, if I do go, I can’t be with you. So—’

‘You have to go,’ her mum assured her. ‘You’ve not had a decent holiday all year.’

It was true. She had been here, there and everywhere for work, but it had been a while since she’d felt that wonderful, heart-tugging excitement at being somewhere for fun. She hadn’t had a proper holiday with relaxation time, sun lounger reading or a chance to pull out her paints and dabble, for ages.

‘So you don’t mind?’ Violet asked.

‘No! Not at all,’ her dad said. ‘We might go and see your sister in Australia. She was asking us about coming out the other day and we’d said possibly in January to beat the winter blues, but she won’t mind if we come over for Christmas instead.’

‘Oh!’ Her mum grinned. ‘A sunny, warm Christmas–that’ll be new. Lovely.’

Violet looked out of the window into the grey, drizzly street. Snow would be lovely. And they had lots of it in Lapland. The thought of snuggling down into a gorgeous lodge with a crackling fire, looking out the window to see lines of beautiful fir trees rather than parked cars, was filling her chest with excitement. She could even paint! She could almost hear Grandma Louisa’s ghost whispering in her ear, and she smiled. Fluffy pyjamas, bed socks and comfy, luxury pillows. Oh yes, it sounded divine. And Christmas in another country, one where Father Christmas was supposed to live (though she didn’t actually believe in him anymore because she was a grown-up) would be even more fun. Waking up on Christmas Day to thick snow and going for a walk in it, leaving deep footprints would be magical.

‘And you’re sure you don’t mind?’ Violet asked again, crossing her fingers and hoping her parents hadn’t changed their minds in the last two minutes, but wanting to check all the same.

Her mum shook her head emphatically. ‘Don’t be silly! I’ve never worn flip-flops at Christmas. It’ll be fun. And like we said, you absolutely deserve a proper holiday. You could do some painting while you’re there! Brush up on your brush skills! You do still paint, don’t you?’

‘When I have time.’ The thought of prioritising her art, or her attempts at it, was quite exciting. ‘But I’d really like to do it more. I tried yesterday and I feel like I’ve lost my touch. This would be a really good chance to practise my skills and everything Grandma Louisa taught me.’

‘Well, there you go. I’m sure there’ll be some lovely views. Now go and confirm your dates before they change their minds.’

As Violet hung up, eagerness sent her straight back to her desk and before long, she’d checked her diary, exchanged emails with the holiday people, let her team know the news, and had booked her flights. She glanced out of the window at the heavy wind and drizzle and, while her Christmas tree lights twinkled in the winter gloom, she could imagine how much more sparkly they’d look against the backdrop of a wooden lodge, snow falling outside her window.

She couldn’t wait.

She was off to spend Christmas in Lapland.

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Chapter 2

A week later, Violet approached her luxury eco lodge so full of excitement she was like a kid on their first ever holiday. Everyone had been more than happy for her to go, and Ellen had even gone so far as to say she'd be offended if Violet didn't take this break, which made her feel a lot better, especially as it was such a long time to be away. Longer than she'd ever been away from her business, but she could always work from here if they needed her; her whole business model was based on working from home and then attending locations as and when required, and she couldn't help but check in daily anyway. That was all part of being a business owner.

Now, with her cases by her side, she took a moment to take it all in, the snow-covered ground, the chill wind sweeping across her cheeks, the cute eco lodge in front of her that was to be her home for the next four weeks. The owner had left the lights on, and the warm glow brightened the early afternoon. The sky was heavy with clouds and from the freezing temperatures, she was guessing there was more snow on the way. Violet's stomach fizzed with anticipation.

Levi, the town where her eco lodge was and where her taxi had dropped her, was at its heart, a busy ski resort. The place had been full of families and experienced skiers flying down the slopes, swerving left and right, leaving tracks in the densely packed snow, but as she'd followed the instructions on her welcome email, she'd moved further and further away from the busy centre to the outskirts, finding her own perfect little lodge. She knew from the website there were more lodges like hers, but as she looked around she couldn't see them. They were so spaced out it was like she was on her own, in her own perfect snowy slice of heaven, and banks of tall spruces and pines protected her from any other guests. The remoteness would be welcome, giving her time to roam and paint as she wished.

In the distance, the sounds of the ski resort were just about audible if she listened carefully enough, but not intrusive. If she could hear anything it was the wind through the trees dislodging the odd clump of snow that

would fall to the ground with a muffled oomph and the occasional call of birds that were far hardier than she was, as she decided it was time to head inside.

At least a foot of snow rested on the lodge's roof. The walls were made of a stone base and on top were huge pillars of thick wooden planks set at angles, thousands of tiny tree rings visible on the rough-cut circular ends. From inside, warm orange lights shone out, cosy against the strange blueish light that permeated the powdery white landscape, and off into the distance were more trees, more untouched wilderness. Huge, tall pines and spruces punctuated the view, adding a touch of green against the pale snow-covered lands. Their branches were just as heavy with snowfall, pulling them down towards the ground. She took a breath of the cold, clean air and dragged her heavy cases up the small set of steps, pausing before the large, heavy wooden door.

Thankfully the code for the key box worked first time and she pushed the door to feel warm, woody-scented air hit her face. A gentle 'Ooo' escaped her mouth as she took in the luxurious surroundings. Once she was inside she began to peel off the layers she'd worn to travel in. They'd been just about enough against the cold, but she had a feeling she might need more if she were going out for any length of time. She pulled off her gloves and hat and ran her fingers through her hair, not quite sure what the tight beanie would have done to her curls, but there was no way she was going without one. She wasn't that fashion-conscious.

Though the lodge was ecofriendly, Violet was happy to see they hadn't saved on the luxury. While wood predominated, giving the space warmth and texture, there was a sleek white kitchen and a large grey sofa around a huge, brick fireplace. The log fire was crackling, sending waves of heat into the room, and Violet was grateful someone had lit it for her. It was definitely a cosy welcome. Either side of the fireplace sat large baskets of wood so she could top it up as soon as she needed to. She went and warmed her cold fingers, taking a moment to enjoy the heat on her ice-cold cheeks and hands.

'Well, this is nice.'

Violet sighed in relief as she sat back for a moment, nestling into the soft sofa cushions. Everything was quiet and peaceful, and though her job was a pleasure, it was still stressful at times and some of the tension began to seep away. The last year had been her busiest yet. She'd taken on more clients

and expanded her staff to accommodate, and she had big plans for the year ahead. The couple of clients from outside of the UK who'd hired her had got her thinking about making more of a concerted effort to expand into Europe and as she loved travelling, and had no one to tie her down, she was excited about where the future might take her. But all that was for another day. Right now, all she had to do was relax.

A large, real Christmas tree stood in the corner of the living room, tastefully decorated, and all around were various-sized wooden reindeers, nutcrackers and wooden ornaments. It was like Christmas for grown-ups, much more tasteful than the mad assortment of Christmas decorations she'd grown up with as a child. She'd loved them growing up, and Christmas at home with her family had been magical. But as she'd grown, she'd liked something a little more minimal. Something tasteful but still Christmassy enough – and this was her idea of perfect.

Violet sat and removed her chunky boots, leaning back against the soft reindeer-patterned cushions on the sofa. Once she was warm, she did a quick scout around. The bathroom had a claw-foot tub and a separate rain shower, and the bedroom was beautifully lit with fluffy cushions on the bed and huge pillows that promised the best night's sleep she'd ever had. She couldn't wait to unpack, get the supplies she needed and then snuggle down for an evening of relaxing. It hadn't been a long journey, but she was still tired. Travelling always did that to her. She needed a cup of tea to refresh. She opened her suitcase and found the bag of teabags she'd brought with her. Having travelled so much, she knew she'd need a cup before she even thought about going shopping for food and wine and other supplies she might need.

She was hoping there might be an art shop somewhere. A place she could get some extra supplies. She'd brought what she could with her, but as she'd packed at the last minute, she'd realised how dried up some of her paints were and how ratty some of the brushes had become. If she'd packed sooner, she would have had time to bring more with her but, as usual, her business had taken priority, so she'd ended up packing last night in a stress-induced rush. She was just thankful her passport was in the drawer where she always kept it. As her body began to relax in her new surroundings, she was more determined than ever to indulge her much-neglected hobby over the next four weeks. Grandma Louisa would be proud.

As she moved to the kitchen, searching for the kettle, she was surprised to see a gift basket full of everything she'd need for the afternoon. There were tea and milk, bread and a strange cheese that seemed to be called squeaky cheese, local biscuits and some jam. That would be more than enough to keep her going for a while until she felt ready to go out and explore.

Out of habit, Violet checked her phone once she'd filled the kettle and set it to boil.

'Nothing new,' she said, relaxing even more. There were a couple of update emails from her team, a few from shopping sites she really needed to unsubscribe from, but nothing that required her attention. 'Perfect.'

Just as she sat down in front of the fire, about to take her first sip of tea, a weird noise outside her window made her look up. She listened intently trying to make out what it was, and as it grew louder, almost as if it were heading towards her, she realised it was someone – a man – speaking in another language. Finnish she presumed, given her location, but who were they? And why were they headed this way? She raised her tea again, assuming whoever they were would walk past, maybe on towards the resort, and the voice would fade, but her neck grew tight and concern began to rise as the muffled sound grew nearer and clearer. Suddenly heavy footsteps drummed on the steps outside, clomping up towards her front door.

Violet quickly put her tea down and went to the window, trying to sneak a look at whoever was outside. Though she angled her head this way and that, she still couldn't see, but as they were now in front of the door, and clearly not happy about something, fear gripped her more tightly. Surely she hadn't got into the wrong lodge? The key code had worked, and it had obviously been cleaned and prepared, ready for her. But she'd been in enough hotel mix-ups to know that mistakes could still happen, and even if she had accidentally got in the wrong lodge, to be this annoyed seemed a bit over the top. Whoever this man was, though, he was really irritated, and Violet wondered about hiding behind the sofa until he'd gone. She didn't know any Finnish so it would be hard to reason with him if he didn't also speak English. She kept out of view and decided to wait it out until he left.

The shouting stopped and she breathed a sigh of relief, her heart rate calming down. Thank goodness. But as she took a step forward, she heard a loud knock and then the doorknob started twisting.

They were coming in!

‘Olavi?’

What did that mean?

He said it again and she had no idea what it meant. She couldn’t figure out anything except he was miffed. Violet made a mad dash to the kitchen and searched for something to defend herself with. Damn it! She didn’t know where any of the pots and pans were. She frantically looked around and grabbed a wooden spoon from the utensil pot, holding it high with both hands, ready to swipe.

The door flew further open, and her breath hitched as with three heavy strides the man was inside.

‘Ola— Oh!’ he said, doubling back so quickly his feet almost flew out from under him and he scrabbled, only just remaining upright. Him almost slipping over should have been funny but, given the circumstances, it really wasn’t. In response to her pose, he suddenly lifted whatever he was holding too, gripping it tightly, ready to wield it like a bat. Violet’s eyes glanced to it and she was sure it was some kind of … magazine? As the man’s hood was up she couldn’t see his face properly and with the layers he was wearing against the cold he looked huge. Three times the size of a normal man. ‘Who are you?’ he asked, his brow creasing.

‘Who am I?’ Violet fired back, the flight-or-fight instinct still in full force despite his obvious surprise at seeing her. His double take and comedy fall had done nothing to calm her down. ‘Who are you? And what are you doing in my lodge?’

‘Your lodge?’

‘Yes, my lodge. Look—’ She grabbed the key she’d left on the kitchen counter. ‘I’m allowed to be here. You’re not!’

The man paused, his brow furrowed as he looked first at her cases, then at her. He lowered his arms and pulled back his hood. Oh, but he was lovely. Like a sexy Viking. Violet forced herself not to think about how gorgeous his blond hair, sharp cheekbones and pale blue eyes were.

‘Right. Sorry. Yes,’ he spoke in English, confusion filling his voice. He lowered the magazine. ‘I see. You can put down the wooden spoon, by the way. I’m not going to attack you or anything.’

‘Excuse me if I don’t. You were shouting like a maniac and then barged into my accommodation. I’m not putting it down until you leave.’

‘And you booked this place?’ His eyes narrowed quizzically, his voice calm and, she had to admit, a little bit sexy in a silky, deep bass way.

‘Not that it’s any of your business, but I didn’t book it, I won it. A holiday here for New Year.’ She shook her head. ‘Why am I telling you this? Get. Out!’

Colour began to flood his cheeks and he scratched his temple. His thick, pale blond eyebrows drew together. He was handsome in a rugged, I-could-knock-down-a-tree-with-my-bare-hands way. Like he could wrestle a bear into submission and would then shoo it away, because of course, he wouldn’t hurt it as he was actually a really nice guy.

What are you doing? Violet chastised herself. *Focus!* She ignored her own stupid thoughts. This was absolutely not the time to be thinking about things like how sexy he was or how big his hands were.

‘Umm …’ he began, shifting on the spot, clutching the rolled-up magazine in both hands. ‘I think I might have made a mistake.’

‘Yes! Yes, you have. You’ve barged into my lodge uninvited. Now can you please leave so I can call someone and ask them what the hell is going on.’

‘No! Please don’t.’ The man placed the magazine on the kitchen counter and held up his hands in surrender. ‘Please, don’t do that. I’ve made a mistake and I can explain everything.’

Violet assessed him for a moment, her hands staying exactly where they were, then she lowered the wooden spoon a fraction before deciding she was better safe than sorry until he’d told her what exactly was going on. She raised it back up again.

‘Are you really going to hold that the whole time?’ He cocked his head, sounding both amused and annoyed.

‘Yes.’

‘Fine. But I’m not a criminal. There’s just been a mistake. A simple, stupid mistake.’ He sighed and pushed a hand into his short, pale hair. ‘My name’s Rasmus and I own the lodges over that way—’ He pointed at the front window, towards the trees. ‘I saw the light on and thought it was Olavi, the owner of this lodge. I … I wanted to speak to him.’

‘Speak to him? It sounded like you wanted to murder him. Which is why I’m holding this until you go.’ She wiggled the wooden spoon she still clutched in white knuckles.

‘I didn’t want to murder him! And do you really think that’s going to do anything helpful? It’s a wooden spoon; I could break it with one hand.’ He probably could because she was sure under his coat was a firm, chiselled

chest and really good biceps. ‘I just wanted to speak to Olavi about something important and I was a bit … frustrated.’

‘Yes, I could tell.’

Rasmus’s eyes sharpened on her. ‘Will you please put down the wooden spoon? It’s very disconcerting.’

‘No.’

He dropped his eyes to the floor and inhaled, his chest puffing as he did so. He shook his head like she was the one acting strangely. The cheek! ‘Okay, I will go. I’m sorry for frightening you. Very sorry. I didn’t mean to. I will speak to Olavi another time. I won’t bother you again.’

He turned around and walked out, leaving Violet’s heart hammering in her chest. So much for a relaxing holiday! If this was what she was in for, she’d be heading back home tomorrow.

Rasmus – if that was his real name – closed the door behind him and stomped off into the snow. Violet slowly lowered the spoon and left it on the counter as she headed to the window and watched him until he was out of sight, relief washing through her. She locked the door (better safe than sorry after that) and flopped onto the sofa, too hot now for the roaring fire. After a second, a burst of laughter escaped as she replayed the scene, imagining what it looked like from his angle or as an observer watching them both. It wasn’t the start to her holiday she’d anticipated, and she definitely needed that cup of tea now.

‘Well,’ she said to herself, another giggle bubbling up. ‘That was unexpected.’

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Chapter 3

After a cup of tea and a trip into the resort to buy some supplies (she needed alcohol after that encounter), Violet settled on the sofa with an easy meal and a large glass of rich red wine. Her plans for the evening contained nothing more than a soak in the huge bathtub and then snuggling down to watch a film on her laptop.

At least with the lodges being far apart she was unlikely to see this Rasmus again and she could forget about the whole unfortunate episode. Though, if he'd met her under nicer circumstances she might have felt very differently. He was very good-looking and the thought of what those strong arms could do lingered in her mind. It had been a while since men had crossed her mind, after more than her fair share of failed dates. She shook thoughts of Rasmus and the crazy start to her holiday away. Now, to try once more to relax. That's what she was here for and that was what she'd do.

While she'd been cooking, her eyes had wandered to the magazine Rasmus had left and they did so again now. It had unfurled on the counter, opening to reveal a beautiful photograph of the area. While she tried to ignore it, the enticing image on the cover of a lodge, just like hers, lit with golden light and dusted with bright white snow caught her attention again. Curiosity got the better of her, and she placed her wine on the table and grabbed it. She'd just take a quick look. Hopefully he wouldn't come back for it because despite his good looks, she absolutely didn't want to see the shouty man again.

She opened the front page and a sheet of white paper fell to the floor. Violet grabbed it and read the jumble of letters, realising it was in Finnish. She quickly grabbed her phone and translated it.

Olavi,

I hope it's not too late for me to try and change your mind.

Here is the brochure I made to highlight all the beautiful nature that is around us. Please, we must not even consider selling to a developer.

If one of us does, they will build ugly huge hotels and expand the resorts, damaging the environment, killing the wildlife and killing local businesses. They only care about money and not tourism that benefits us while protecting the environment. We must stand firm. Together!

Let us talk about it. We all have a duty to protect this beautiful, special place.

Rasmus

Violet took a sip of wine and placed the letter on the table before reading the magazine. He'd done a good job because all the images were stunning: green forests full of densely packed trees reaching high into the sky, the forest floor dusted with snow like an entry to another world. There was a picture of the Aurora Borealis, something she'd always wanted to see, bright green dancing light patterns captured in an enchanting moment, and finally, a soft, vanilla yellow sun peeking above the snowy horizon, sending waves of pink and peach into the sky over untrampled white fields. This was why she loved travelling – seeing places like this – exploring a world that was new to her. It was the most magical thing about vacations.

Unable to stop herself, she grabbed the few supplies she'd bought with her and picked the picture of the forest. With the sketchpad balanced on her lap and a light pencil, she began sketching the shapes of the trees. Frustration grew as she made marks on the paper only to rub them out again.

'Nooo!' she mumbled, scrubbing at the paper.

Her skills really were rusty, and it just wasn't the same working from a crumpled magazine photo. Grandma Louisa had always said to paint the real thing if that was ever possible. Watching how the light played and really seeing the different colours. If only she knew where this place was.

After another half an hour with little progress, and growing irritated at herself, Violet put the magazine down and picked up the letter again. Rasmus had written eloquently. The man who'd barged into her lodge had seemed so het up she hadn't thought he could manage something like that. She remembered how he'd stumbled backwards when he realised she was inside rather than this Olavi, and how he'd nearly slipped over. She giggled.

Whoever Rasmus was, he clearly cared about the environment and this Olavi was obviously planning to sell something to the developers. *This lodge?* she wondered. She hoped not. Violet glanced out of the window. She

could just imagine some developer adding in more lodges next to her, filling in the gaps for the sake of profits, so the trees were gone and everyone was on top of each other, ruining the stunning views and the sense of peace that permeated the place.

Outside the window, fresh snow began to fall, beautiful tiny flakes fluttering through the air. She pushed her inquisitiveness at who these developers were and where they wanted to build out of her head. That wasn't her concern and it had nothing to do with her. She was here to relax and have a holiday. To sketch or paint and walk and explore.

Suddenly tired after such a strange afternoon, and cuddled by the warmth of the fire, Violet's eyes grew heavy. She needed sleep and then tomorrow she'd try and find one of the places in Rasmus's brochure. The need to paint was stronger than it had been in a long time. Grandma Louisa had always called it the desideratum. It meant something that was needed or wanted. She'd always loved big words, and her art had been a calling. It wasn't quite like that for Violet, but it definitely felt like a part of herself she'd ignored. Violet smiled at the memory of her grandma and wondered what she'd think of this place. It was definitely inspirational.

As Violet laid her head back and closed her eyes, a giant yawn took over. She needed those comfy pillows and big thick duvet she'd discovered in the lodge bedroom and the enormous king-sized bed. With a stretch, Violet headed to bed, the beautiful scenes in Rasmus's brochure and his plea to Olavi still clear in her mind.

❊ ❊ ❊

The next morning, Violet awoke refreshed and ready to explore the beautiful world now sitting on her doorstep. Wrapped up against the cold, she closed the lodge door, quickly putting her thick mittens back on to save her already icy fingers, and headed off towards the trees behind her lodge. According to a sort of guidebook in her welcome basket, there was a path through the forest to the town and as she was up for an adventure, she headed off.

The snowfall had stopped sometime in the night. She didn't know when as she'd slept for almost ten hours. She was normally a good sleeper but with a business to run there was always a lot on her mind, and she tended to wake early and start work virtually straight away. Last night, sleep had been

deep and restorative rather than light and peppered with thoughts of her to-do list, and she'd slept far later than normal, but she felt more rested than she had in ages.

As she trudged towards the bank of trees, she hadn't anticipated how much it would work her legs to walk on the thick snow. Her feet sunk in and she had to actively pull them out again just to take a single step. By the time she reached the woodland, where the snow that covered the ground was shallower, most of it caught by the large branches overhead, her legs were aching and her breath running faster. Under the canopy, she slowed her pace and inhaled the scent of pine, and the hint of dirt from the firm earthen path beneath her feet.

Violet gazed around her, taking in the natural beauty of the place. The dark tree trunks looked too thin to hold the weight of the snow-covered boughs and where flurries had gathered at different heights, the land around her undulated with dozens of tiny white hills and valleys. She wandered further – surer than ever she should try and find some painting supplies to capture this beautiful place. She couldn't quite believe she had so much time to do it in. It was like a dream come true, but a dream she hadn't realised she even had. Her holidays were normally to hot and sunny places. She'd never thought to visit somewhere like this, but she was glad the opportunity had come her way.

As she followed the path, a large man came into view and she paused, recognising him immediately. Rasmus was walking towards her, head down, concentrating on the ground. Was he ignoring her? All the layers of clothes made him seem bigger than he was, but he was still nicely tall and broad. Violet noticed his pale blond eyebrows, drawn together in a frown just as they had been yesterday. Was it the developers he mentioned playing on his mind? Or, had he seen her and wanted to avoid her?

For a second, she wasn't sure what to do. She thought about hiding behind a tree but that would mean trudging through the snow, and she probably wouldn't get there without him spotting her. She was just going to have to walk past him and be polite. Rasmus looked up, his step faltered and he dropped his eyes before barrelling forwards, moving to the edge of the path so they could pass each other easily. Clearly, he had no intention of speaking to her, which was fine because she didn't want to speak to him either. But then, as she smelled the pine-scented air and remembered the beautiful images in the magazine, her need to know more grew too strong.

His note to Olavi had stirred something inside her, and rereading the brochure that morning, Violet, as always, had thoughts. At the very least she needed to ask if he wanted his magazine back.

‘Rasmus, isn’t it?’ she said, stepping into his path, forcing him to stop.

‘Umm, yes, that’s right.’ He looked at her and gave a polite, almost shy smile.

Her stomach somersaulted. She’d always preferred his type of handsome over the shiny-suited, ultra-processed guys she came across on dating sites. Too many of them had turned out to be self-obsessed walking red flags. She repressed a shudder at the memory.

‘I’m Violet.’ She stuck her thickly mittened hand out for him to shake. He eyed it suspiciously for a second, then took it, though the handshake was weird and awkward in their thick gloves. ‘We met yesterday,’ she added, even though she clearly didn’t need to. She’d formed the habit of introducing herself this way from all the events she’d run, and it was a hard habit to break.

‘Yes, I remember.’ His cheeks were pink and she couldn’t tell if it was from the cold or from embarrassment, but she was sure the colour had darkened since they began talking. ‘I’m sorry but I must—’ He tried to step around her, but she side-stepped right back into his way.

‘You left something at the lodge yesterday – a brochure. Did you want it back?’

Rasmus’s pulled-together brow softened, his face relaxing. He really was gorgeous when he wasn’t yelling. ‘Yes, thank you. I’ll come and get it later, if that’s all right? It’s for the owner of your lodge.’

‘Yes, I – I’m sorry but when I moved it the note fell out and I read it. I didn’t realise it was private or I wouldn’t have—’

‘You speak Finnish?’

‘Umm … no, I translated it.’ What would his reaction be to that? She expected him to revert to the Rasmus of yesterday and be cross, but to her surprise he smiled.

‘I see. Thankfully it’s not really private. But I will be there later to collect it.’ Another side step to try and move past her but she was too quick for him and again blocked his path.

‘There was something about a developer? It sounded pretty serious.’

‘Aren’t you here on holiday?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why do you want to know?’

‘I just do,’ she said honestly with a shrug. ‘I’m a naturally curious person and I always get interested in the places I visit.’

‘Really?’ He seemed sceptical. ‘Well, if you really want to know, a big commercial developer is trying to buy up the land just outside of Levi. We don’t know if it’s for another resort or something else. There have been rumours of an airport for private jets and an exclusive resort for the rich and famous.’ His tone was full of disapproval. ‘Olavi is thinking of selling some of his land. He owns a lot around here and he likes money. He doesn’t care about the people here or about the environment.’

‘So that’s why you were so cross?’

‘Cross?’ His brows pulled together adorably.

‘Oh, sorry.’ Violet chuckled. ‘Angry. Annoyed.’

‘Ah, I see.’ A small smile lifted one side of his mouth. ‘Yes. And there are others in the town too who are thinking of selling.’ He softened as he looked at her. ‘I’m sorry if I frightened you yesterday. I really didn’t mean to. I just needed to change his mind.’

‘It’s okay.’ His apology was genuine – she could tell. A moment’s silence descended as they studied each other. She wondered if he was seeing her differently, just as she was seeing him through fresh eyes now she understood a tiny bit about him. It was clear he was passionate about the land and his business, and she hoped he could see she wasn’t as peculiar as the wooden spoon wielding might suggest. ‘The pictures in your brochure are stunning. Are they real places? Around here?’

‘Yes. All of them. Some are well known, others more secret. Not places the tourists know or can easily get to from the resort.’

‘Oh.’ A bolt of disappointment hit her. If they weren’t tourist spots how was she to visit them? The answer was standing right in front of her and she gave her widest, most winning smile. ‘I’d love to see them. They’re very inspiring. Could you possibly—?’

‘I’m sorry, no,’ he said scowling, his manner growing sterner. ‘That isn’t possible.’ Finally he managed to dodge around her and began marching on his way.

‘No?’ Violet hurried after him. ‘What do you mean no?’

‘I mean no. Those spots are not for tourists like you to trample all over and destroy.’

‘Excuse me but I have no intention of trampling on, or destroying, anything. I just want to see them. In fact, I’d like to paint them, if I can find some art supplies somewhere.’

She was getting a little out of breath trying to keep up. She was no match for his long strides, not in these heavy boots. If they made it out of the woods and back out to the snow-covered ground, she’d have no chance of keeping up. And what exactly was his problem? Obviously she had an idea from the note and brochure, but that didn’t seem enough to act like this. ‘Hey!’ she called out.

‘My answer is still no,’ he yelled back over his shoulder.

God, she was unfit. Perhaps she should add the gym as a New Year’s resolution. But as she fought for breath, an idea occurred to her. If she were honest, the beginnings of it had occurred to her last night, as soon as she saw the letter, but she’d not wanted to get involved in someone else’s drama. But perhaps she could help him while he helped her.

‘What if I can help you?’ she said, noticing him slow and eventually pause a couple of steps later.

‘How can you help me?’ He turned, crossing his arms over his chest.

‘Well,’ she said, walking up to him so they could speak face to face. ‘I happen to run my own business organising events, often fundraising ones, for businesses in the arts, which isn’t too far away from you and what you’re doing, saving your local area. I could help you.’

‘How?’

‘Well, what have you done to raise awareness and get people onside?’

‘I made the brochure.’

‘Okay.’ She stretched the word to make her point. ‘And … ?’

He shrugged.

‘And then went around shouting at people?’ He looked sheepish and a little bit exasperated. ‘Dare I suggest, there are other, less shouty things that might work better?’

‘Like what?’

‘Lots of things. I can think of at least three right now, off the top of my head.’ His eyes narrowed with curiosity. ‘Agree to show me some of these gorgeous places and I’ll help you put a new, better plan together. One that might actually work in getting people onside.’

‘My answer is still no.’ He started walking again and with a groan she followed.

Violet fought for breath. ‘One, you could start a petition. Two, you could hold an event to raise awareness and three—’ She sucked air into her lungs even though they didn’t seem keen on accepting it. ‘Three, you could look at funding opportunities to support you.’

Rasmus slowed to a stop and turned. He shifted his weight onto one hip and cocked his head, assessing her.

‘Look,’ she said, resisting the urge to double over, put her hands on her knees and catch her breath. ‘I really want to paint some of these places. I don’t want to destroy them; I want to capture them on paper – well, canvas. My grandma was an artist and—’ She shrugged. ‘I just want to paint beautiful paintings like she did and these places look amazing. Like nowhere else on earth.’

For the first time since she’d met him, a genuine, full smile lifted the corners of his mouth, and it completely transformed his face. While he’d been handsome before, he looked sexy as hell now. His eyes had lit up and he seemed different. Like she might actually like him if they had a conversation, which didn’t involve insulting each other. For a long, drawn-out moment, he didn’t speak. Then suddenly, after scanning her once more with narrowed eyes he said: ‘Fine.’

A bolt of excitement shot through her. ‘You agree?’

‘I do. But I want specifics on some of these ideas. The ones you listed before.’

She looked around as the wind began to gust, shaking snow from the branches. A clump fell onto the ground and Violet shivered as the cold wind rippled her skin, slipping under her hat and around the back of her neck.

To her surprise Rasmus noticed and a flash of concern passed over his eyes. ‘Why don’t we go to a café in the resort? It’s going to start snowing again soon and you’re cold.’

She thought about arguing, not wanting him to think of her as a wimpy tourist unused to the extreme weather, because it was clear he wasn’t overly fond of tourists. But what would be the point? She was one and she was unused to this sort of extreme cold. She also didn’t fancy freezing her bits off for the sake of misplaced pride.

‘Yes, let’s do that. I have to admit, I’m normally a hot countries type of girl.’

‘You like to travel?’

‘I do. When I can.’

‘Follow me,’ he said, turning and leading the way. ‘It isn’t far.’

Not far for you, maybe, she thought, struggling to match his pace. She was a bit worried she’d be an unattractive, hot, sweaty mess by the time she got there. But then, what did it matter? She wasn’t here for romance. She was here to unwind and explore, nothing more. Rasmus whatever-his-surname-was was going to have to take her how he found her and if he didn’t like it, tough.

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Chapter 4

A short walk brought them back into the main part of the resort. Christmas trees had been stationed at various points around the place, and the slopes were busy with energetic skiers. With fairy lights hanging around the different buildings, an abundance of twinkling lights, loud chatter and general noise surrounded her. The difference between this and the silent, natural beauty of the eco lodges was stark and Violet had a moment's understanding of where Rasmus's passion came from. She wasn't judging anyone, she could absolutely see the appeal of this type of holiday, and this resort was wonderful with bars and restaurants bringing jobs and money into the local economy, but she could also see why you wouldn't want these everywhere if you lived somewhere so naturally beautiful as here.

She followed Rasmus into a café, the tables outside busy despite the cold. Inside, Violet was grateful for the warm air from the two large fireplaces, log fires burning fiercely. The orange glow from lots of low-hanging lights all in circular wicker shades made the place seem almost as homely as her lodge. She definitely liked this cosy décor and might have to bring some of this to her own place back home. A huge Christmas tree twinkled in the corner and children gaped at it in wonder before being called by their parents to sit down and eat.

'What would you like to drink?' he asked.

'Umm … can I get a coffee? Thanks.'

'Milk?'

'Yes, please.'

He ordered at the till, laughing with the guy serving him, and Violet relaxed a little more. So he *could* laugh then, when he wanted to. She was interested to see this side of him. Rasmus came over with a tray a few minutes later. By the time he arrived, Violet had shed her thick coat and scarf, gloves and hat, and was trying to tame her curls so they weren't sticking straight up off her head thanks to the static from her beanie. As Rasmus sat down, he glanced at her, his eyes skittering over her face, his

expression unreadable. Then he quickly turned his attention back to the tray. Did she look the hot, sweaty mess she'd expected after such a brisk walk in all those layers? She glanced at a mirror on the wall opposite. No, she looked okay actually. Her cheeks were a tiny bit pinker than was most flattering, but she looked all right. Maybe it was her hair. Most people were surprised by the sheer volume of it.

He placed a coffee and a delicious-looking slice of cake in front of her.

'What's this?' Violet asked, her mouth watering at the sweet, buttery smell.

'It's *tiikerikakku*. Tiger cake, we call it. I thought it might be a good way to apologise.'

Anyone bringing her cake, unasked, made their way into her good books. Violet immediately took a bite. The circular bundt cake with ridges on the top was like a chocolate and vanilla marble cake and utterly delicious.

'Thank you,' she said, finishing another bite before continuing. 'But before we begin—' This conversation couldn't be avoided given yesterday's bad first meeting, even if he had bought her delicious treats. '—I just need to check. You're not normally a shouty maniac, are you?'

He laughed, surprised by her question, throwing his head back. She liked it, the deep bass chuckle and the way it changed his face into something softer. 'No. I'm sorry to say you caught me – or maybe I caught you – on a bad day.'

'So you don't normally go breaking and entering into other people's lodges?'

'I wasn't breaking and entering! I knocked and opened because I thought it was Olavi. We've always done that and besides, I thought he was avoiding me.'

'I'm not surprised.'

'I really don't normally shout. Ever.' He clocked her disbelieving expression. 'It's true! Normally I act like a grown man and control myself.'

She studied him for a moment. He did seem much more placid today. But if she was going to help him and get to see those beautiful places she desperately wanted, she had to know she could spend time with him. She was getting the impression he was a lot more than those silly few minutes of their first meeting, and maybe he was even a bit … nice.

'I am sorry about yesterday,' he continued. 'I really am not normally like that at all. And now I know you're in the lodge I won't ever knock and open

the door myself.'

'Okay,' she replied. 'Apology accepted. So—' She slipped easily into business mode, used to leading these types of meetings, though she hadn't expected to be doing it on day two of her holiday. Or was it day one? Should you count the day of travelling? She didn't normally. She brought her mind back to the matter at hand as she added sugar to her coffee. 'What's actually going on? I need all the details please.'

Rasmus paused, his cup halfway to his lips. He too had taken a moment to remove some layers and as he brushed a hand through his pale blond hair, his bicep bulging against his shirt, a tingle started deep down in her chest. He put his cup down and took a breath. 'Like I said, there are developers closing in and some of the other landowners and local businesses are thinking of selling to them. They seem to want to get their hands on everything here and turn the whole town into a resort. I don't want them to.'

'Why?'

His brows pulled together, fine lines appearing on his forehead. 'Why don't I want them to? Isn't that obvious?'

'Like I said, details please. And why are they thinking of selling?' Violet asked. She sipped her coffee and Rasmus did the same. The rich, deep flavour hit her tongue and warmed her from the inside. 'This is good coffee.'

'We like our coffee here. Not too strong, either.'

After a second, he relaxed back into the chair, his thick plaid shirt strained attractively across his broad shoulders. Violet wondered if there was a Mrs Rasmus but a quick glance at his hand showed no wedding ring. If she'd seen his picture on a dating profile back home, she'd definitely have been interested, but she shook the thought away.

'Olavi has money, at least I think he does. So I don't really know why he wants to sell. He seems the type to want *all* the money he can get, if you know what I mean. I think that's probably why he's selling.'

'And everyone else? Do people not like living here?'

'They love it,' Rasmus replied. 'At least the people I know do. But it can be costly. There are always running repairs; out of season it can be hard to make a living. Mostly, for me, we have seen enough development here. The places that are untouched by the tourism industry are getting smaller.'

'All those secret spots you mentioned in your brochure?' She sipped some more of her delicious coffee and took another bite of cake, getting

more chocolate than vanilla this time and enjoying the hit of cocoa with the sweet buttery sponge. It was surprisingly easy to talk to Rasmus when he wasn't shouting.

He nodded. 'I'm passionate about sustainable tourism. We all make money from tourists like you, I'm not pretending we don't, but we have a duty to protect the beauty of this place, the wildlife … the world even, if you wanted to go that far.'

'But you think other owners' biggest problems are surviving through the off-season and upkeep costs?'

'I think so. Unless they run other businesses like my family do, it can be hard to make a living, but even then …'

He trailed away and from his expression she guessed there was something going on his mind, but after a second he hadn't added anything, so she spoke to ensure the conversation carried on. 'So if we could head that off somehow, that could be helpful?'

'I think so, yes. We're all basically small business owners trying to make enough to live on. None of us are rich. Except for Olavi.'

She knew herself how hard it had been at first to build her business. 'So your main goal is to protect this place?'

'Yes. The problem is simple really, but I don't think the solution is.'

'Well, it sort of is,' Violet replied. 'Either convince Olavi and others not to sell or convince the developers not to develop. I'm not sure the second one is an option because we all know that when developers have made up their mind there's no stopping them, as long as they have the land to build on, they will. So that leaves us with convincing people not to give them the land in the first place. Therefore, all our effort needs to go into the first option: convince people not to sell.'

He looked up and their eyes met. A charge of electricity entered the air. Rasmus cleared his throat. 'I'm impressed.'

'Well, thank you very much.'

'So, what do you think we should do?'

Violet rested her elbows on the table, her coffee cup in hand. 'I'm thinking.' Her mind turned thought after thought over as she ran through the experiences she'd had with other organisations, searching for anything that might be useful.

She was primarily an events organiser but often worked alongside fundraisers. In the arts, that was nearly always the reason why events were

put on in the first place: to raise money for a cause. It could be to save a building, replace a roof, cover a specific cost or to showcase a new offering. Her mind settled on a particular event she'd run the year before. A theatre company in the north of England needed money to replace the roof on their theatre. While they'd tried a couple of smaller scale things themselves, nothing was getting them anywhere near their target amount, so Violet had been brought in. They'd had the idea for a larger scale event but needed someone experienced to ensure they didn't end up out of pocket and without any money to fix the roof. She'd worked with the theatre's fundraising team and together they'd put on a gala evening and auction. A tiny bell began to tinkle somewhere in her brain. She'd hit on something. She wasn't sure what exactly, but something. She looked around at the tree, the cosy lights, and her eyes fell on a poster about booking your table for New Year's Day dinner now before they sold out. She sat straighter.

Rasmus, who'd been quietly sipping his coffee, noticed and looked around. 'Is everything okay?'

His voice startled her out of her thoughts. 'What?'

'I worried something was wrong.' He smiled, chuckling. 'You jumped like …' He searched for the words. '*Olla puulla päähän lyöty*.'

'What does that mean?' she giggled.

'Like you've been struck by a log. It's a Finnish saying.'

'Oh!' She laughed again, louder this time, unable to stop herself. 'Does that happen often here?'

'I guess it must do for there to be a saying, but it's never happened to me. Thankfully.'

'I'm glad to hear it. But I'm good. I think …' Violet said, nodding to herself as she refocused her thoughts and the idea continued to develop and take shape in her head. 'I think I've got an idea.'

'Already?'

'Okay, it's just a first idea, a work in progress, but—'

She put her cup down, turning a little more towards him, and ran through her thoughts about the theatre company and the gala evening, but Rasmus only looked more confused. This was the problem when she hadn't quite PowerPointed her ideas. They were a jumble and she had a habit of talking in half sentences as one thought overtook another. 'Okay,' she said, knowing she needed to start again and lay it out clearly. 'What if we set up a Sustainable Tourism Fund and hold a celebration day to raise money for

it? We can have a day event, maybe on New Year's Eve, and then a party in the evening. We'll be cutting it fine for a New Year's Eve do, given most people will have set their events up ages ago and probably sold out by now, but it's worth a try. We might even be able to piggyback onto someone else's if you know anyone who might be sympathetic to our cause?'

Rasmus blinked. She didn't blame him. It was a lot to take in.

'That's … wow, you thought of all that in like … five seconds.'

'I told you, I'm good at what I do.'

'I like the idea,' he replied but his voice wavered with hesitation.

'But?'

'But how? How could we even do all this in a matter of weeks? Isn't this too big considering we need to stop them now? There was a meeting only the other day and the developers were convincing people to sell. Olavi was there along with some other people I wish hadn't gone too. Won't it take too long to organise all those things?'

She could sense there was something in that last comment but didn't press. 'It is a lot, but lucky for you, I'm really organised and you'd be surprised how often we get called in at the last minute to sort events that haven't gone to plan. I'll be leaving just after New Year so I can help with a New Year's Eve event but nothing after that. Sometimes a tight timescale can work to your advantage, and you feel the developers are moving quickly?'

'Very quickly. The pressure increases daily. The season will be over soon, and people will be preparing for the harder months.'

'Then what other choice do you have? It's got to be worth a try, hasn't it?'

'Okay,' he agreed. 'Let's try.'

'Good. And, in return, you can show me the beautiful, secret places that were in your brochure and any others that are in your brain that you don't want regular tourists to see. I won't go trampling over them or destroying them, I promise.'

'I'm glad to hear it. Does your grandmother still paint?'

'No, she passed away a long time ago.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's fine,' she quickly reassured him. 'Really. I miss her but … painting helps me remember her and I've been so caught up in life that I haven't

been doing it as much. This is my chance to reconnect with her and a hobby I used to love. Sorry, that might be TMI.'

'T.M …'

'Too much information.'

'No, it's not. Family is important.'

Again, his brows pulled together, and he looked almost sad for a second, then a smile brightened his face. 'I think our agreement is fair.'

'It's more than fair, given how much I normally charge for my services,' she teased.

'Yes, but—' His tone matched hers and as he leaned forwards she got a tiny hint of his aftershave. Something clean and fresh, like the cold air outside. There was a mischievous gleam in his eye that made the back of her neck grow hot. 'I'll be repaying you with views that no amount of money can buy.'

'So we have a deal?' She held out her hand and he took it. His skin was warm, and she'd expected a firm grip that hurt her fingers, but his hold was gentle, his hand enclosing hers carefully.

'We have a deal.'

'Great.' She took another mouthful of cake and washed it down with coffee. 'So where can I buy painting supplies? And where are we going first?'

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Chapter 5

Rasmus directed Violet to a shop on the outskirts of Levi about a fifteen-minute walk from her lodge but in the opposite direction to the resort. They parted outside the café as he had business with someone there, promising that he'd pick Violet up later to take her to the first of the secret spots he was willing to show her. She wondered what it would it be, but he'd given no hints, just told her to be ready at two o'clock that afternoon, which gave her plenty of time to get to the town, buy what she needed and then get back to her lodge for a quick warm-up and lunch.

He'd told her to follow the track she'd started taking through the woods and follow the path through its centre. A little nervous she was going to get lost, Violet had made sure her phone was fully charged before leaving, but as she walked through the tall pine forest again, the wind still as strong as it was before but with no signs of immediate snow, she felt calm and at peace. There was just something about nature that reminded you of the world outside. Not the one full of jobs and to-do lists, but the one that had existed for a millennia before and would continue to exist long after everyone's time had come. She found it comforting, a solid foundation on which life was built, and made an effort to pay attention to everything around her. She studied the shape of the branches, the exact colour of the snow, which wasn't totally white but had hints of an eerie pale blue. She could hear birds singing, though she was sure it wasn't the usual ones she saw in her garden, and tuned in to the gentle melodies as she walked.

Before long she was in Levi, and its small town centre with the sky heavy with loaded grey clouds. The bright lights of the shops glittered, making the place seem even more welcoming. The tall buildings, made from a mixture of stone and wooden cladding, had snow-covered signs poking out the sides with the business names on, icicles hanging from the bottoms. There was a light dusting of powder on the streets where the footsteps of tourists had trodden down any snowfall that had landed before. It was idyllic, picture-perfect for a snowy, Christmassy holiday. She followed the directions

Rasmus had given her to the store and entered the shop, surprised at how big it was.

The store frontage was small, fixed in tightly between two others, but the shop seemed to expand as soon as she got inside. It wasn't specifically an art shop, but more of a general store that also sold art supplies. There was a distinct lack of Christmas decorations in here, a sharp contrast to the rest of the town. Violet smiled at the woman behind the counter who was in her late sixties, her grey hair short and curly. Not as wildly curled as Violet's own, but similar enough, and deep lines were etched into her forehead, around her eyes and at the corners of her mouth. From her manner and tight-lipped expression, Violet was pretty sure they weren't laughter lines and wondered why Rasmus had sent her here. It must have been the only place in town that sold what she needed.

Violet approached the counter, hoping to save herself time by asking for what she needed rather than spending ages searching. The sky was growing darker with what she suspected were snow clouds, and she wanted to be back in her lodge before it came down too heavily. Hopefully it wouldn't stop her being taken out that afternoon. She was desperate to stand in some of the places she'd seen in Rasmus's brochure, but there was no fighting the weather, especially somewhere like here.

'Hello!' she said cheerily. 'You must be Ritva.'

'*Hei*,' she replied, glancing up then peering at her through narrowed eyes, the wrinkles closing in even tighter. She pushed her paperwork to one side. 'Can I help you?'

'Oh, great, you speak English. I was worried I was going to have to use a translation app and those things can sometimes steer you very wrong.' She chuckled and the woman behind the counter pressed her lips together, unimpressed. Granted it wasn't one of her best jokes, but she clearly thought Violet was jabbering and had no patience for it. 'Umm … I was told you had art supplies?'

'Art supplies? Yes. Who told you that?'

'Rasmus. Sorry, I don't know his surname.' She really needed to find out given she was going to be working with him and spending quite a lot of time alone with him. The idea filled her with excitement, but it was because of where he was taking her, not his bulging biceps or the way his shirt sometimes strained over his shoulders. She'd only noticed that by accident.

She absolutely had not been looking and even if she had she was just being polite.

‘Rasmus?’

From her tone, Violet wasn’t sure if she simply couldn’t remember who he was or if it was someone she knew and didn’t approve of.

‘Tall, broad, blond hair,’ Violet added.

‘I know who you mean. I am not senile.’

‘Right.’ Crikey. Violet hoped not everyone here was as grumpy as this woman. ‘You are Ritva though, right?’

‘Of course I’m Ritva.’ A second later, after giving Violet a quick flick up and down with her eyes, she added, ‘What did he say?’

‘Rasmus? Just that this was the nearest store with arty things.’

She was wishing now he’d warned her about the grumpy owner too, but he hadn’t mentioned much more than her name.

‘I see.’ Ritva scowled, assessing Violet. ‘What do you need?’

Violet had tried painting lots of different things in lots of different mediums thanks to her grandmother, but she’d discovered a love of landscapes painted with acrylics suited her best. ‘I was looking for some canvases and a set of acrylic paints. And brushes of course,’ she added quickly. ‘And a pallet.’

Ritva came out from behind the counter. ‘This way. Are you carrying them back to your car?’

‘To my lodge. I’m in one of the eco lodges near the resort.’

She paused. ‘That’s quite a long way.’ A flash of concern passed over her stern face, surprising Violet. ‘Will you be able to manage all this?’

‘I think so. I’m stronger than I look.’ She smiled again to be met with another unimpressed scowl.

Whether Violet was or wasn’t, she didn’t have much choice. Ritva left her in front of a display full of paints, sketchpads, canvases and everything an artist could need. Maybe not a professional one, but this would be absolutely fine for her to reconnect with one of her favourite hobbies. As she examined a set of brushes, Violet allowed herself to dream of her work one day being displayed. It didn’t matter where – a local fair or a tiny art gallery somewhere – she didn’t mind. She’d just always wanted to be considered a real artist, like her grandmother, but it had always seemed like a silly, out of reach dream, and as time had passed, other dreams had taken

over. Glancing over to see Ritva unsubtly watching her, Violet pushed the thought away, gathered everything into her arms and took it to the till.

‘Are you here on a painting holiday?’

‘I am. It’s always been a hobby but one I hope to do more of. I haven’t had a proper holiday in ages.’ And she wouldn’t now really, not with planning this event for Rasmus. Which reminded her, she’d have to get started on that when she got back. Maybe she could get some things done before he even picked her up while she ate her lunch. She was very good at multi-tasking.

‘What made you choose here?’

‘I won a stay at one of the eco lodges.’

Ritva’s head shot up. ‘Which one?’

‘Sorry, I don’t know what it’s called but it’s owned by someone called Olavi.’

‘Olavi?’ She narrowed her eyes again. ‘Why is that old windbag giving away his cottage?’

The question and the name-calling surprised her. Clearly Rasmus wasn’t the only one not too keen on Olavi. ‘Sorry, I’ve no idea. You’d have to ask him that.’

‘So how do you know Rasmus?’

Given how the woman had greeted her, it was surprising how many questions she liked to ask. Violet hadn’t had her down as the chatty type.

‘We just sort of bumped into each other and got talking.’ She wasn’t about to go into the details of the whole wooden-spoon-brandishing episode. She was realising this was a small town and everyone knew each other and she wasn’t sure Rasmus would want that information getting out. She had a feeling he’d be quite embarrassed about it, and as he had apologised it was probably better forgotten.

Violet felt like more questions were lingering on the tip of Ritva’s tongue, but she didn’t say anything. Maybe she was the town gossip, though she didn’t seem the type. With the final item put through the till and everything bagged up, Ritva gave her the final price and Violet paid.

‘Are you sure you can manage all that walking back to the lodges?’

‘Absolutely.’ Violet began manoeuvring each item and herself so she had everything balanced. She wasn’t quite sure how she’d navigate her front door, but she’d face that when she came to it. She glanced at the shop door, realising she hadn’t accounted for that either.

Damn.

Ritva followed her gaze then sighed. ‘I’ll get that for you.’ She opened it, standing to one side to let her out.

‘Thank you! I’m sure I’ll be back soon.’

Ritva didn’t answer.

Violet made it out of the town and back onto the forest track in fairly good spirits but as she trekked what felt like a never-ending path, it became so much harder given the weight of everything she was carrying. She didn’t bother taking in the natural beauty, she was too busy sweating and trying not to drop anything because she wasn’t entirely sure she’d be able to pick it up again if she did.

‘This was not your best idea, ever, Violet,’ she muttered to herself.

‘Did you know,’ said a cheerful voice next to her, ‘that you’re talking to yourself?’

She spun to see a pretty, blue-eyed woman about her age grinning at her.

‘Can I help with anything? That is a lot to carry.’

‘Oh no,’ Violet replied, shaking her head. ‘That’s fine. I’ve got everything balanced, I’m—Arrrgh!’ She slid on a patch of ice or packed snow, or a stone or something. She couldn’t see because of the load piled in her arms but regained her balance just in time.

The young woman’s arms steadied her. ‘You’re all right. Here—’ She eased a couple of large canvases out from under Violet’s armpit. ‘Please, let me help.’

‘Are you sure? You might not be going my way.’

The woman nodded towards the path in front of them. ‘I’m headed to the ski resort. I work there. What about you?’

‘The eco lodges?’

‘Then we are going in the same direction! I’m Monika.’

‘Violet. It’s lovely to meet you. Thank you for this. You’re sure it’s not a problem?’

‘Not at all. You are an artist, yes?’

Violet shook her head and explained that she’d won the holiday and had decided to do some painting while she was here.

‘Oh, that sounds like lots of fun.’

‘And you work at the resort?’

She nodded. ‘I’m one of the creche managers. I look after some of the kids so their parents can get some time together.’

‘Wow. That sounds … tiring. Very tiring.’

Monika laughed. ‘It is. But I love it.’

As they walked on Monika asked what she did for a living and, after replying, Violet gently probed about the developers.

‘They’re determined to build another ski resort but one that is “exclusive”. We don’t need another one.’

‘Do you know Rasmus, the lodge owner?’ Violet asked.

‘Of course! Everyone knows everyone here. He’s very against the developers.’

‘He told me. And do you agree?’

‘I do, definitely. If we don’t stop them soon there will be no wide-open spaces left. Everything will be resorts. We need to make a stand.’

They chatted more and more and thanks to Monika’s friendliness, it felt like Violet had known her for five years rather than five minutes. When they came to the lodges, Violet hoped she’d see her again.

‘Thank you. I really appreciate your help.’

‘No problem. I know the town might seem a bit at odds because of this developer thing, but mostly we are nice people and like to help each other out. I hope I’ll see you around, Violet.’

‘Yes, you too!’

After a cup of tea in her warm, cosy lodge (though she was secretly craving a hot chocolate), Violet began to sort through her purchases. She’d bought different-sized canvases and decided that a small one would be best to start with. After all, she was still getting back into it and couldn’t be sure how long a bigger one would take her. She also didn’t fancy lugging it around after the trek home and wasn’t about to ask Rasmus for help, so she had to make sure she could manage everything herself. She also needed to make a bit of a start on this event planning and so found a copy of her event checklist, ready to share it with Rasmus when he came to pick her up.

By the time he knocked on her front door she’d restored her energy with some lunch (a *ruisleipä* – an open sandwich on rye bread she’d bought in town) and had put everything she needed for painting into a large wicker basket she’d found in a cupboard.

‘Come in,’ she said, letting Rasmus out of the cold wind. ‘I won’t be a second. What’s your email address by the way?’

‘My … ? Why do you need that?’

‘To send you some event planning stuff.’ She held her phone aloft ready to go. He told her and she sent him the checklist, a document she’d refined after years and years of working in events, the starting point for all her projects. ‘We can talk about that later. Now, where are we going?’

She couldn’t hide the excitement in her voice and Rasmus smiled. It sent another crackle of attraction through her.

‘You’ll see. Come on.’

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Chapter 6

They stepped outside and Violet immediately paused. ‘Oh!’

‘What?’ Rasmus asked, looking around.

For some reason, she’d presumed they’d walk, probably because Rasmus was so set on saving the environment around him, so she was slightly surprised to see a large black car in front of her lodge. She pointed at it. ‘It’s a car.’

‘Yes, I know that.’

‘I’m just surprised. Is it yours?’

‘Of course it’s mine. How else do you think I get around? Dog sled?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe.’

A smile lifted the corner of his mouth. ‘Come on, or we won’t get long before the light fades.’

She climbed in, the breeze strong and the sky a deep, slate grey. Rasmus drove them first towards the town, then circled around it. After a few more minutes on a winding road, he parked at the bottom of what looked like a mountain.

‘Umm—’ Violet peered up at the intimidating mass of rock.

‘What?’

‘I’m not sure I’m quite equipped to climb that.’

‘We’re not climbing all of it. Just a quarter. And there’s a path. Come on.’ He held out his hand for her basket, and she happily handed it over, knowing she was going to need all her limbs free to tackle this. Exhilaration and nerves swirled in her stomach as Rasmus led them to a path. It was thick with snow and free from footprints. This really was a secret spot no one had visited, since the last snowfall at least. She wondered what the view would be like. Rasmus held out his hand to help her up the steepest parts and she happily took it, his strong arm pulling her forward. Just as her legs were burning with the effort, and the thought of continuing to climb made her anxious rather than excited, Rasmus guided them to a flat trail, and they seemed to be circling around the mountain to the other side.

‘Here you are,’ he said, placing the basket down then holding his arms out.

As she straightened up, trying to take slow, steady breaths, her mouth dropped open. Down on the ground in front of her was a large swathe of land covered in unbroken snow. The fields rolled and curved giving the whiteness texture and shape, shadow and shade. To her right, a series of smaller mountains, or maybe they were hills – she’d never quite known what the technical difference was – bordered the fields. The landscape was rugged and unforgiving as away in the distance was another imposing mountain range, lower this time with jagged edges and dark rocks jutting through the snow. What really took her breath away, though, was that there was no one and nothing around. The world was silent, and everything seemed untouched, like she and Rasmus were the first people to even see it. She hurried to find a canvas and start sketching the shapes, ready to paint.

‘It’s beautiful.’

‘I’m glad you think so. And I didn’t start with the best one. There’s a lot more to show you.’

She could only imagine how lovely the other places were, if this was their starting point.

‘I should have bought an easel,’ she said, finding a rock to sit on and balancing the small canvas on her knees.

‘I’m glad you didn’t,’ he replied teasingly. ‘It would have been hard to carry up the path. But there are other places where you might want one. Did Ritva not have any?’

‘I didn’t look,’ she admitted. ‘I was too busy thinking about paints and canvases. I’ll have to call back in. Would she have one delivered to the lodge, do you think?’

‘Yes, probably. Or I can pick it up for you. Though you would have to go in and get it.’

She narrowed her eyes at him. ‘Why is that?’

‘Why is what?’

‘Why would I have to go in? Don’t you like Ritva?’ She pulled out a light pencil and began sketching the shapes in front of her, thinking of Ritva’s own inquisition regarding Rasmus. No detail at this stage, just the outlines of the mountains, making sure she got the proportions right.

‘I do,’ Rasmus replied, and for a second added nothing more, then he took a breath and settled on a rock. ‘But she doesn’t really like me.’

‘Oh, why not?’ If he’d introduced himself to her the way he had to Violet, she could understand why, but that wasn’t likely. ‘To be honest she didn’t seem the sort to like many people. No offence.’

Rasmus chuckled. ‘You’re right, she doesn’t. Only her family really and even then …’

His sentence trailed away and she got the feeling there was more to it but didn’t want to pry. They had, after all, only known each other for less than forty-eight hours, and they’d been a rocky forty-eight hours at that.

Violet sighed, found her eraser and began again. Her skills were rusty and she couldn’t quite get it right. The hills in the distance were too big and the ones on the right too small. There were also small banks of trees here and there that looked like they’d been tucked into the landscape, and she was struggling to fit those in.

‘Is everything all right?’ he asked. ‘Are you cold?’

‘Isn’t everyone always cold here?’ She laughed. ‘I’m fine, it’s just been a while since I did this, and I want to get this stage right.’

‘The summers are actually quite mild here. Often getting up to twenty to twenty-five degrees.’

‘Really?’ she asked, glancing over her shoulder.

She’d assumed it was snowy and freezing all year round. It would be interesting to see the landscape then, see the ground beneath the snow.

Rasmus took out his phone and stared at it in silence.

‘You know, you don’t have to stay,’ Violet said. ‘I’m quite happy to sit here on my own.’

To her surprise. he shook his head. ‘It’s fine. I like sitting in places like this. They’re quiet. Away from the world. Peaceful.’

‘Yes,’ she said, completely understanding what he meant.

She’d never really experienced it before, but it was lovely to be somewhere so … tranquil. So restorative. She could just imagine walking almost daily if she lived here. As usual, her brain began to imagine her running her business from the little lodge, flying to events back in the UK or beyond and then returning home to this place. She let herself indulge in the fantasy. It was one of the most fun things about vacations, she’d found, getting so immersed in a place you could imagine life there. She glanced again at Rasmus who was busy typing. She was surprised she felt so at ease in his company, and she had to admit she was a little relieved to have him there in case she tumbled down the mountainside.

Violet carried on sketching and, unusually, she didn't feel the need to fill the silence. Despite their beginning, right now, there was a calmness about Rasmus that matched the environment.

'So,' he said after a while, as Violet sat back, finally satisfied with most of her sketch. 'What is this thing you've sent me?'

'That thing is my events checklist. It's my bible and I use it for every single event I do.'

His index finger swiped against the phone screen time and again. 'It's very long.'

She laughed. 'Yes, it is. Believe it or not, putting on events takes a lot of work. You don't just knock them up in two minutes. We've got to do all of that in a matter of weeks.'

He ran a finger under the rim of his beanie hat, scratching at his hairline. 'This was a bad idea.'

'No, it wasn't. It's just a challenge and one we need to get started on. So, first things first—' She was about to open the paints then looked at the heavy sky and checked the time on her phone.

She wasn't going to be able to paint and wait for it to dry before they had to start making their way back. It was stupid to bring them all. She'd have to concentrate on finishing her sketch and hoping a photo would capture all the delicate colours. She couldn't believe a white landscape could have so many different shades of … well … white. There was brownish white where the ground was, a bright white from the banks of snow, and a pale, almost pinkish white. Where the sun was sinking lower, the grey sky was lit from behind with a stunning glow that made the clouds an unusual yellowish colour. She'd never seen shades like it and wasn't sure she was good enough to capture them all. When she got back, she'd have to just make a start and hope it all worked out. Much like this event.

'First of all, did you like my ideas of a fair during the day and a party at night?'

'Yes! Definitely. I had no idea what to do or where to even start. To be honest an event hadn't even occurred to me. I thought maybe a petition or protesting.'

'Well, good. But we need to decide what the goal is for the event. From what we've discussed so far it seems to be to raise awareness of why people shouldn't sell to the developers, and launch the Sustainable Tourism Fund, and actually get some donations for it. Correct?'

Again, he looked impressed and she swelled with pride.

‘Yes, correct, but—’ He scratched his temple again, finally pulling off his hat despite the cold, and running his fingers through his hair. She didn’t look at the thick mop that had such different shades of blond streaking through it. ‘That feels like a lot.’

‘It is a lot. It’s a hell of a lot, but that doesn’t mean we can’t try. So a fair will show all the tourists how amazing this place is and its people, so that might sway them to donate, or sign a petition against the developers, and a party in the evening for the community will hopefully convince locals not to sell and to support the fund too.’

‘Yes, I like it.’

‘So, the first thing we need to do is secure a location for the event itself. We want something on New Year’s Eve, right?’

‘Right.’

‘Something during the day and something at night.’ She sat back, tapping her pencil against her lip as she thought, and then randomly going over curves and outlines on her sketch. ‘So, with it being such a busy time of year, I still think we’re going to need to piggyback on someone else’s party. That would be most ideal. Do you know anyone who might let us? And who might let us have a space during the day? Is there a local arts centre or exhibition space we can use?’

Rasmus sat for a moment, staring at his phone. Violet let him think and turned her attention back to her sketch. She scowled, still embarrassed at her feeble efforts that weren’t getting any better with her constant tinkering. In fact they were getting worse. But she reminded herself what her grandma used to say, that this was a journey. She would have loved it here – Violet could tell. Grandma Louisa had instilled in her that painting was an exploration of the world around her and as much about the process as it was the finished thing. Enjoying the activity was just as important as the end result. She was there to enjoy the experience and not race to get it finished. For once there was no timetable or deadline. This was for her and her alone. Her work was the same too. You had to enjoy all of the tasks leading up to the night itself or you never got to enjoy anything, too busy chasing the next thing.

Eventually, Rasmus lifted his head. ‘So we do have a small arts centre, and I’ve just been checking and there’s nothing on at this time of year.’

‘Good, then you need to approach them and ask them about holding an event that showcases all the local businesses and the life here. And any idea for the evening?’

‘I have one idea but I’m not sure how willing they’ll be to say yes.’

‘Why?’

Her attention was on her sketch, so she didn’t see his face but the silence that stretched out made her turn.

‘Because we had a falling-out,’ Rasmus admitted shuffling on the rock.

‘About what?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘I don’t know. If it’s something minor we might be able to get over it and if not then we’ll have to think of another location.’

He sighed. ‘It was about the developer meeting. They went and I didn’t think they should.’

‘Why not? Maybe they went to find out what’s actually happening rather than relying on rumours or town gossip.’

Rasmus went silent. ‘Was that remark aimed at me?’

She grinned at him over her shoulder. ‘You did come storming into my lodge yesterday because you thought I was an evil, money-hungry lodge owner.’

‘I don’t think Olavi is evil. He just doesn’t see the damage his agreement could do.’

‘And is it the same for your friend?’

‘I – I don’t know. I didn’t think they had plans to sell, so it was a surprise that they went.’

‘Well, I guess tomorrow you can find out more.’

‘Do you …’ He hesitated. ‘Do you not think that you should come too? As the events organiser? So you can … I don’t know, assess the space or something?’

Seeing this hint of vulnerability was heartwarming, and it definitely was vulnerability rather than him trying to shirk his share of the responsibility. She’d had enough staff and worked with enough people to tell the difference.

‘I just think,’ he continued, ‘you might be better at this than me. Please?’

She laughed as she turned back to her sketch. ‘Fine. It probably would be easier. Do you have a budget for all this or are we asking people to give us the space for free?’

‘Definitely free would be better. I can give some money, but I don’t have much.’ A hint of red crept into his cheeks and it wasn’t from the cold.

Violet ignored the way her heart gave a little quiver. A snowflake fluttered down, landing on her sleeve, and she looked up seeing more begin to float their way to the ground. She quickly covered her canvas.

‘We should go,’ Rasmus said, helping her pack up. ‘I should have moved us sooner.’ Seeing Violet look up, her fear that they were going to be stuck on the mountain written all over her face, Rasmus smiled gently. ‘Don’t worry. We’ll be back in the car before it comes down. I’ll keep you safe.’

The warmth of his words and his determined expression did something to her insides so much so that she couldn’t speak. Then he held out his hand, and she thought about slipping her own into it until she realised he was offering to take the basket again. A blush rushed into her cheeks, and she dropped her eyes, pretending she’d known all along what he was doing. She pushed the basket towards him and as more flakes gathered on her clothes and eyelashes, and the tendrils of hair poking out from under her hat, they made their way back down to the car.

Rasmus stopped in front of her lodge. She wondered for a moment whether to invite him in. There was still a lot to sort out and, she had to admit, she’d enjoyed time in his company. This Rasmus was calm and steady to be around, not to mention nice to look at, and she liked that.

‘So—’ he began, glancing at her then turning back to the windscreen. ‘Tomorrow? Shall we go into town then? I will treat you to breakfast if you like.’

Violet could always be bribed with food, and they needed to get started as soon as possible. ‘That sounds good to me.’

‘Great.’ He smiled genuinely at her, and she couldn’t help but grin back. ‘I’ll pick you up at ten.’

He climbed out and helped with her basket, carrying it up the stairs to the lodge’s front door. When she closed it behind her, there was a strange feeling in her chest. She’d been so busy with work she hadn’t really met anyone she liked in ages. She couldn’t deny she was attracted to Rasmus, at least to the man she’d seen today. But was this just her romanticising again? Idealising this place and everyone in it? Letting the holiday feels take over? She shook the thought away, determined to spend the evening painting her sketch and watching the snow fall outside her window. That was what she was here for, so that was what she would do.

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Chapter 7

Once again, the snow had stopped sometime in the night, and Violet had snuggled into her cloudlike bed, warm and cosy against the huge pillows and wrapped in the thick duvet. This morning, she pottered around the lodge waiting for Rasmus. She'd texted him for details on the two places they planned to visit that day and had done some internet research to make sure she was prepared to meet the owners this morning. The only thing stopping her right now was that she was ravenously hungry and she could never function if she was even the tiniest bit peckish, because all her brain did was scream that it needed food. If she'd known where he was taking her for breakfast, she'd have checked out the menu and planned what to order already.

When Rasmus pulled up, she was more than ready to go as her stomach gurgled loudly. She'd charged out of the house and had leapt into his car by the time he'd opened his door and put one foot on the ground.

'Are you okay?' he asked. Obviously he'd planned to meet her nearer her front door. 'Is something about to explode in there?'

'Very funny. I'm just hungry. Where're we going for breakfast?'

He chuckled. 'To a café I know in town. They do the best coffee and the best food.'

'Yes, but what food?'

He glanced at her and back to the road as he pulled away, grinning. 'You'll like it. I promise.'

'How do you know?'

'Because, unlike most tourists I meet, I think you are interested in local food and local customs and not just skiing and drinking beer.'

Violet hid her surprise as best she could. 'It's true. I am. I'm not really a skier. I like the après-ski more.' But that he already seemed to know her fairly well was exciting. Yet she felt like she was only scratching the surface with him. That was the problem with being an open-book type person, as she was. It left little to the imagination. She wasn't mysterious, but who had

time for that? She had far too much to do on a day-to-day basis to not just say what she thought or ask for what she wanted.

As they drove the short distance into town and then walked to the café, Rasmus asked about her sketch and if she'd made any more progress. Violet admitted that when she'd got home last night all she'd wanted was dinner, a hot bath and to relax in front of the TV. Now, as they sat waiting for their food to be delivered, she decided to ask a little more about him.

The café he'd chosen was away from the centre of town and down a few, narrow side roads. The wooden building reminded Violet of a barn and when they went inside, that theme continued as she spotted a giant toy reindeer in the corner with kids giggling as they attempted to climb onto it, and globe fairy lights criss-crossing the ceiling. Every place she'd seen so far, even the more corporate places at the resort, had been cute and she loved the overall feel of Levi.

'Have you always lived here?' she asked savouring the flavour of the delicious coffee but desperate for her food. Could the cold weather be making her hungrier? Was that a thing?

'Apart from a year when I went to study environmental preservation, yes, but I couldn't wait to get back home.'

She nodded her understanding. She could well imagine Rasmus only ever wanting to be here, he was so fiercely proud of it. 'You must love it here very much.'

'I do, but also, we must do what we have to sometimes.'

'What does that mean?'

Once again, having removed all their outer layers, Violet could see his broad shoulders as he hunched over the table. They were raised with tension but fell as he sighed. 'My family have always run businesses here in Levi. Lots of them. But while I was away things were tough and they made decisions I didn't agree with.'

'What decisions?' she asked gently.

'Decisions to sell or move. Where the McDonald's is used to be a ski shop my grandfather started. It was sold while I was away because the ski resort had opened. The new shop on site sold everything anyone needed at half the price or rented out the equipment, undercutting us even more. My grandfather cut prices as much as he could but eventually, he couldn't compete, so he sold.'

'Oh. And you don't think he should have?'

‘I think it would be wonderful if our local, family-owned stores could stay local family-owned stores, but I recognise it is hard. I just wish we could have discussed it more as a family. I might have been able to help somehow.’

‘What did the rest of your family say?’

Rasmus was saved from having to answer by the arrival of their food and she could see the relief on his face. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ he said straightening up and creating room on the table, but she could see the remnants of past hurts in his eyes. ‘Here, you will like this I think.’

‘What is it again?’ she asked, letting the subject lie. She could tell it had been difficult talking about it and given they were about to spend the next hour or two together, she didn’t want to seem nosy.

‘You have Karelian pie. It’s sort of baked rice in pastry.’

‘So like rice pudding pie?’

‘Rice pudding?’ His brows pulled together.

‘Yeah.’ She tasted some and it was delicious and just like her mum’s rice pudding but a bit firmer and wrapped in pastry. ‘Oh my God, this tastes just like it. This is yummy.’

Rasmus smiled, glancing at her from the corner of his eye as she ate. ‘I like a woman with an appetite.’

Her head shot up and she stared at him, blinking. Had he just said what she’d thought he’d said? His cheeks turned bright pink, and he stuttered as he spoke.

‘I mean – it’s nice being – sitting – with a woman – with someone – who likes to eat.’ He looked at the door where someone had just walked in, avoiding her gaze.

‘I bet you say that to all the women you bring in here.’

‘Believe me, there are not that many. I don’t have time for all that.’

‘Me neither,’ she replied, shovelling another piece of the delicious pie into her mouth, but her chest had tightened at the compliment, and a fizzing sensation tingled her nerves. ‘To be honest, I travel a lot with my job and that’s what I’ve been focusing on.’

‘You don’t mind it?’

‘What?’ she asked unsure which bit of her last sentence he was referring to.

‘Travelling a lot?’

‘No, I love it! I’ve worked all over the UK and even in Europe. My goal is to take my events business global, but I’ll settle for more of a foothold in Europe first.’

‘Wow. That is ambitious. In a good way,’ he added when she cocked her head at him. ‘But don’t you miss being at home?’

‘Not really. I’ve always loved travelling, whether for work or for pleasure. I take it you don’t?’

He shook his head. ‘I prefer to be here. There really isn’t anywhere more perfect in the world.’ A dreamy look came into his eye for a second as he looked out of the window at the locals passing by, some waving when they spotted him and him cheerfully waving back. ‘I’m sure it seems very boring and quiet to someone like you?’

‘Someone like me?’ she said, wiping her mouth with her napkin and forcing herself to take a break from her breakfast before it was all gone.

‘You are too … energetic for somewhere like here. I think you’d get bored.’

‘Maybe,’ she replied, though she had a feeling Levi was busier than she’d first thought. ‘I guess with developers and your fight against the evil tourists there’s enough going on to keep you busy.’

‘I don’t think tourists are evil. I just think we need to do more to protect the planet. Is that so bad?’

‘No,’ she said, sadly finishing her breakfast and pushing the plate away with a sigh.

Rasmus laughed. ‘Are you sighing that your food is all gone, or over the planet?’

‘Will you be annoyed if I say mostly the food?’

He chuckled. ‘No. But come on, we can stop for cake later and should probably get to work.’

‘Okay. Let’s go then. We better get started or this Sustainable Tourism Fund is going to have the least exciting launch ever. Where to first?’

‘The arts centre.’

She wasn’t sure he’d chosen that one first because he was nervous of seeing his friend about the party venue or because they needed that space for the longest amount of time. Whatever it was, they wrapped up against the cold air and made their way outside. They hadn’t got very far when a voice called her name. She turned to see Monika looking cute in a knitted cream hat, her brown hair and fringe sticking out from underneath.

‘Violet! Rasmus! What are you two doing together?’

Violet glanced at Rasmus, unsure how much of their plan he wanted revealed. He smiled at Monika.

‘We’re going to the arts centre to try and get some space for a New Year’s Eve fair. We want to try and stop the developers by launching a Sustainable Tourism Fund people can use so they don’t have to sell to them.’

‘Wow! That sounds cool. I’d love to be involved. How is your painting, Violet?’

Violet was surprised by her question and her genuine interest. ‘It’s going well, thanks. I keep reminding myself it doesn’t have to be perfect. It’s a process.’

‘I’m sure all those amazing paintings in galleries took years of work and weren’t done in one go. As long as you are enjoying it, that’s all that matters.’

‘How do you two—?’ Rasmus wiggled his finger between them.

Monika answered. ‘We ran into each other in the forest. I helped Violet carry some things to her lodge.’

‘I’d kind of overestimated my strength and underestimated how far it was.’

‘It’s easy to do,’ Monika said. ‘Do let me know if I can help with this event of yours. I’d love to get involved!’ She said her goodbyes and waved as she virtually jogged down the street.

‘And you thought I was energetic?’ Violet joked.

Rasmus laughed. ‘Monika has always run at a million miles an hour since we were children. She’s always been interested in helping her community too, as is her husband. He runs skiing lessons up at the resort.’

‘So it’s not that bad then.’

‘What isn’t?’

They’d only taken a few steps and she stopped to face him. ‘I was worried you hated all the resorts and any type of development, because some of it can be good. There’ve been times in my career when I’ve seen old buildings knocked down to make way for newer, more fit-for-purpose theatres and it can sometimes be needed.’

‘I agree, some of it, when done right, can be very beneficial.’

‘And I was a bit worried the whole town was at each other’s throats. Firstly you walked into my lodge shouting, then Ritva couldn’t have been

less excited to see a customer and Olavi clearly—’

‘Don’t worry about Ritva,’ he reassured her. ‘She is always like that, but no, the whole community is not at war. There are just … fractures I suppose, and I’d like to heal them if I can, especially as they’re being caused by an outside force. Without that, you would see how nice people can be to each other here.’

She hoped it worked and restored some of that harmony. The few people she’d met so far, she’d liked and there was a friendliness here she hadn’t found anywhere else she’d visited.

Violet followed Rasmus through the busy streets. Fresh snow lay on windowsills and the tops of streetlamps, but the sky was a light blue with only a few clouds that were so white they were hard to look at. The lights from the shops still twinkled an appealing warm orange and the locals greeted each other, and Rasmus, as they passed.

With a full belly, Violet felt ready to tackle the venue situation, which was the most important in getting this event idea off the ground. If they didn’t have a venue, there was no point in even thinking about doing anything else. As she walked, Violet looked around wondering if any other locations would do as a back-up, but there didn’t seem to be any that would be suitable apart from the large hotels that she could guarantee were already booked for New Year’s Eve. She hated having only one option but there was no point in panicking yet. She’d just have to see where she was at the end of this meeting.

They rounded the corner to a newer-looking building that housed a museum and a gallery space. She read the sign, noticing an exhibition had just finished. As she assessed the size of the place, remembering the room sizes she’d read on the centre’s website, her hopes began to rise.

‘So who are we meeting?’ she asked Rasmus.

‘I don’t know.’

‘What do you mean, you don’t know? Don’t you all know each other here?’

‘Not everyone, no. I know Helmi is the art manager here but—’

‘Wait.’ She paused and he stopped a few steps ahead of her. ‘You did call and book in a meeting right?’ He didn’t answer. ‘Because you can’t always just turn up and then wham! Job done. Like, some people really hate that. They might refuse to see us.’

‘I didn’t think we’d need to. This is Levi!’ He pointed at the arts centre as if it helped make his point.

‘Oh, Rasmus!’ She tried to put her hands on her hips, but she was wearing so many layers her hands, in their thick gloves, just slid down the sides of her body. He started to smile. ‘Don’t laugh!’

‘I’m not. I’m in too much trouble to laugh.’

She sighed. ‘I guess we’ll just have to try and be super charming. I know I can be, but can you?’

‘Of course I can! I told you, I’m not normally how I was when you met me the other day. That was a one-off.’

‘Good to know, but just to clarify, charming means no shouting or wielding brochures like weapons.’

He rolled his eyes. ‘I didn’t wield my brochure like a weapon. And besides, you were ready to attack me with a wooden spoon.’

‘You absolutely did.’ She giggled. ‘My wooden spoon would have beaten your magazine.’

‘I’d have probably run away if you’d charged at me with it. You were quite terrifying.’

Violet laughed again and met his gaze. ‘Good.’ She marched past him towards the entrance. ‘Now let me do the talking.’

She heard rather than saw him follow. She needed to focus. She had a job to do.

Violet headed straight for the reception desk and asked to speak to whoever was responsible for the exhibition space. After the receptionist made a quick phone call, she was asked to wait and a few minutes later a woman in a thick, high-necked black jumper and black trousers came towards them.

‘Helmi!’ Rasmus said, smiling, before turning an eye to Violet and giving an I-told-you-so grin.

‘Rasmus, what are you doing here?’ Helmi had the appearance of a petite powerhouse, but smiled warmly when she saw them.

‘I wanted to ask—’

‘Hi!’ Violet said, not wanting him to say anything about the event and ruin her carefully thought-out pitch. Okay, she had only thought of it last night, and had quickly edited it after that conversation, but she’d made notes on her phone and was following her tried and tested pitch method that

had worked on so many venues before. She wasn't about to let Rasmus ruin it. 'I'm Violet.'

'*Hei*,' Helmi replied, a little surprised at the loud interjection. 'How can I help you both?'

'I want—' Rasmus began and Violet immediately cut him off again. She hated appearing so rude, but needs must, especially if he was starting a sentence with *I want*. *I want* never sounded nice and generally made people *not* want to help you.

'Do you have a few minutes to chat? Rasmus and I have been discussing an event idea and we're looking for suitable venues. He'd recommended here and it's a lovely space. We'd love to know more about it.'

'Of course. Let's sit.'

They moved to some chairs in the large lobby area and Violet hung back to whisper again, 'Let me do the talking!'

'Fine,' Rasmus replied, taking the seat opposite Helmi. Violet sat on his right.

'So when is this event?' Helmi asked and before Violet could even think, Rasmus had opened his big old mouth and was off again. Would the man not listen?

'New Year's Eve,' he said, smiling triumphantly at Violet.

Helmi balked. 'Oh no. I – I don't think we can help with that, I'm afraid. That's too short notice and I have a new exhibition being installed to open in the New Year. I'm sorry, Rasmus.'

The smug grin fell from his face. 'Oh right. Okay.' He made to stand but Violet put a hand on his arm.

'Maybe we could start again?' Violet asked. 'There is a little more to it than that.'

She could tell Rasmus was about to open his mouth when Helmi said, 'Of course I'd like to help any way I can but if the space is not available, there isn't much I can do.'

Violet nodded. 'No, I understand that but here's the deal. As you probably know, Rasmus is keen on sustainable tourism, especially with the threat posed by these new developers who are looking to move in.'

'Yes, he's always been passionate about that sort of thing, and these developers, I don't trust them.'

'So the event we were hoping to hold was rather like a celebration of Levi and all it has to offer – different stallholders from the town selling

their goods, promoting their services, generally showcasing how amazing this place is. And the aim is to, at the same time, launch a Sustainable Tourism Fund so that local businesses can request money from the fund if they're struggling. Obviously Rasmus is looking at approaching some large-name investors whose values align with his own, but we'd also be hoping to use it as a fundraising event to get some money in the pot straight away. We're also hoping to hold a party that evening at another venue, who we're seeing after this. So while your exhibition space is booked, is there anywhere else you might have that could suit what we need? This is such an amazing venue. Do you have other, even smaller spaces, that might work?'

Helmi sat back, her eyes darting between Rasmus and Violet, then a grin brought light to her face, and the small frown she'd had before fell away. 'You know, I could use you when I next need to pitch for an exhibition.'

Violet laughed. 'I'd be happy to help. I do this for a living, so I've had some practice. I actually work with charities and arts organisations so I'd love to help you if ever I can.' She knew it sounded schmoozy, but she hoped Helmi could see that she truly meant it. She'd be more than happy to come back here and stay again.

'We do have one space,' Helmi replied. 'It's smaller than our main exhibition room, but you could also use the lobby area here if you needed to. How many vendors do you have?'

'That's phase two,' Violet replied, casting her own smug glance at Rasmus. He rolled his eyes playfully. 'So I'm not really sure yet.'

Helmi stood and Violet and Rasmus followed her to the other side of the lobby and the second space. It was small, but they'd be able to get quite a few people in there and if they could use the lobby too that would help with any overspill. At this stage it was better to have a smaller space and be able to fill it than a huge space that was empty. That wouldn't look good at all.

'This could be perfect!' Violet turned to Rasmus. 'Do you think?'

'I do.' He nodded enthusiastically clearly as relieved as she was, though Violet was trying not to show it.

'And how much will it be?'

Helmi shook her head. 'For a one-day event to launch the Levi Sustainable Tourism Fund, we'd be happy to give it to you for free. We'd just be delighted to be involved.'

'We'll make sure we promote the event as supported by you, so people know you've been so generous.'

‘That would be kind, thank you.’

Violet pulled out a business card. ‘Can you send the contract here and we’ll make sure it’s signed as soon as we get it.’

‘I’ll do it this afternoon. Good luck with this, Rasmus. It’s a great idea.’

‘Thank you,’ he replied, seeming slightly shell-shocked.

Helmi excused herself, needing to return to work, and Violet thanked her again as she left. That was one big thing off her list, and she let out a sigh of relief. She was buzzing with endorphins and adrenalin. Now they needed to sort out the evening event.

‘So where are we off to next?’ she asked. Rasmus gawped at her and she giggled. ‘Come on, I’m on a roll!’

‘See,’ he said, struggling to keep up with her though she had no idea where she was going. ‘Too energetic.’

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Chapter 8

Violet's roll came to such a sudden and complete stop at their next venue that she almost had whiplash.

Having walked into *Makavuus* (which apparently meant comfort), a restaurant owned by Rasmus's friend Lumi, Violet had expected their request to be met with an automatic and enthusiastic yes and maybe even a celebratory drink. (She could definitely go for a glass of red wine right about now.) What she hadn't expected was the decidedly frosty reception Rasmus had got and the raised voices leaning towards an argument she was listening to now.

Normally one to defuse a tense situation and not afraid to interrupt when necessary, Violet had been in such a state of shock she hadn't yet uttered a word. But as Rasmus and Lumi's voices rose so that neither could actually hear the other, she felt she had to step in, or they weren't going to get anywhere, and if this place wasn't going to work out, they very quickly needed to find somewhere that would.

'I can't believe you're saying no,' Rasmus said. 'Is this because you want to keep the developers onside?'

'I went to one meeting,' Lumi said, throwing his hands in the air. He was tall and slender with dark hair and an affable smile. A smile that had faded when he'd seen Rasmus walk in. His beautifully patterned shirt had swirls on it, and his tailored trousers were the complete opposite of Rasmus who wore the same uniform today of thick plaid shirt and jeans that he'd worn every time she'd seen him.

'Okay,' Violet said, holding her hands up and stopping them. 'Someone needs to tell me what's going on.'

'I thought,' Lumi began, 'that Rasmus was my friend, but turns out he doesn't like anyone disagreeing with him.'

'That's not true! And siding with the developers is more than disagreeing with me. It's betraying our town—'

Lumi leaned on the counter with both hands. 'I went to one meeting to see what they were planning – that's all. You know, you are the most

difficult person I've ever met, and I meet quite a few in this job.'

Tiny cogs were whirring in Violet's brain. 'Okay, so you went to the meeting to see what's what and Rasmus thought you were there to schmooze the evil developers?'

'It seems so,' Lumi said. 'And I don't regret going.'

The words were fired at Rasmus who replied with a very grown up 'Pfft.'

'Okay, this is ridiculous.' She turned to Rasmus. 'Rasmus, you're acting like a baby.'

His eyes widened and his mouth hung open in shock.

Lumi burst out laughing. 'I like her a lot.'

Violet turned to him, starting to like him too. 'Let's clear this up. Are you thinking of selling anything to the developers?'

'No, of course not.' He shook his head. 'I wanted to see if the rumours were true. Apparently they're building a private airport and lodge for the rich and famous.'

'Yes, I heard.'

'Which would mean more restaurants and more competition,' Lumi directed his words to Rasmus. 'And I also heard they were planning on building a scientific observatory and a reindeer farm. Everyone is talking with wild theories. I just wanted to know which rumours were actually true.'

'Very sensible,' Violet said and Lumi nodded his head at her in thanks.

Rasmus dropped his eyes. 'Oh.'

'So maybe,' Lumi continued, calmer and more teasing now, 'you should have asked me before you went jumping to your own conclusions and deciding I was as bad as Olavi.'

'Hmm,' Violet said, meeting Rasmus's eye with a teasing smile. 'Looks like someone has a habit of jumping to conclusions and marching into places shouting before they know what's actually happening.' He was clearly independent and maybe even a little stubborn.

'I—' Rasmus began to protest when Lumi answered.

'He does. He always has once he's on a … what is the word? Crusade?' Violet nodded. 'And he doesn't like to need people either. Even when it's best for him.'

The two men shared a look, a hint of a smile on each of their faces. Suddenly the atmosphere felt a lot less chilly than it had before.

'I don't crusade.'

‘You do!’ Lumi turned to Violet again. ‘He’s an idealist and fights for what he believes in. We became friends when he started a petition at school to stop the principal removing some equipment from the gym.’

‘We needed it,’ Rasmus mumbled. ‘It was the only thing we liked to do.’

‘It’s probably his most redeeming feature.’ Lumi gave him another glance and smiled.

That and his handsome face, thought Violet before banishing it to the back of her mind. ‘How long have you two known each other?’

‘Since school. A long, long time. And, to be honest, he is not always like this. Things with the developers have gotten more stressful. He’s normally a decent human being.’

‘Thank you.’ Rasmus rolled his eyes.

‘Now,’ Lumi said, ‘can I get you a drink?’

‘Yes, please.’ She hopped onto a stool and looked around the beautiful restaurant, finally able to take it in.

The place was a mixture of dark, almost black wood and glass with cute paper lightshades in the shape of pinecones. Some of the tables were set out as long, banquet-style ones and others were set up in the usual two-to-four-people way. Elegant glass and silverware shone in the light pouring in through the large, arched windows and there were Christmas decorations too. A small tree stood in the corner with fake presents underneath and wooden decorations all over it.

‘It’s a shame you can’t accommodate us,’ Violet said. ‘But I’m not surprised you’re booked out. This place is lovely.’

‘I like her even more,’ Lumi said to Rasmus who had requested (extremely politely) a coffee and had also slid onto a bar stool. ‘But I might have a solution that can work.’

Rasmus lifted his head and shot a look at Violet.

‘As you know we’ve been expanding,’ Lumi said. ‘And we’re just finishing work on a private dining or small event space.’

‘Really?’ Violet sipped her glass of delicious chilled white wine. After all that stress it was definitely hitting the spot.

‘It’s not huge, but it might just be big enough if you don’t have tables and chairs and make it standing only.’

‘Can we see?’

‘Of course.’

‘I thought things were running behind schedule?’ Rasmus said.

They both followed him to the end of the bar and through a door that opened into the new space. There were piles of wood on the floor, cladding due to be put onto the walls and tins of paint scattered around with brushes resting on top. Where the main space had lots of small lightshades this had two enormous, modern glass chandeliers at either end, a mixture of metal and glass that reminded Violet of reindeer antlers. The room was elegant and refined and would be perfect for a small party.

'When do you think it'll be ready?' Violet asked.

'It was supposed to be ready for the start of December but as you can see we are behind, like Rasmus said. I didn't take any pre-bookings or rent the space out to anyone because I didn't want to risk not delivering. But it should be finished just before Christmas or just after at the latest. You're welcome to use it and showcase it for me.'

'And what fee would you need?' Violet asked, mentally crossing everything.

'Nothing. I'll do it for free as Rasmus is a friend.'

Rasmus gave a single, manly nod and then engulfed his friend in a bear hug. 'Thank you, Lumi. And I'm sorry, I shouldn't have doubted you.'

Lumi patted his back. 'You should learn to trust people more, but I know why this crusade is important to you. You've seen the effect it can have.'

Violet's ears pricked, hoping for more information, but the two men shared a knowing look and didn't say any more. Violet logged that little piece of information away for later, combining it with what he'd said about his grandfather's shop earlier. The two had to be connected.

'Now—' He led them back out. 'Tell me more about this Sustainable Tourism Fund and how it'll work.'

They went back to the bar and both Rasmus and Violet outlined the plans as they were so far.

'So now we have our amazing venues sorted,' she began, saying a silent prayer for them to have been arranged more easily than she was anticipating. 'We need to get the vendors lined up for the day event and tickets sold for a gala party to raise money for the fund. Or we can just invite people and ask them to make donations.'

'You are very good at this,' Lumi said, holding the bottle of wine and gesturing towards the glass.

'Yes, please.' She pushed it towards him. 'I'm an event planner. It's what I do and in exchange, Rasmus has promised to show me some of the most

beautiful spots here so I can paint them.’

‘Make sure he takes you to see the reindeer. You can go to Santa’s village and see them there, but there is nothing like watching them roaming in the wild or at least in the huge paddocks on the edge of town. We used to go every year when we were children, Rasmus and I. But with the right person it can be very romantic too.’

Heat burned her neck and she kept her eyes away from Rasmus. ‘Oh, this isn’t—’

‘No, no, no!’ Rasmus said at the same time, shaking his head.

Violet wiggled her finger between the two of them. ‘This is nothing like that. We’re just sort of temporary colleagues.’

‘Yes, colleagues. Nothing more.’

‘Definitely nothing more,’ she added, knowing her cheeks were now a violent shade of red and that a feeling slightly like disappointment had welled in her stomach. ‘But I do deserve a trip tomorrow after all the work I’ve done today, even though I’m on holiday.’

‘Excuse me,’ Rasmus said with a smile. ‘This was all your idea. You’re the one who—’

‘Got you to think of more than just a brochure? You’re welcome! And look how well we’re doing so far.’

Lumi laughed. ‘Oh, we’re going to be good friends. I can tell.’

She held up her glass. ‘Cheers!’

‘Okay,’ Rasmus said. ‘I’ll think of somewhere to take you tomorrow.’

Lumi began tidying the bar, whispering deliberately loudly, ‘The reindeers are very cute.’

‘No!’ Rasmus replied, the pinkness in his cheeks leaching down his neck and Lumi and Violet giggled. ‘I’m regretting introducing you two now,’ he mumbled before staring at his coffee and ignoring them both.

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They chatted with Lumi, who Violet liked more and more the longer they spent together, and eventually, as the dinner crowd began to arrive, Rasmus drove her back to her lodge.

‘What are you doing this evening?’ he asked as she unlocked the door and switched on the lights.

Unsure if it was an invitation or a simple enquiry, Violet chose a safe reply. ‘I was planning on painting my sketch from yesterday. I don’t have an easel, but I can make a makeshift one on the table.’ Rasmus nodded, and as he didn’t offer anything else, Violet kept talking. ‘That and a bottle of Lumi’s delicious wine—’ She held up the one she’d bought at the restaurant and taken home with her. ‘It’ll be lovely after such a busy day.’

‘Yes, it has been busy,’ he said, pushing his hands into his pockets.

As he’d driven her home, he hadn’t bothered with all the usual layers of clothing when he got out of the car to walk her to her door, which she found very sweet, and Violet wondered how cold he was. She could already feel the chill air leaching into the lodge where she had the door open. Behind him, the vague noise of the resort could be heard in the background but all around her was a quiet, peaceful, snowy landscape. The sky was darkening with snow-leaden clouds, and the occasional hoot of an owl punctured the silence.

‘Well,’ he said, shuffling his foot on the ground, kicking a lump of snow out of the way. ‘Have a lovely evening. Same time tomorrow?’

‘Yes, please. Any hint at where we’re going if it’s not the reindeers?’

‘I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise but the fact that polar night is starting has affected my decision.’

‘Polar night?’ She’d heard the name of it but wasn’t sure exactly what it meant. ‘Does that mean it’s going to be pitch-black from now until summer?’

‘No,’ he chuckled. ‘That’s what most people think, and there are places where that’s true but here we’ll have about three weeks where there is very little daylight but don’t worry, there is still light and it is beautiful. As a painter, you’ll love it.’

His smile made his eyes twinkle in the warm lights from the lodge. She wanted to invite him in, suggest he stay and enjoy the wine with her, but she couldn’t find the courage.

‘Goodnight, Violet. Have a good evening.’

‘Yeah, yeah. You too.’

He turned and walked back to his car and slowly, so as to watch him for as long as possible, Violet closed the door. Once it was shut she took a moment to calm the fluttering in her belly. Blowing out a deep breath, she pushed the feelings away and went to find her paints.

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Chapter 9

‘Okay, guys, so that’s kind of where I’m at,’ Violet said, as she ended the impromptu team meeting called by Archie earlier that morning. There’d been a slight panic over one of the January events, which they’d now dealt with, and then Ellen had asked Violet how her holiday was going and she’d kind of blurted everything out, including that she was now working with Rasmus and sorting out a New Year’s Eve event. Everyone was now staring at her, blinking.

‘Crikey,’ said Ellen. ‘I thought you were going to say you’d painted like three different pictures, been skiing, and stroked a reindeer – not that you’d gotten yourself roped into organising a save the wildlife campaign.’

‘We should have known you would,’ said Ahmed. ‘You do like helping people.’ Harold the dog gave a bark of agreement.

Violet hadn’t mentioned how handsome Rasmus was or how much she was looking forward to seeing him today on another secret adventure.

Last night, she’d spent some time adding colour to her first sketch of the wide, snowy panorama and she’d been tentatively pleased with the results. She could hear Grandma Louisa’s encouraging words and would work on it some more tonight, maybe, depending on how tired she was when she got back from that day’s outing. There were definitely areas of colour she wanted to deepen but she was worried about adding too much and ruining everything. Violet secretly checked the time on her phone.

‘Do you need us to do anything to help?’ asked Archie.

‘Possibly, but not right now. You could look into who these developers actually are if you have time? I’ll get their name off Rasmus. I should have looked into it myself by now but …’ But she’d been too busy enjoying herself. ‘I just haven’t really had a chance,’ she finished.

‘Yeah, no worries,’ said Archie, making a note. ‘Leave it with me.’

Archie was a whizz at research and had given her lots of background on different organisations, most of which had been pivotal for her pitches.

‘Okay then, if we’ve got everything back on track shall we call it a day?’ They all nodded and Ahmed gave a thumbs up. ‘I’m here if you guys need

me though.’

‘Same!’ shouted Ellen before they all signed off.

No sooner had Violet closed her laptop and swallowed the last of her tea than there was a knock at the door. She opened it excitedly expecting it to be Rasmus but was surprised to see a man she’d never met before. He was short and older, more like Ritva’s age, but was smiling up at her in a friendly way that made her smile back.

‘*Hei*,’ he said. ‘You must be Violet.’

‘I am. And you’re … ?’

‘Olavi. I own the lodge and set up the competition with my travel agent.’

‘Oh! Right. Well, thank you!’ She didn’t quite know how to act, having heard not very nice things about him from Ritva and Rasmus, and others in town. Given that he was thinking of selling, Violet had a million questions for him.

‘You’re welcome. I just came to make sure you were comfortable and had everything you needed.’

‘Yes, I do, thank you. This is a beautiful place.’ She motioned around the lodge to show she wasn’t just talking about the landscape.

‘Yes, it is. Well, if you—’

‘Sorry,’ Violet said, leaping forwards as he backed away. She wasn’t really sure what she wanted to ask or how best to do it but let the words tumble out hoping she’d find a way. ‘Can I just ask … I’ve been told that there are developers trying to buy up the land around here. Is that right?’

His demeanour changed immediately and his eyes narrowed. ‘That’s right.’

‘And you’ve been thinking of selling? Not this place I hope.’

‘Not that it’s any of your business but yes, I have. Not this lodge particularly but—’

‘Can I ask why?’

‘No, you may not.’ Any hint of a smile had vanished immediately. ‘Enjoy your stay. Please call the number on the welcome pack if you have any problems.’

He turned and marched away. Well, that didn’t go very well. Violet closed the door and headed back inside. About ten minutes later, Rasmus arrived. He’d told her to bring her paints as there wasn’t supposed to be any snow that day and Violet was hoping she’d be able to at least get a decent sketch and maybe a first try at dabbing on some colour before they had to

return. Butterflies flittered around her ribcage as she wondered where they'd be going today. She was still a little sad it wasn't the reindeers, but it was probably for the best. Her habit of glamourising places would only get worse if she did something like that. She'd already decided she needed a trip into the Santa village to see what that was like. She'd see them there.

Violet opened the door just as she was pulling on her thick coat to see him walking up the steps to greet her.

'Are you ready?' he asked, taking her basket like a gentleman.

She smiled. 'I am. Any hints yet?'

He shook his head. 'No. Come on.'

She locked the door and climbed into the car. She glanced behind her as Rasmus put her basket on the back seat and gasped. 'Is that … ?'

'An easel, yes. I thought you might need one today and ordered one from Ritva's. Lumi collected it for me.'

'Thank you!' Without thinking she leaned over and placed a kiss on his cheek.

'Oh, yes, well—' Rasmus shuffled nervously, tugging at his seatbelt, which only made it reluctant to move. Eventually he stopped yanking it and pulled it smoothly. 'Umm, that's fine.'

Seeing his cheeks pinken, her own grew hot. She added, 'I'll give you the money of course.'

'No, no. You're helping me so much already.'

'Are you sure? I really don't mind.'

He waved her concerns away as he started the engine and they set off. It hadn't escaped her notice that Lumi had been made to go into the shop, and she wondered again what the deal was between Rasmus and Ritva. What had caused the rift between them? For some reason, she didn't think it was linked to the current developers, especially after Ritva had called Olavi an old windbag. Speaking of which …

'I just met Olavi,' Violet said and his head shot towards her before settling back on the road.

'What did he say?'

'Just welcomed me to the lodge.'

'Did he say anything else?'

She shook her head. 'I tried to find out more but he closed up pretty quickly. Do you have any idea why he's selling?'

‘No. He doesn’t need the money as far as we know. But he has a lot of land around here. More than he knows what to do with. I think he just wants the extra cash.’

They fell into silence as they left the busier routes around Levi, and Violet turned to the views through her car window, which were utterly breathtaking. Rolling hillsides covered in untouched snow, clusters of trees nothing more than white blobs where their branches were so laden. But there were small houses, too, dotted around the landscape – and rather than feeling sad, Violet imagined what it’d be like to live there. Tranquil and cosy, away from the world and its troubles, golden log fires warming you after a long day at work. She stopped herself from inserting herself into the picture just in time, imagining how it would feel. Rasmus pointed out streams and rivers, the water pure and no doubt absolutely freezing.

‘I’m trying to imagine it without the snow but it’s hard,’ she said, unable to take her eyes off the window for fear she might miss another beautiful scene.

‘Sometimes, in the summer, people like to canoe in the rivers, even swim, and people like to fish all year round.’

She could just imagine a dip in the pure water during the summer. How wonderful it would be to sink into the river, unworried about sewage or anything nasty, and just swim. She saw herself doing it and again, reined in her imagination.

‘You like the water?’ he asked, after a second.

‘I do.’

‘Then you’ll like where we’re going.’

‘Is that my first hint?’

‘Your one and only.’

Again they parked at the bottom of a giant hill and Violet worried she was about to be as tired as she’d been the other day, but judging by Rasmus’s hints it would be worth it. They began the climb, this time her carrying the basket and Rasmus carrying the easel. He moved with ease up the path, the easel on his shoulder, and she followed behind.

Once more, Rasmus led them up a track. She could tell it had been walked a number of times already that day from the footprints and indentations in the thin, packed snow that remained. She had to admit, having her own private sexy tour guide was pretty cool. Then he led them

through a flat vista, the snow untouched, and through a thicket of trees, suddenly pausing and putting the easel down.

‘Here,’ he said, stepping to one side, holding a branch high so she could move through without being hit in the face.

Anticipation built as she walked under his arm, not only because it felt incredibly romantic, but also because she knew that whatever spot he’d chosen would be utterly breathtaking. She looked left and right to find the exact spot Rasmus had brought her there for, and when her eyes fell on it, her breath hitched and her mouth fell open.

She had no words.

The frozen waterfall in front of her was one of the most magical things she’d ever seen. It was like she’d stepped into a fairy tale, a picture from a magical children’s book. A rock formation, indented into the landscape, was surrounded by thicket and bush, but above it there must have been some kind of stream because falling from the top all the way to the bottom were pale, sparkling icicles.

Violet took in the colours. There were the usual different shades of white on the snow-covered ground, but the frozen waterfall was an astonishing iridescent shade of blue. She couldn’t wait to mix the colours on her palette, unsure where it sat on the spectrum because it was both pale and bright, opaque and translucent, cobalt and duck-egg at the same time.

‘Do you like it?’ Rasmus asked, his voice hushed and low.

Whether it was out of respect for the wildlife around them or the enchanting grove they were in that seemed to require silence, she did the same. ‘It’s incredible. Beautiful. I – I love it.’

She turned to face him, and his wide smile matched her own. Their eyes met and for a moment, the magic of the place seemed to dance between them. Her emotions heightened and her attraction to him grew so strong she could feel it in her belly. She thought he might have felt it too because he didn’t speak or move. Then an animal or bird moved nearby, a twig snapped and he cleared his throat.

‘Where do you want to set up?’

Her fingers itching, Violet walked further towards the incredible natural wonder and found a fairly even spot for her easel. Rasmus helped her set it up and she placed her canvas on the ledge, beginning to sketch the beautiful shapes. She took several pictures before she started because the light would undoubtedly change while they were there and she wanted to capture it

right at that moment – the moment Rasmus had shared this secret, wonderful place with her. Tourists would pay a lot to see something like this, and she imagined the pathway they'd just walked littered with food wrappers and debris dropped along the way – hair ties, pens, children's pacifiers – objects people didn't mean to lose but always did and could ruin the natural world. She was beginning to see more and more why Rasmus was so passionate about this place and what the effects would be if they didn't all help to protect the natural world around them.

'So—' She began to sketch, her fingers moving deftly over the canvas. 'We need to make a list of vendors to approach.'

'I've already started,' he replied, surprising her and then reading from his phone. 'There are local galleries who might like to display, as well as lots of local stores who make their own homewares and stuff like that. All those tiny things people like to buy and display on shelves.'

She peered around the side of her canvas.

'What?' he asked, his tone light as if he knew her teasing was coming.

'Tiny things people like to put on shelves?'

'Yes, you know. Stuff like little ceramic things … animals and … odd shapes and other … stuff.'

'Animals and stuff?' she giggled. 'I'm looking forward to visiting there already. Maybe I'll get something for Archie, Ellen and Ahmed. They're my team,' she added for clarification.

'What are they like?'

She smiled as she praised each of them in turn: Archie's boundless enthusiasm, Ellen's problem-solving attitude and Ahmed's calmness, and of course she mentioned Harold, his dog.

'It sounds like you really love what you do.'

'I do, very much.' She told him of some of the projects she'd worked on, the most rewarding and the most difficult. 'I wouldn't want to do anything else. I get to travel around and explore different places while I work. It's pretty awesome. I'd like to get to go further afield, not just on holidays.'

Her mind went back to the little cabin she'd seen on the way here. The one she'd thought was cosy. She could just imagine returning home to it, decorated as the eco lodge was, with the log fire burning, and snuggling inside until the next work trip. There'd be an easel of course and she'd kick off her shoes and paint or sketch while dinner cooked. She had a home in England, but as she pictured the cabin, a man very much like Rasmus

inside, a strange twinge in her heart pulsed. She was doing it again, imagining a life somewhere she was only there to visit because she got swept up in how new and different it all was. But life always had its problems wherever you were and a cute, cosy cabin didn't mean they would be any different. The trouble was her house in England had always been just that: a house. It wasn't somewhere she was particularly emotionally attached to. It was just a base camp. A little part of her was beginning to want an actual home that meant something, and that realisation shocked her.

'You've gone very quiet. Are you okay? Not too cold?' Rasmus asked.

'No, I'm fine.' She pulled her mind away from the sudden, quite startling realisation and lifted her eyes to the sun to feel its brightness touch her skin. 'Anyone else on your list?'

'There are other craft shop owners who I think would like to take part and there are local bakers who do our specialities like the Karelian pasty we could invite too.'

'Good idea. We basically want anyone who might have something to appeal to tourists as that's your main audience.'

'There are some we shouldn't ask too.' His voice had a strained edge to it and once more, she peeked around the side of her easel.

'Oh, like who?' Obviously the big chain stores could fend for themselves. This was all about supporting the local, smaller businesses but she was surprised Rasmus was talking about local people.

He sighed. 'I don't think we should invite those who support the developers.'

'And they are?'

'Like the ice-karting place. They are very in favour of a new development. They're hoping if they support them when the new resort is open they can be the sole provider. And then there are some we should invite but they will probably not come because they're keeping their options open.'

'Have you spoken to the ice-karting guy? Shown him your brochure and the habitats that'll be affected?'

'Yes. He told me to go away and mind my own business. I'm not trying to tell him how to run his business, just to think about how this will affect this place. These sorts of places.' He motioned around.

Violet didn't like the sound of him and went back to concentrating on her sketch, determined to get the shape of the icicles perfectly right. She had no

idea how long she worked in silence until Rasmus spoke gently.

‘I think I will go for a walk and leave you to paint.’

‘Sorry!’ She turned to face him and was struck by his bright smile, his cheeks attractively pink from the cold. ‘I’m being antisocial, aren’t I.’

‘Not at all. I can see how much you’re enjoying yourself. Please—’ He reached out and gently held her forearm. The unexpected touch sent a rumbling through her core. ‘Carry on painting and I’ll be back in a while.’

He strode away, back towards the tourist path, and Violet found herself almost calling out to him to stay or saying she would go with him. Despite their odd beginning she liked his company and the more time she spent with him, the more she discovered the man underneath. While it had only been a few days, it had been a lot of hours as she’d painted, or they’d been in the car together, or wandering around town and she’d liked it more than she should. Rasmus was quiet and calm on the surface but there was a passionate man with strong values under the bluster. She’d seen glimpses of that side of him the day they’d met, and when he spoke about saving his town. She thought about what Lumi had said about his campaigning and found it inspiring. Her mind went to his touch, and she wondered what it would be like to feel his skin on hers rather than through the thick layers of padding they had to wear. Her imagination wandered to his lips, what they would feel like on her own or gently pressing against her neck. A chill ran down her spine unconnected to the weather. She thought of the easel she was now painting on and how he’d got it for her.

For the next hour, she focused on the captivating view in front of her and time ceased to exist. As Violet moved from sketching to adding her first tentative strokes of paint, building up the colours and texture so the painting felt right, her soul was at peace. A tranquillity washed over her as she thought of nothing but the next brushstroke. It had been a long time since she’d felt like this. Not since she’d painted with her grandma all those years ago.

‘Wow,’ Rasmus said, appearing through the thicket, his boots heavy on the snow. ‘That’s incredible. Have you never thought of displaying your work?’

‘No, no, no.’ She shook her head. ‘No, this is definitely just a hobby. A proper artist would probably look at this and cringe. Look, I’ve gone too heavy with the paint here and this colour isn’t quite right.’

‘I think it’s incredible. Most people couldn’t do anything like this and—’ He stood back his eyes flicking from the painting to the real-life frozen waterfall and back again.

‘What it is?’ Violet asked, her nerves fizzing as she waited for him to finish his sentence.

‘I don’t know but somehow, you’ve captured the – the feel of the place, not just what it looks like. I’m surprised. Most pictures I see don’t do that. Even ones local artists have painted.’

‘Oh.’ It was such an unexpected compliment she didn’t know what else to say. ‘Thank you.’

She turned to him and their eyes met, locking in on each other and for a second it was as if another electric charge had filled the space between them. Then Rasmus’s phone rang and he stepped away, taking it out and pressing it to his ear.

‘Rasmus Korhonen. Yes, hello! Is everything all right? Of course! I’ll come by as soon as I can. No, please, it’s no problem. You’ll get used to doing it in no time. All right, see you soon.’

Violet desperately wanted to ask who it was but pinned her eyes to the top corner of her canvas and a splodge of paint that refused to sit how she wanted it to.

He put his phone back in his pocket, zipped it up and said, ‘I’m sorry to ask, but how much longer do you want to stay?’

‘Oh, umm … I don’t know. I’m feeling a little cold but not too much. Do you need to go somewhere?’

‘It was my guests. I run three eco lodges and these guys have just checked in. They can’t get the wood fire burning and asked for assistance.’

‘Right. In that case I—’

‘I can come back and pick you up in an hour if you like?’

‘Are you sure you don’t mind?’

‘Of course. You are in your element. I wouldn’t want to cut your time short. Please, stay and enjoy yourself and I’ll be back soon. Call me if you need me to come earlier and I’ll do my best.’

He left again and, totally ignoring the fact that she’d have liked him to stay and chat to her while she worked, she focused back in on the beautiful frozen waterfall, determined to make as much progress as possible before he returned. After all, this was what she was here for. Not some kind of holiday fling. Her heart gave another unhelpful twinge and she ignored it.

‘Stupid heart,’ she muttered under her breath, thankful only the trees could hear her.

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Chapter 10

The next day, Violet glanced at Rasmus just as he glanced at her. They were walking down the street towards the first vendor they were going to meet, and the atmosphere was awkward in a way it had never been before, even when he'd been waving his brochure and she'd been threatening him with a wooden spoon.

When he'd picked her up from the mountainside the day before, praising her painting again and carrying the easel he'd bought for her, she'd mumbled thanks and then her mind had forgotten how to have normal conversations. Her realisation that she really was starting to like Rasmus, in a way she hadn't liked anyone for ages, had unsettled her, and now Violet was determined to act normally and not give any signs away of her attraction. After all, what would be the point?

As they drove into town this morning, she'd made a few terrible efforts regarding the party organisation and then given up and looked out of the window. She was determined to get everything back to normal. Though this whole holiday was anything but normal.

Rasmus glanced at her once more, then came to a sudden and complete stop. 'Okay. What's happened?'

'What?' Violet panicked. 'Nothing! Why?'

'You never stop talking and now you are acting so … weird. Is it because I bought you the easel? I'm sorry if I overstepped or—'

'No, no, it's not that!' And she thought she'd been doing such a good job. She wasn't sure if him realising she was acting strangely should make her feel better or worse, but she smiled, relaxing a little as the tension eased from around them. She wasn't going to tell him why she was being weird – that was absolutely a step too far.

'Then what is it?'

'It's honestly nothing. Just a … a work thing,' she lied, adding, 'and I do stop talking, thank you very much.'

'You don't, only when you're painting, but it's fine. I like it.'

He smiled and her ribcage tightened around her lungs. Then he walked on and Violet had to hurry to catch up. They approached a jeweller, the window glittering with silver and gold, and precious stones.

Rasmus sighed. ‘We should try here but don’t expect a warm welcome.’

‘Oh, okay.’ Violet followed him inside and let Rasmus do the talking especially as the conversation began in Finnish. It turned quickly to English as the man behind the counter scowled.

‘No. We don’t want to be involved.’ He began polishing the glass cases as if wanting to move away from the conversation.

‘Are you sure?’ Violet asked. ‘You’d be very welcome.’

He stopped and looked at Rasmus rather than her. ‘We don’t want to get involved in all this. Developers are always interested in land here. Most of the time nothing ever happens.’

‘I think it will be different this time if we don’t act,’ Rasmus replied calmly.

Again, the man shook his head. ‘No. We’ll keep out of it and what will be will be.’

Rasmus and Violet shuffled out, both thanking him for his time.

‘That is what I hate most,’ Rasmus said as they walked on.

‘What?’

‘Apathy. They will complain when the new resort opens a Swarovski crystal shop or a Tiffany’s and they have to close. We have to stop them building in the first place, not just try and cope after it’s happened.’

‘I agree,’ she replied. ‘But he is only the first shop, and we’ve got lots more to see. Maybe he’ll get FOMO and—’

‘FOMO?’

‘Fear of missing out. Maybe we try again later and he’ll want to come after all.’

‘Maybe. This one will be better.’

They went into another shop and Violet stared around at the gorgeous little knickknacks as Rasmus introduced her to Charle, the owner. He was older than them and had greying hair with wrinkles around his eyes from smiling. He was incredibly jolly as he agreed with everything Rasmus said about the need to fight the developers and was keen to be involved in the event.

‘What a wonderful idea. Yes! Sign me up for it!’

Violet had her eye on several items she either wanted for herself or would make great Christmas presents for her family. She'd have to pop back before she went home. Again there was a strange niggling in her heart at the idea of home that she stubbornly ignored. She still had a lot of time left here to enjoy.

Before long, all the home décor shops had agreed to attend the fair at the arts centre and the gala party in the evening. It was a great start, and Violet had been surprised at Rasmus's charm as he spoke to people, even those who said no, which was a few more than Violet would have liked. She had to admit she totally saw Rasmus's point of view and their apathetic approach wasn't going to help when their businesses were under threat. Not to mention the beautiful, wild and rugged landscape around them that would be destroyed.

'Where to next?' she asked, happy for him to lead the way. She was exploring the place in a way she'd never imagined and was enjoying it.

She always loved wandering around places she visited, walking most places instead of getting a train or a tram. She found that you experienced the real feel of a city more if you walked its streets, and of course, she'd imagine how wonderful it would be to live there, like locals did. But today she was experiencing something else, something new, and that was the sense of community here. For those who were against the developers, there was a real sense of camaraderie, and she could imagine them helping each other out when it was needed. She'd never experienced that personally and could see how comforting it would be.

'I think we should also do the activity businesses,' Rasmus said. 'They make all their money from tourists, so off-season is very difficult for them. They will definitely support the fund and want to attend the fair.'

'Sure, lead the way. Wait—' She stopped outside of a business selling handmade clothes. 'Shall we try in there?'

'No, I don't think we need to.' He walked on.

'Why not?'

'It's not the right type of business.'

She placed a hand on his arm, to stop him. 'Wait, what's going on?'

Rasmus pushed a finger under the brim of his beanie hat. 'Some of these businesses used to belong to my family.'

'They don't anymore?'

'No. And … this is another one who supports the developers.'

Ah, so that was another reason he felt so responsible for leading the campaign.

‘What happened?’ Violet asked, keeping her voice soft.

Rasmus pushed a finger under his hat and scratched his temple. ‘My family sold them. Like I say, things are not always easy here and the damage it caused to my family was … significant. But if we hadn’t have sold, things might be different now. Silly, I know.’

‘No, I understand.’

‘Come on, let’s talk to the activity people.’ He was clearly trying to change the subject and Violet didn’t challenge him. She wouldn’t want to discuss something so personal in the middle of the street either and there was nothing more personal than family-run businesses. She was beginning to get the impression that the last round of development had destroyed not only businesses but relationships too, and that was heartbreaking. ‘Tourists love these guys,’ he continued, his tone unusually cheerful.

They walked into the snowmobile shop, a line of terrifying-looking vehicles outside ready to be rented. Rasmus approached the owner who came out to greet them. He was a wiry man in his fifties, already in outdoor clothes, his hair a startling shade of black.

‘Rasmus! Good to see you!’

‘You too, Sauli.’

‘Are you here for an adventure?’

‘Not today. We’re here to talk to you about something.’ He launched into his spiel, which he’d honed after the first few chats, and soon the man was nodding along.

‘Of course we’d like to take part. Yes, definitely. Don’t bother asking at the ice-karting. Don’t waste your breath.’

‘Yes, I know they’re not interested.’

They chatted about a few more details before he suddenly turned to Violet. ‘Have you ever been on a snowmobile?’

‘Me? Oh, no, I—’

Before she could say any more Sauli had swept her outside and was encouraging her to sit on one.

‘I really don’t—’ Violet protested but the man’s enthusiasm overrode her hesitation. Rasmus laughed.

‘It is so easy. And you can explore so much either on your own or with a guide, and we make sure not to disturb the wildlife. Here, here—’

Suddenly Violet was being ushered forward with no choice but to step over and sit on the infernal machine. ‘Honestly, it’s kind of you, but I’m—’

‘Everyone in Levi can use one of these,’ Rasmus said. ‘It’s very simple. Then you’ll really be a local.’

This was absolutely not her bag. Not her idea of fun. Her idea of fun was standing still and painting, not whizzing around on one of these death-trap things. She tried to protest but the man had turned it on, and she seemed to have no choice but to ride it down the street, turn around and come back again. If he was trying to sell her on doing this, it wasn’t working. Rasmus, meanwhile, was watching on, a smile she would normally find attractive on his face, but right now she would quite happily have slapped him.

‘Here,’ the man said, ‘just pull this back gently and you’ll ease out.’

Whether it was nerves or the machine was super sensitive she didn’t know, but figuring she’d just bite the bullet and get it over with, she stared at the controls. Fine, she’d go to the end of the street, turn around and drive back again. Violet used the controls and suddenly she was shooting forward towards a bin with someone screaming in her ear. Oh no, that screaming noise was her! An ear-piercing shriek seemed to be coming out of her mouth and echoing in the air. Suddenly she found the brake and came to such a sudden stop her bum lifted out of the seat and she almost went over the front headfirst. Somehow she managed to brake just in time so she only hit the bin, which had appeared out of nowhere, a little bit. Her heart was pounding against her ribcage and she felt like she was about to have a heart attack.

Everyone in the street had stopped and stared, and most were grinning ear to ear at her clear and utter incompetence. This was, without doubt, the most embarrassing thing that had ever happened to her. Rasmus and the owner jogged towards her and were at her side.

‘Right, well,’ Sauli said. ‘Let me take this back over there.’

‘Are you all right?’ asked Rasmus, looking concerned but also highly amused.

‘Apart from being mortifyingly embarrassed, I’m fine.’ She stood off the snowmobile and smiled at Sauli. ‘Not sure it’s for me, thanks. But I’ll definitely send anyone who’s interested your way.’

‘Yes, yes, thank you.’ As she turned around and began walking towards the town, she was sure she heard him say, ‘Well, that’s never happened before.’

Violet glanced back over her shoulder to see him wheeling the awful machine back in line with the others. She found that very hard to believe. Violet turned her attention to Rasmus. ‘Lunch?’

‘Yes. Good idea.’

They began walking towards Lumi’s restaurant, Violet’s cheeks still hot but her heart rate finally returning to normal. Rasmus’s mouth was twitching with withheld laughter.

‘And don’t say a word,’ she added.

‘I wouldn’t dream of it.’

Despite herself, his low chuckle brought a grin to her face.

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Settled at a table for two by the window, Violet ignored the people who smirked as they passed, having clearly witnessed her embarrassing snowmobile incident. She dropped her head and studied the tabletop as one person actually pointed and Rasmus giggled.

They’d visited a few more stores on the way to the restaurant and had lots of people interested in their New Year’s event. Everything was lining up perfectly, so she’d focus on that and ignore the *unfortunate incident* as she was now going to call it.

‘Here you are,’ said Lumi, delivering menus for them and lighting the candle on their table.

Violet glanced around. No one else’s candle was lit. She gave him a look from the corner of her eye.

‘What?’ he asked innocently. ‘It’s dark in this corner.’

‘It’s really not,’ she replied, eyeing one of the pretty lights hanging directly over their heads.

‘I’ll give you a minute to peruse but is there anything I can get you to drink?’

‘We could leave the car here and walk back if you wanted to share a bottle of wine?’ Rasmus said. ‘You look like you need it after that … thing with the—’

‘Good idea!’ A glass of wine would definitely soothe her nerves.

Suddenly Lumi was suggesting his best reds, whites and champagnes and saying what a wonderful idea it was. They ordered a bottle of red, and he’d

delivered it to the table, poured it into two glasses and made them taste it before they'd had chance to finish a sentence.

When he'd gone, Violet said, 'What's up with him?'

Rasmus sighed and scratched his temple before fiddling with the collar of his coat. 'He likes you.'

'Okay, well that's good because I like him too but—' She didn't fancy him. Not one little bit. 'I mean, he's lovely but he's not really my—'

Rasmus shook his head. 'Lumi is gay. He thinks *we* should date.'

Luckily she'd swallowed the large mouthful of wine she'd just taken, or she'd have spluttered it all over the tabletop. And Rasmus. 'Oh!'

'I know. Silly, isn't it?' He pressed a hand to the back of his neck and then adjusted the collar of his shirt again. She'd never seen anyone look so uncomfortable at the idea of her fancying them. Harsh. 'Especially,' he continued, 'as you'll be going home soon and well … we're obviously not suited anyway.'

'Yes – no – right.' She took another large gulp of wine just for something to do rather than have to say anything else. She wasn't sure whether to be relieved or insulted. Right now she was edging towards insulted. From her response, it sounded like she'd forgotten words of more than one syllable.

How were they not suited? Why were they not suited? Obviously she was leaving in a few weeks – not an insignificant stumbling block – and she hadn't known him for very long at all technically speaking. That was another reason to be cautious. But for him to so blatantly say they weren't suited stung.

'Yes,' she said, a little too enthusiastically. 'We'd definitely not be suited. I mean, you shout a lot and you look fairly nice but could tidy up your hair a bit and—'

What the hell was she saying? Her brain was screaming at her to stop. To be quiet. Cease and desist! Cease and desist! But no, her mouth was still moving with goodness knows what coming out. Rasmus's eyes were narrowing with every sentence, a mixture of offence and confusion on his face.

'And that jumper has holes in the sleeves so you might want to get some new ones for when you do decide to date—'

'Jumpers are important to you, are they?' he asked quirking an eyebrow, his wine glass paused at his mouth.

She did like his mouth. It was a nice shape, and she imagined it would be quite nice to kiss him. Violet shook the thought away as he studied the hole in his sleeve.

‘In this weather jumpers are very important,’ she added, which might actually be the most boring sentence she’d ever uttered in her life.

This was why she hadn’t been on many dates recently. They just all seemed too much hassle, and she hadn’t met anyone who made her want to put herself on the line and risk embarrassing conversations like this. Just then, Lumi came over, placing a small vase with a single red rose in it on the table. This absolutely wasn’t helping.

‘I’ll be back in a moment for your orders. I’ll just give you a few more minutes to decide.’

‘Thank you,’ Violet said, smiling, though it couldn’t have looked any more fake.

Rasmus sighed as Lumi scuttled away. ‘I’m going to have to tell him you only like men in smart jumpers, aren’t I? It’ll break his heart.’

Momentarily stunned, Violet stared and then, as his words sunk in, a giant laugh escaped, suddenly easing the tension from her body. As Rasmus joined in it also wiped away the weird atmosphere that had descended between them thanks to Violet’s unintended character assassination.

‘So why aren’t you dating?’ Violet asked. ‘Are other women turned off by the holey jumpers too?’

He smiled. ‘I haven’t really had time. My last serious relationship was while I was away.’ She cocked her head quizzically and he continued. ‘I went away to university and took my degree and then a master’s. I met someone while I was there, but it didn’t work out. And my family … well, they weren’t happy I went away so that was never going to help.’

‘I’m sorry. Why weren’t they happy you went away?’

‘Oh, various reasons.’ He took a sip of his drink.

‘But no one here’s caught your eye since?’

Why was she asking? She knew that if he said there was someone, or there had been someone she’d have felt a pang of jealousy.

His eyes shot to hers and despite everything that had been said in the last few minutes, there was a fire to his gaze, and she could feel it burning in her own eyes. On the table, his hand seemed to move a little closer to her own, his fingers reaching out towards her resting hand. Or was she

imagining it? Was she romanticising him the same way she romanticised places whenever she visited them?

Lumi appeared again and both of them straightened, grabbing their menus.

'What will you have?' Lumi asked Violet.

'Oh, umm …'

'What about trying *poronkäristys*?' Rasmus asked.

'What's that?'

'Reindeer.'

Violet's mouth fell open and she dropped the menu to look at him. 'Reindeer? You eat Santa's helpers?'

'I thought his helpers were the elves.'

'Yeah, but the reindeers help too! They pull the sleigh! Santa wouldn't get anywhere if it weren't for them. You can't eat them!'

'You do know Santa isn't real, don't you?'

'What?' She widened her eyes, and for a second she almost had him. The slow, sexy smile lit his face, and she was sure there was a hint of that same fire she'd seen moments before.

'You eat cows though, don't you?' Rasmus asked.

'Yes, but they've got nothing to do with Santa!' She shook her head while he and Lumi laughed. 'No. Absolutely not. I am not eating reindeer. I'll have the salmon, thank you.'

'Good choice,' said Lumi. 'We have so much of it here – it is all freshly caught.' He turned to Rasmus, but Violet spoke before he could.

'If you order reindeer, I'm leaving.'

Rasmus chuckled. 'I'll have the salmon too. I wouldn't want to upset my guest.'

'You mean your date.' Lumi flashed a cheeky grin.

'No, I mean my guest.'

Violet didn't know where to look in this awkward exchange so stared out of the window, only to be recognised again as the insane snowmobile lady. She dropped her head. Was today's humiliation never going to end?

'Before I leave,' Lumi said. 'There was something I wanted to ask.' He glanced at Rasmus who gave an almost imperceptible nod. 'What are you doing about Christmas Eve? It's when we celebrate Christmas, more so than Christmas Day, and I hate the idea of you sitting alone and sad in your lodge.'

‘I wasn’t planning on sitting alone and sad in my lodge but—’

‘Would you like to come here? We are open and there is space for you if you’d like to come and have a proper Finnish Christmas dinner.’

Her heart swelled at the kind thought. ‘I’d love to, thank you, Lumi.’

He sighed in relief. ‘Good. I can stop worrying about you now.’

It was a throwaway comment, but it made her smile and her heart sing. He – and so many people here, like Monika – were really very kind. Yes, there were some who weren’t, at the moment at least, but it was clear how the developers were driving this community apart.

‘So what about you?’ Rasmus asked as Lumi left. ‘There’s no one at home waiting for you?’

Violet shook her head. ‘No. I mean, I’ve dated, obviously, just not recently and no one really stuck, you know?’

‘Then the men in your country are idiots.’

Violet swallowed. Her nerves were tingling and she was almost afraid to look at his face in case she saw something that made her swoon. He could be charming when he wanted to be. Very charming. ‘So, err—’ she began. ‘Let’s talk about the next stage of planning this fair.’

They discussed who in town was left to invite and when they would approach them. Lumi delivered their food and both tucked in, Violet realising just how hungry she was after such a busy morning. Conversation flowed naturally and she relaxed as they talked about the event planning still to do and tucked into the delicious dinner. Rasmus had just asked Violet how her painting was going when the door opened and a silence descended on some of the diners.

A man walked in with a handful of flyers, handing one to Lumi and speaking in Finnish. Violet couldn’t tell what was happening but noticed Lumi’s smile had vanished and Rasmus had stiffened across the table from her. Whoever this man was, he wasn’t welcome and the locals who were also dining had spotted him too, their conversations ending abruptly and their eyes following the man instead.

‘Who’s that?’ Violet asked.

‘He works for the developers. His name’s Väinö.’

It was as if a heavy rain cloud had suddenly settled above all their heads.

‘What’s he saying?’

‘He’s asking if he can leave those flyers. Lumi has said no, of course, but that he’ll take some for his friends.’

As Violet watched the conversation, Väinö scowled.

Rasmus continued his translation. ‘He just said, suit yourself. Or the Finnish equivalent, you could say.’

The man left and Violet turned back and refilled both their glasses. Lumi came straight to them, handing one of the flyers to Rasmus.

‘They’re holding another meeting. The developers.’

‘When?’

‘Next week.’

Violet held out her hand and Rasmus handed it over. She read, grateful it was in English on one side and Finnish on the other. ‘Maybe we should go?’

‘Why?’ Rasmus scowled. ‘They can have nothing to say that will convince me to listen to them.’

Lumi rolled his eyes and pointed at his friend. ‘See what he’s like? He’s impossible.’

‘We need to know what we’re up against and see if their plans have changed or moved on in any way. It’s better to know for sure what they’re doing.’

‘That is why I went to the first meeting,’ Lumi said, again directing the comment at Rasmus who looked both shame-faced and irritated.

‘Okay,’ Rasmus agreed. ‘We’ll go.’

‘I’m going too. As long as you two don’t mind a third wheel.’

‘Lumi!’ Rasmus said, and while the two bickered like children, Lumi pretending he had no idea what Rasmus was talking about, and Rasmus trying subtly to tell him to stop, she texted Archie the name of the developer, asking him to work his magic and send her everything he could find.

She needed to fully understand this situation and while she’d obviously do her own research, somehow, Archie managed to find things that weren’t obvious. She was a little bit worried he was a secret hacker or something, but given his notes nearly always came in useful, she wasn’t going to say anything.

‘Are you two finished?’ she asked, putting her phone back on the table and picking back up her knife and fork. ‘Because I plan on eating the rest of my dinner now the drama’s over.’

‘Sorry,’ Lumi replied, backing away and she and Rasmus finished their meal trying to find some of the fun they’d had before, though the

atmosphere had changed completely.

A sadness had settled on them both, a reminder of what exactly was at stake if they failed to launch the fund and if their event was a flop. Violet made several mental notes of things to do, check and double-check.

‘What are you doing tomorrow?’ Rasmus asked.

‘We should probably start thinking about marketing the events. We don’t have much time.’

‘I meant for yourself.’ Guilt laced his expression.

‘Oh, I – I don’t know.’

‘I’m ruining your holiday with all this.’

‘No, no, you’re not! I really don’t mind helping. I like it here. I’ve met some lovely people, and I want to do what I can. It would be silly not to use my skills and help you. I’ll come up with a few marketing ideas and maybe finish off my waterfall painting, though it’s almost there. I’m a bit worried about doing too much to it and ruining it. Maybe I’ll go out exploring or something.’

‘I have an idea for something we can do if you’d like?’ He glanced at her shyly from under his long, pale lashes.

‘Depends on what it is. If it involves one of those death-trap snowmobiles the answer’s no, thank you, I’d rather freeze to death.’

He laughed, relaxed and easy once more. ‘This I think you’ll like. How do you feel about huskies?’

‘The dogs?’

‘A husky ride specifically. It’s a brilliant way to see the countryside and a lot of fun. After today, I thought you might like it. And it’ll be my way of saying thank you for everything you’ve done so far.’

Even with the Unfortunate Incident and the flyer delivery, she had enjoyed today. Rasmus was kind and funny and the bit of flirting they’d been doing had set her heart alight. She felt like she was beginning to understand him. At least a little. And she liked it.

‘That sounds great. I’d like that. But then we really need to think about marketing this event now we’ve got the basics set up.’

‘Yes, boss.’

From the way he was looking at her, he’d like it too and no matter what their conversations had been during dinner, she couldn’t deny the attraction she felt towards him. Yes, they were unsuited and there were limits that

time and geography placed on them, but something was definitely growing in her heart and it absolutely wasn’t platonic.

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Chapter 11

‘Are you sure this is safe?’ Violet asked as they watched the huskies getting ready to take them on a journey through the beautiful Lapland countryside. Snow had been forecast for the day, but that didn’t seem to stop anyone here. Not like it would in England where the world comes to a standstill when three flakes fall and fade into the damp pavements.

‘Of course it’s safe.’ Rasmus held his arm open for her to move onto the sled. She stepped on and shuffled across, and he handed her a blanket, which she nestled over her knees.

‘It will be cold,’ he warned.

‘I’ve worn as many layers as humanly possible under this giant coat.’ She also had two sets of gloves on, a hat and her hood up.

They were currently on the edge of town, about to leave. Where polar night had begun, the sky was a strange colour as the sun was no longer climbing above the horizon and the clouds, heavy with snow, were absorbing most of the light. There wasn’t much wind today, but it was bitterly cold – the coldest it had been since she’d arrived. She tucked the blanket around her, grateful for the thermal clothes underneath that were keeping her toasty.

‘So this is polar night?’ she said to Rasmus.

‘Yes, it’s a wonderful time of year. It feels like we’re out of step with the rest of the world, but in a good way.’

She could totally understand that.

The dogs barked, setting each other off and suddenly they were moving and the eight beautiful huskies ran energetically, their pace growing faster and faster. Violet couldn’t stop smiling as they wound through the snowy tracks, trees banking them on either side, the sled gliding over the shimmering white ground. Without any effort at all, the dogs seemed to know exactly where they were going, and Violet took in the beautiful untouched world around her. They were deep in a forest, the sun having

cleared the banks of snow from the branches so they could reach out sideways instead of downwards.

Before she'd come here, she'd thought that one snowy view was much like another and seeing one meant you'd seen them all, but she couldn't have been more wrong. Where the weather was constantly changing she could now see some of the detail on the trees and the ground, dark green popping up or grey, rocky sections suddenly displayed. The strange snow-leaden light gave everything an ethereal glow; it was mesmerising and she snapped as many photos as she could. Rasmus had advised her not to bring her paints or sketchpad for the day as they were going to be busy, but she had to capture some reminders of what she'd seen. She could always paint them later when she returned to England.

A weight settled into the pit of her stomach. She'd always loved travelling and still did and her job demanded it, which was never going to change because she wasn't giving up her business, but a question was now forming as to where home actually was. Levi had a homely feel to it in a way nowhere else had. Back home, as she'd looked at her Christmas tree, that niggling in her mind she realised was telling her that while it was technically her home, it didn't feel like it. And Lapland, specifically Levi, did. She pushed the niggling, uncomfortable thought away, reminding herself she always did this to some degree when on holiday. It was probably stronger here because she'd been pulled into this community so suddenly. The feel of the cold wind on her cheeks helped her concentrate on her surroundings, and she listened to the huffing of the huskies and the sound of the sled gently crunching the ground.

The whole wonderful, unique experience was over far too quickly and as they stepped down, Rasmus helping her by gently holding her elbow, she struggled to regain her breath. It had been exhilarating and she wanted to step back on and do it all over again. Though the huskies probably needed a break. She couldn't imagine that she and Rasmus were the easiest things to lug around at high speed. Rasmus particularly with his Viking build, strong shoulders and muscular thighs. He caught her looking at him and she quickly smiled, pretending she hadn't been thinking anything that made her want to reach out and grab him.

'That was incredible,' she said, only just realising that they had done that whole thing in a comfortable silence, smiling over at each other and enjoying the scenery.

‘You can see why I love this place so much,’ he said. ‘There is nowhere like it on earth. I mean, obviously there are lots of snowy places that probably look just like it but there is nowhere that feels like this. Levi – this area – is special. And this afternoon, we are going to one more special place.’

‘Do I need my paints for it?’

‘No. This is one to experience, not stare at.’

‘Sounds intriguing.’

‘Let’s get the car and get on our way.’

‘You’re not going to tell me where we’re going? Again?’

‘I will if you really want me to?’

They walked down the street and Violet thought about it. ‘No, actually, I really like surprises, so I’ll wait till we get there. But it’s something to experience rather than paint?’

He nodded.

‘Okay. Can we get a coffee first? I’m gasping.’

‘Of course.’ Rasmus chuckled as they veered towards the nearest café. They ordered coffee to go and when they stepped back outside, he handed her a biscuit.

‘What’s this?’

‘*Kampanisu*. It’s a sweet biscuit flavoured with cardamom. Delicious.’ He took a big bite of his, and Violet didn’t need any encouragement to tackle hers. It was mouth-wateringly good and the perfect accompaniment to her coffee.

‘That’s delicious,’ she confirmed, when she only had a little left.

‘Here, I got some more.’ He offered a bag with another one each inside. She ate hers immediately, and when she handed the bag back, Rasmus said, ‘I’ll save mine for later.’

They climbed into the car, and Rasmus drove them back into the wilderness.

A few minutes into the journey, Violet’s phone pinged with a notification. She checked her emails and squeaked in excitement. ‘I have someone enquiring about an event in Edinburgh in the summer. I’ve been there before and it’s gorgeous. And the job sounds exciting too.’

‘I’m not surprised. You’re very good at what you do.’

She warmed at the compliment. ‘Speaking of which, we really need to discuss marketing.’

‘And we will. Tomorrow. Today, you deserve to relax and unwind.’

She sat back, determined to do just that as the beautiful scenery flew past her window. They seemed to be in the middle of nowhere until he pulled down a track that had obviously been driven on many times before, tyre tracks visible on the ground and the snow banked up on either side. She craned her neck looking for hints of where they were going. Rasmus tutted.

‘You’ll see where we are in a minute.’

And he was right, because a few seconds later they rounded a corner and she saw a huge, wooden-fenced enclosure and …

‘Reindeers!’ she shouted, seeing them wandering the large, snowy pasture. She turned to Rasmus. ‘Reindeers!’

‘Yes.’ He laughed. ‘I know. I thought you might like to come and feed some. You can do that also in Rovaniemi, but it is always crazy this time of year.’

‘That’s not surprising. It is nearly Christmas, but I can imagine how magical that would be for the families.’

Rasmus parked the car and undid his seatbelt. ‘Come on.’ Once they’d both climbed out, he added, ‘Won’t you miss being at home for Christmas?’

‘No, not really. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not anti-Christmas or anything. I love Christmas, but more for just having some time off, you know. I’m not one for the whistles and bells of it all.’

He scowled and she giggled, realising her turn of phrase might have been just a little too English.

‘All the over-the-top decorations and stuff to do,’ she clarified.

‘Ah, I see.’

‘And my parents are off visiting my sister in Australia so …’

‘I’m sorry,’ Rasmus said, as they trudged through the snow towards a giant barn.

‘No, don’t be!’ She added extra cheeriness into her voice because she really wasn’t bothered at all. ‘I was going to spend Christmas with them but then I won this trip, so they decided to go and visit my sister out there. It’s honestly not a problem. They were happy for me and I’m happy for them. No drama.’

‘You’re lucky. Family drama can be … difficult. Very difficult.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you seeing your family over Christmas?’ she asked tentatively.

‘Some. Most of mine have moved away from Levi. They moved after they sold their businesses. And we – we don’t talk as much anymore.’

Sadness pulsed in Violet’s heart. ‘Are they nearby?’

He shrugged. ‘Some are a few hours away, others further than that.’

She was beginning to understand how much of a rift had formed in his family and it nearly all seemed to stem from them having no choice but to sell their businesses. The wounds seemed to run very deep, and she wondered what more there was to the story because she was sure there were elements she wasn’t aware of.

He pushed open the barn door and was greeted by the owner: a short, round man, with rosy cheeks. If he’d had fluffy white hair and a beard he could have been Santa Claus, minus the glasses. They chatted in Finnish and Violet looked around the barn at the reindeer stuffed toys, Christmas books and other gifts for visitors to the farm. There was also a stand full of reindeer food and little bags to put it in. Rasmus collected two for each of them, pulling out a wallet that was so old and tatty she was surprised it still held money and hadn’t fallen apart. He said goodbye and held the door for Violet as they left. She gave a friendly wave to the owner who cheerily wiggled his fingers back.

Outside, the cold air nipped at the tip of her nose, turning it pink. They walked towards the first enclosure and a couple of reindeer strolled over to them. Rasmus tipped some food into the palm of his hand and held it out flat. The reindeer sniffed then tucked in. While it did, Violet gently rubbed the side of its neck.

‘They’re so gorgeous!’ She had to duck to avoid its huge antlers, but its cute little eyes and snow-covered nose were worth the possibility of getting scratched. She followed Rasmus’s example and tipped some food into her hand, offering it to the same reindeer. It gobbled it up, making her laugh as its lips brushed the fabric of her gloves.

‘Do you think they have names?’

‘Of course they do. Each one has a name and Runo, the owner, knows them all. Like all animals, they all have different personalities too. Shall we go and find some more?’

Another was just slowly clamouring over, and Violet had already tipped more food into her palm.

Rasmus playfully rolled his eyes. ‘I’ll go and get some more food.’

As he went, Violet remembered what Lumi had said, that this was known locally as a romantic trip to take. Had Rasmus meant it that way or was he simply taking her to say thank you for her help?

He came back from the barn with two more bags of food, a large grin on his face and for a second, panic welled in her stomach. If this was a romantic trip, what did that mean exactly? Did that mean he thought they were suited after all, despite what he said at the restaurant yesterday? Surely he hadn't changed his mind that quickly. Perhaps he really did just want to say thank you for her help and her clear passion for reindeers (at least not eating them) had given him the idea for this trip.

'Here—' He passed her a bag of food, and she tucked it into her pocket. 'Let's visit some others, shall we?'

As they walked, him making small talk while Violet smiled and nodded, trying to figure out how to act given she had no idea how Rasmus felt about her or this trip, she could feel the easy, fun atmosphere of before evaporating.

'Is everything okay?' Rasmus asked. 'You're scowling.'

'I'm fine! Absolutely fine! I was just … thinking.'

'About?'

She couldn't admit she'd been thinking about him and if he'd like to kiss her as much as she'd like to kiss him. She needed something else. 'About reindeers of course!'

'Oh.' He looked confused. Which was fair enough really. Nobody pondered reindeers that deeply.

'I was thinking about if I could paint one,' she added. 'I'm not sure I could. I tend to stick to landscapes, I'm not great at animals or still lifes or anything like that but I might try.'

'You could speak to Ritva for some advice.'

'Ritva?' Her brows pulled together.

'She doesn't just own some local stores. She is a local artist herself, and her work has been in galleries all over Lapland.'

'Wow. I didn't know that.'

'She doesn't mention it much. She keeps herself to herself. But if you want to try painting one you should. Look—'

He led them to another fence and though the field was a sheet of white, dimpled with footsteps, there didn't seem to be any reindeers in this one.

Then, a moment later, three came out from behind a small group of trees and trotted slowly towards them.

Violet couldn't stop the smile tugging at her mouth and lifting her spirits. She looked at Rasmus to find him already watching her, smiling as she was. She hadn't realised how close together they were, their shoulders touching, their faces so near she could see the eyelashes around his almond-shaped eyes. As her heart pulsed, she could absolutely see why feeding the reindeers was a romantic activity for couples.

Violet's breath stuttered in her chest. She expected him to move, to pull away, but he didn't. Instead his eyes locked on hers before flicking over her lips and back up. Would he move closer? The atmosphere was charged, pushing out the cold. She was sure he edged towards her just a little, leaning over his crossed arms.

Then a reindeer grunted in her ear and the moment was gone as she jumped out of her skin at a reindeer grunting in her ear for more food.

'He likes you,' Rasmus said, straightening up and uncrossing his arms from the top of the fence.

She laughed, but it felt like the ground had shifted beneath her feet. Like something rare and unusual had just happened, and she didn't mean the reindeer snorting in her ear. She watched Rasmus begin to walk away, towards the next enclosure and followed, disappointed that he was avoiding eye contact. He had to have felt it too, whatever it was.

They spent the next hour wandering around the different paddocks, feeding the differing reindeers, Violet doing her best to understand the moment that had passed between them. She also did her best to commit every moment of the experience to memory. The reindeers' gentle faces, thick fur and strange, but still sweet, grunts.

'This is the last one,' Rasmus said as they reached the final pen and Violet's fluttery heart slowed with regret.

Once again, they fed the animals who came to the fence.

'Hey, get off!' he called playfully, removing his hand as one particularly presumptuous one tried to take Rasmus's glove straight off his fingers in his pursuit of more grain. 'Ow! He nipped my finger.' Rasmus pulled off his glove.

Violet, without thinking, removed her own and took his hand, studying it. The tip was a little red, but he hadn't broken the skin. She looked up to find Rasmus's eyes wide, but he didn't pull his hand away. His skin was warm

against hers, the heat permeating into her. Her core tightened as he blinked. A mixture of emotions roiled around her body. Ones she had no idea how to sort through and detangle. Time inched out and she had no choice but to let go.

‘It looks fine,’ she said, releasing him.

‘Great. Good.’ He pulled his gloves back on.

Violet watched the ground intently, because she had no idea what she’d find if she lifted her head and looked in his eyes. What would he see in *her* face?

‘We should get going.’ Rasmus headed towards the car, pulling his keys from his pocket.

Violet followed and was just opening the door when a thought occurred to her. ‘I’ll just be a minute. Hang on.’

She dived back into the barn and bought a small, fluffy reindeer toy. She didn’t care that she was technically far too old for it, she wanted a souvenir of this day, of her trip, and right now she couldn’t think of anything better.

As she climbed back into the car a couple of minutes later, Rasmus laughed.

‘Is that what I think it is?’

‘It is.’

He shook his head, smiling. ‘So you had a nice time today?’

‘I did, thank you.’

‘Good. I wanted to bring you so you had some nice memories of this holiday and not just of me asking you to work for free.’

Ah, so that was why they were here, nothing to do with romance at all. She pressed down her disappointment knowing it was a stupid emotion to have anyway.

‘Will I see you tomorrow? For more work?’ she asked trying to sound teasing, but her voice wavered from the spinning emotions inside her.

‘No, sorry. I have a changeover in one of my lodges. I need to see to that.’

‘Oh, okay.’ The sting of sorrow was far stronger than it should have been. ‘In that case I think I’ll have a day painting and doing some bits of event planning. Will you be in town?’

‘At times.’

‘Don’t forget to get people selling tickets to the gala party and making people aware of the fair.’

‘I won’t. I promise.’

‘Good.’ She settled back, hugging her reindeer and forcing herself not to look at Rasmus as he drove her home.

Violet’s mind raced with so many thoughts and feelings she couldn’t make them out into anything distinguishable. As she saw small lodges dotted around the countryside, she forced herself not to think about what it would be like to live there, what it would be like to pop up and feed the reindeers more often, or see them roaming in the wild during the summer. She knew the reality of living here would be vastly different, but she couldn’t stop herself. It would be cold, she told herself, without real sun during polar night, and it would be difficult to get to places. And if all of that wasn’t enough reason to get a grip on her feelings, she was going home in a few weeks’ time.

Right after the party.

And then all of this would be nothing more than a memory.

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Chapter 12

Violet spent the next few days doing a mixture of work with the arts centre for the event, painting, exploring the local area alone and generally relaxing. She was loving the little eco lodge with its wood-burning fire and gorgeous views, and was even thinking that when she got home she might redecorate her house to something similar. But her weird thoughts about home still remained. Maybe she should look at moving to a different house? Buying a cottage or something? Somehow it didn't feel like the right solution.

Her easel was set up in the living room, the wicker basket with her painting supplies by its side. Her art was improving and she'd felt Grandma Louisa's presence again, her encouraging words in her ear and her happiness as Violet gave herself time once more. There was still a lot of room for improvement, but she had the feeling that if she was ever to produce something worth showing, it would be here with these landscapes, these amazing places she was capturing. As she looked around, she loved the cosy vibes and natural décor, wanting to create herself a sanctuary back home.

Back home.

She swallowed down those annoying thoughts with the sip of her tea and finished her work on her painting. Tonight was the developers' meeting, so she didn't have time to think about that right now. She'd been studying the brochure and their website and had some questions she wanted to pose tonight. Questions that she hoped would help them win.

As usual, time disappeared as she concentrated only on her art and soon Rasmus was on his way to pick her up for the developers' meeting. He was driving them to Lumi's restaurant and then the three of them would head to the arts centre where the meeting was due to take place. She felt unexpectedly nervous. Not just at what the developers were going to say (she had a feeling it wasn't going to be good) but also at seeing Rasmus. The day at the reindeer farm had been completely and utterly romantic, probably one of the best dates of her life. Not that she could, or should, call

it a date. It had been a trip out, nothing more. But there'd been that moment by the fence, and the one with his hand where electricity had shot through his skin and into hers. She began to picture his eyes, his mouth, wondering how it would feel to kiss him and have those strong arms wrap around her waist, pulling her close.

A beep outside jolted her from the thoughts and she jumped backwards as tea spilt over the rim of her cup. She quickly grabbed a cloth and cleaned it up before leaving both on the side and heading for the door.

With her coat over her arm, she climbed into his car, grateful he'd put the heating on already.

'*Hei*,' he said, glancing at her quickly then back to the road as he pulled away. 'Are you ready for this?'

'Are you? Do you have any idea what they're going to say?'

He shook his head. 'I'm worried though.'

'I guess we'll just have to wait and hope for the best.'

Before long, they walked into the arts centre with Lumi, eager for the meeting to begin. As they stepped into the room, Rasmus paused. Olavi sat in a chair at the front, on the far-right-hand side of the room with some of the other supporters around him. Rasmus approached him.

'Olavi, did you see the brochure and note I sent you?'

Given his first one had been given to her in error the first day they'd met, he must have sent another to Olavi's offices or one of his lodges.

'I did,' Olavi replied. 'And it's very impressive, but it isn't going to change my mind.'

'Why do you need to sell?' Rasmus asked, straight to the point.

'I don't need to do anything. But I have land doing nothing. It seems a waste when I can earn money from it.'

'But what about the wildlife? The beauty of where we live?'

'You've always been an idealist, Rasmus. It's time you lived in the real world.'

'I do and I make an effort to run my business sustainably in a way that doesn't harm the environment. What you do is—'

'What I do is my business.'

Lumi leaned into Violet. 'Uh-oh, I better just—' He stepped to Rasmus's side and urged him away. 'Let's take our seats, Rasmus. Now is not the time.'

Rasmus moved and the three sat on hard plastic chairs as far away from Olavi as possible. They had prime places at the front and Rasmus managed to greet most of the people who came in with a smile, wave, or brief conversation. When Monika walked in with her husband, who was tall and athletic as you'd imagine a ski instructor to be, Violet waved and Monika made her way over.

'You're here too!'

'Yes, I'm hoping we find out more about what stage they're at and what their next plans are.'

'It's so nerve-wracking. I just want them to go away. My husband has said the resort he works at are not happy about their plans. They don't want the competition.'

'I should imagine not.'

'But we'll have to see. Resorts require a huge amount of land. I'm hoping if people don't sell they won't have enough to build on. But how is your painting going?'

'It really is just a hobby so it's not amazing, but I'm enjoying getting better.'

'Rasmus said you were very good.'

'Did he?'

'Yes! He said you were very talented.'

'Oh.'

She wanted to ask when he'd said it and how the conversation had even come about, but Monika glanced at her husband who beckoned her over as the meeting was about to begin. 'I should go and join my husband. I think we're about to get started.'

Ritva was the last to arrive, and as Violet sat, she smiled at the older woman. Ritva gave a small, polite nod back, but when her eyes landed on Rasmus something strange happened. The curmudgeonly woman's gaze softened, though her mouth remained in a tight line and Rasmus too reacted as their eyes met. Violet noticed a softness wash over him and he shifted his posture, a nervousness emanating from him.

What was that about? Something was definitely going on between them. First her reaction to his name and him saying he wouldn't go into the shop and now this? As he was involved in conversation, she leaned towards Lumi.

'Lumi, is there some kind of a problem between Rasmus and Ritva?'

‘There are problems between Ritva and nearly everyone. She’s not an easy person to get along with, and there’s—’ he glanced at Rasmus before speaking, lowering his voice even more ‘—personal stuff there too.’

‘Personal stuff?’ she whispered. ‘What does that mean?’ Had he been a tearaway in his youth and done something like damage her property? Had he disagreed with her as a neighbour? The possibilities were endless. Too many to think about.

‘I’ll tell you later. We’re about to start.’

A suited man had walked in and the room fell quiet. He stood in front of the chairs, like a lecturer about to begin a seminar. The tension in the air was palpable as he took a clicker and suddenly the company name appeared on the projector screen behind him.

He began speaking in Finnish and knowing she couldn’t ask Lumi or Rasmus to translate while he was talking in case they missed something important, she pulled out her phone, found a translation app and watched the words appear on the screen.

‘Good evening. For those who don’t know me my name is Aro Heikkinen and I represent the Futurehub Development Company. We’ve had several consultations on our plans to develop a new, prestigious, luxury ski resort here in Levi and would like your support. Unfortunately, despite our assurances that we will do everything we can to protect as much of the natural environment as possible—’

‘What you’re not bulldozing over to build more saunas and spas,’ Rasmus shouted, his voice full of passion.

‘If I may continue uninterrupted. There will be time for questions and comments at the end.’

Several people congratulated Rasmus for his point, patting his shoulder or muttering praise. Violet’s eyes flicked from the screen to the man speaking in front of them. He was tall and lean, his hair close-cropped. He had a coldness to him, and he didn’t look like he meant a word he said. He continued, his tone flat and formal.

‘Despite our assurances, we are aware that many of you are being warned, some might say coerced, against selling your land or business to us.’

Rasmus was on his feet in seconds. ‘It’s not coercion to talk to your neighbours and make them aware of exactly what will be lost if they sell.’

‘Absolutely,’ Lumi added.

The words on Violet's screen were coming thick and fast. Her stomach was a tight ball of nerves, and she worried she wouldn't keep up if everyone kept speaking over each other. Already, as others joined in, speaking for and against the development, all arguing in Finnish, the text was merging and changing, and she was sure her phone was getting hotter from the effort.

'If you please!' the suit said, and after a few moments and some more exchanged comments, everyone sat again. 'It's true that some habitats will be lost due to the development, but it cannot be helped. We are committed to planting replacement trees, and do not forget that this new resort will create a number of new jobs and money for the local economy.'

'More tourists,' Rasmus said, 'also means more damage to our environment. Your walking routes that you plan to make cut through some of our most precious, most untouched environments. What will you do to protect it from people dropping rubbish, walking off the paths and damaging habitats? What will you do to support the animals you are forcing out of their homes? Will you create new ones?'

The man fell silent and while her screen lay blank, Violet lifted her eyes to look at his face. Aro looked incredibly uncomfortable and adjusted his tie. 'We do not currently have any plans to build new habitats, but I can feed that back to the company who I'm sure will—'

He was drowned out by a chorus of boos that only grew quiet when Ritva slowly, as if her old bones were aching sitting in the uncomfortable plastic chair, stood up. She lifted her head.

'When are you, and others like you, going to stop treating our home as a tourist attraction? Yes, we are grateful for the jobs, for the tourists and the money they bring in. Before the resort opened, it was hard to make a living.' She shot a glance at Rasmus and he dropped his head.

Violet wondered again what was going on but focused on her screen and Ritva's powerful words.

'But we already have one of the largest resorts here and Santa's village down the road. We do not need another one. We need land for the reindeer to wander, for the lynx and bears and owls.'

'Bears?' Violet said out loud, reading the word on her phone screen. Everyone turned around. *Ooops*. She hadn't meant to say it out loud. But all the time she'd been wandering along through the woods into town she could have been attacked by a bear? Why hadn't someone told her?

Rasmus glanced at her from the corner of his eye, his lip lifted into a one-sided grin.

Ritva, and others, shot her a look, then she continued. ‘You are destroying these natural habitats and those of you—’ she pointed around and behind her, ending on Olavi ‘—who have sold your land or your business to these people are helping to destroy it. You should be ashamed.’

‘Agreed!’ shouted Rasmus.

‘Thank you, everyone, for your comments,’ the suit continued. ‘But this meeting is to remind you that there is still time to come and discuss your options with us. We feel this new resort is crucial to the economy and we will be generous to secure the land we need. The other is to say that …’ he paused and Violet thought it rather overdramatic and crass ‘… thanks to some more forward-thinking people we have nearly secured the amount of land we need. I would encourage those who are considering selling not to miss out. Thank you.’

He stood back and the room went from shocked silence to a cacophony of voices. Violet turned off her phone and looked to Rasmus. Lumi, to her left, also leaned in.

‘They nearly have all the land they need?’ Rasmus asked, clearly shaken. ‘Who else could have sold?’

Lumi shook his head. ‘I don’t know but this is bad. Very, very bad.’

‘Have you heard any rumours?’

‘No, nothing. Whoever has done this, it must have been recently or without saying a word to anyone.’

‘This is a disaster,’ Rasmus said. ‘What are we going to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ his friend replied.

Violet stood. ‘I’m going to ask him some questions.’ She marched over, leaving Rasmus and Lumi gawping at her, and asked him for more details. How much land had they acquired, how much more did they need, what incentives were they offering?

‘And you are?’ he said when she finally paused from firing question after question at him.

Violet introduced herself and her business and he seemed impressed. She didn’t mention she was working with Rasmus, though it was clear to her he already knew. He smiled at her politely before other townsfolk pushed forwards to ask questions and Violet made her way back to Lumi and Rasmus.

‘Well?’ Rasmus asked.

‘I got numbers from him but nothing very helpful. I’m going to email him some follow-up questions.’

‘What are we going to do?’ He sat back in his chair.

‘First,’ Violet said, standing and turning to face them both. ‘We head to your restaurant, Lumi, because God knows I need a drink. Secondly, once we’re seated and comfortable, we form a plan.’

The two men stared at her blankly as though she were speaking a different language.

‘Come on, let’s go.’ She grabbed her coat and slung it over her shoulders. As she did, her eye caught Ritva’s and she was sure the old woman was smiling at her. For a second, she was almost as shaken as Rasmus, then they headed out into the cooling night air.

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Chapter 13

Lumi's restaurant was busy, but they managed to grab a table in the corner where they could discuss everything in relative privacy.

'Who do you think has sold?' Rasmus asked, a hand balling his hair.

Lumi shrugged while pouring him and Violet a glass of wine. Rasmus had opted for a soft drink as he was driving Violet back to her lodge. 'I really have no idea.' Lumi went on to suggest a number of locals Violet hadn't met but each name was met with a shake of Rasmus's head.

'I can't believe any of them would. They love this place as much as Ritva and I do.' A look passed between Lumi and Rasmus, one that on Lumi's part was almost chiding. 'Don't say anything.'

'What's the deal with you and Ritva?' Violet asked.

Rasmus sighed. 'She's annoyed at me.'

'Why?'

'Because,' Lumi said, 'he causes too much trouble. He always has.'

Ah, so it was something he'd done in the past, Violet thought.

'But what are we going to do?'

The two men fell silent, but Violet's brain was whizzing at a million miles an hour. She already had plans and ideas, but she wasn't sure how they'd go down with Rasmus. She took a sip of her wine, her frayed nerves from the meeting soothing a little, and spoke.

'First things first, Rasmus, you need to get the brochure you had for Olavi made up properly. Facts and figures, details of how the natural world will be affected by this new resort. How many animals will be homeless, where will they go, what effect will that have on the whole ecosystem? Use the resorts plans and mock-ups against them. Let people know what they'll see when they look out of the window. We need to make this personal.'

'It already is personal.'

'It is but some people might not realise the extent of it. If you can give them the big-picture stuff and tell them, "This will be your view from now on when you look out the kitchen window," it might help them change their minds. At the moment, if people are only thinking about the extra tourists

it’ll bring in and how it might help their businesses survive, you can’t blame them. We need to drive the message home that this is bigger than them. It’s about the world outside their window.’

Rasmus blinked, stunned. She had gone on a bit of a soapbox rant, so she wasn’t surprised she’d shocked him. ‘Sorry,’ she added.

‘No, it’s … you sound like me, that’s all.’

Lumi grinned, his eyes darting between them. ‘You’re very similar. Very compatible.’

Violet ignored him. ‘Monika said the old resort isn’t happy either.’

Rasmus shook his head. ‘They are much nicer. They did a lot of work and environmental impact studies before building, sharing openly with the town and actually listening to our feedback.’

‘Then talk to them too. They’re probably not overly chuffed—’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Lumi. ‘Chuffed?’

‘Happy. Pleased. Right now, their resort is one of the most popular in this whole region, isn’t it? If another developer builds, they’re going to lose business. They might join us in mounting a campaign against them. Which is what we need to do.’

‘But what about the event? The New Year’s Eve fair and party?’

‘I’ll take care of that while you two—’ she waved her finger between Rasmus and Lumi who looked at each other and then back to her. ‘—start stepping up your campaign. If they’re near to having all the land they need then you need to work harder at letting everyone know what will happen if they sell. And you can tell them about the fund you’re starting to help support local businesses who are struggling. Actually—’ She sat up straighter, grabbing her phone and firing off a text.

After a moment’s silence as Violet tuned in to her current task, Rasmus said, ‘Umm … Violet, you were saying?’

She finished typing the last few words, tapped send and looked up. ‘Sorry! I had an idea. You said the other resort are nice. Do you mean the company or the staff?’

‘The staff, I think.’

‘Great. I’ve just asked Archie, my number-one research guy, to find some contacts at the resort. They might be interested in donating to the fund. It’s worth a try, isn’t it?’

‘Violet!’ Lumi lifted his glass, toasting her. ‘You are wonderful.’

‘I don’t know about that.’

A blush rose to her cheeks, which only grew fiercer as Lumi added: ‘Rasmus, isn’t she wonderful?’

Oh God. His incessant matchmaking was going to be the death of her. She would literally die from embarrassment if he made one more comment.

‘She is,’ Rasmus muttered, glancing at her from under his eyelashes before turning away.

Lumi was called away by a member of staff and Violet stared at her glass, the red wine looking almost purple in the warm evening lighting.

‘I don’t know where we’d be without you,’ Rasmus said, his words forcing her head to shoot up. His tone was quiet, his eyes pinning hers with genuine care.

She swallowed, a lump forming in her throat and nerves going off like fireworks in her stomach. She searched for something to say but couldn’t think of anything as Rasmus’s eyes remained on her face.

‘You see this place the same way I do. I’ve met lots of people – tourists, guests in my lodges, people who move here to work – and they all appreciate the beauty of the place, but they don’t see the damage that’s done and why we need to protect it. But you do.’

She forced her voice to stay even and strong despite her heart pounding against her ribs. ‘I think I might have been like other tourists if you hadn’t shown me some of the places I’ve seen. The ones that are untouched and have been for centuries. I don’t know, it – it gave me a feeling that this place will be here forever, and we’re sort of guardians of it for the short time we’re on this planet.’ She laughed at herself. ‘Sorry if that sounds morbid.’

‘No, it doesn’t. It’s exactly how I feel.’

As he’d spoken, he’d shifted position, his body leaning towards hers across the table, his hand reaching out and resting on the tabletop. His fingertips were almost touching hers and inside, her nerves reacted of their own accord, willing her to stretch her fingers and touch him. She was just wondering what would happen if she did when Lumi returned, fracturing the moment.

‘Why do tourists order reindeer and then complain they can’t eat it when it arrives in front of them? If only they knew their own minds like you do, Violet.’

But did she? She knew she didn’t want to eat reindeer, especially after seeing the cute, gentle animals the other day, but she could no longer deny

the emotions welling inside her. This place, these people, were feeling more like home than her home back in England, and she had no idea what that meant or what the hell she was supposed to do about it.

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Chapter 14

‘That’s great, guys,’ Violet said, closing another impromptu team meeting, this time called by her. With an actual campaign being launched and more pressure now on the event, she’d called in the big guns (the rest of her team) to brainstorm anything else she needed to do and to see if they had any ideas that might help.

Ellen had suggested contacting the local Airbnbs and accommodation providers and urging them to work with the tourist board and booking sites to ensure they were as full as possible. Violet had thought anyone seeking a holiday over this time of year would have booked by now, but Ellen assured her lots of people waited until the last-minute hoping to get cheaper deals. It was a brilliant idea, and Ellen was already on it by the time Violet ended the call.

Archie’s research was underway and initial reports were that the company building the new development didn’t have a great reputation for sustainable tourism. They didn’t replant trees or care about energy consumption. Most of all, they didn’t seem to care about where they built or how, as long as the end result was what they wanted. It didn’t bode well and fed Violet’s passion to stop them. She’d tell Rasmus all this tomorrow, when they met with Lumi for a campaign planning meeting.

His kind but unexpected words still ricocheted around her head, and she was still unsure what to make of them, or her own weird feelings about this place, about home, what it meant and where it was. She’d scheduled a call with her sister and parents for later, hoping to pick her sister’s brain. After all, she’d decided to move to Australia, which was literally the other side of the world, and she was the happiest she’d ever been, so she must have some advice to give, but Violet knew herself well enough to worry that she was simply wrapped up in the holiday feels and all this was just that. Not reality. Unfortunately, she didn’t think she could trust her own instincts.

‘Thank you all so much for your time today.’ She ended the call with cheery waves and goodbyes and sat back, letting everyone’s thoughts and suggestions sink in.

Violet stood and went to make a cup of tea. The crackles from the fire and its gorgeous orange glow were instantly calming and she looked out of the window to see snowflakes drifting down. She'd definitely picked a good day for being inside. As the kettle boiled, she watched the flakes dance on the air, swirling with each gust and settling on branches and windowsills.

With a mug of fresh brewed tea in hand, she returned to her laptop and her event planning, confirming with the arts centre everything she needed to know and then passing information on to the vendors, so they had all the details they needed. By the time she'd finished she had about an hour before her call with her family, and Violet decided to work on another of her paintings. The one of the snowy vista was pretty much done, but she still had work to do on the frozen waterfall. She was struggling to get the textures she'd seen in the landscape onto the canvas and the result was that, to her, the picture felt flat and lifeless. She'd done some research on different painting techniques that might help but was too nervous to try something new and risk ruining the painting altogether.

Her progress was slow and she'd spent the hours paintbrush in hand but doing barely anything when her phone beeped with the meeting reminder and she set up to call her family. She quickly grabbed a glass of wine and settled in front of her laptop.

The smiling, tanned faces of her parents and sister popped up on screen. She was so happy to see them smiling as they all said hello.

'Darling!' her mum said. 'How're things in your gorgeous little lodge?'

They'd already had a conversation where Violet had turned her camera around on her phone and taken them on a tour, and her mum had approved.

'I'm good, thanks. It's lovely and look!' She walked to the window. 'It's snowing!'

'Oh my gosh! How wonderful.'

'Is that an easel I see?' her dad asked. Violet nodded. 'Show me what you're working on.'

Violet did as he asked and her family's praise filled her ears. They were so kind and encouraging. Maybe a little too kind and encouraging given her skill level, but as she looked at it now, she could admit that it really wasn't that bad. She was definitely improving by being here.

'Grandma Louisa would be proud.'

'Thanks, Dad.'

They began chatting about their plans for Christmas Day: a swim in the family pool and a walk along the beach according to her mum, and, according to her dad, sitting reading a book he hoped his wife had got him. He was still insisting on mince pies though they weren't sure they were going to get any and eventually, the questioning turned to her.

'And what are you doing, darling?'

'I'm going to a restaurant in town with some friends.'

'Friends?' her mum said. 'You've made friends already?'

'Of course she has,' her dad interrupted, knowing that her mum hadn't meant anything rudely, but it might have come across that way. 'Our girl's always been good at making friends wherever she is.'

Violet had to admit, it did seem odd that she would call Lumi and Rasmus friends already, but they were, though she wasn't sure they'd stay in touch once she'd left. Violet described Lumi's restaurant and the traditional Finnish meal he was offering and how she planned to spend the rest of the time eating delicious local delicacies and painting.

'That sounds a lovely way to spend Christmas Day,' her dad said.

'It does, doesn't it?'

When she'd first decided to accept the holiday and be away over Christmas she'd been looking forward to a shop beforehand, grabbing all she needed and then just hunkering down in her little lodge and enjoying the peace and quiet. Now she was excited to do both. She'd spend Christmas Eve with Rasmus and Lumi and then Christmas Day relaxing on her own. Some people might think that sad, but Violet was at peace in her own company and was looking forward to indulging herself uninterrupted.

Eventually, after more chatter and kisses blown, her parents went off and her sister Isabel's face filled the screen. She had curly hair like Violet, except hers was pulled back into the semblance of a ponytail.

'So what was your cryptic text message about?' she asked.

Violet had warned her before the call that she needed some time alone with her to discuss something.

'So … something weird is happening.'

'Is it something you need to see a doctor about? Because I know I'm your sister, but I do not do—'

'No!' Violet giggled. 'It's nothing like that. It is serious though.'

Isabel scowled as she settled into her chair. 'Go on then. I won't interrupt.'

‘Since I got here, I’ve been getting this weird feeling. When I look at the houses and visit the town or see the countryside I just … I feel odd. And when I think of home, like it doesn’t feel like a home. It feels … emptier. I’m going to miss all this, but it doesn’t feel like it’s in a holiday way. Like —’ It was taking everything she had to be able to verbalise her mixed-up feelings, untangling one thread from another as she spoke, knowing her sister wouldn’t judge her. ‘I feel like maybe I like it here more than I like it at home and I don’t know what that means.’

‘Wow,’ her sister said, her eyebrows raised. ‘So you don’t know if you want to go back to England?’

‘I don’t know.’ Violet grabbed her head and scrunched her hands into her hair. ‘Sometimes I can really imagine a life here, but you know how I get. *I* know how I get. So is this all just me being how I normally get on lovely holidays? Or is this something more? What do I do?’

Isabel scrunched up her nose and Violet knew what was coming. ‘You have always got a bit carried away when you visit places. Do you remember when we went to Paris, you were going to move there as soon as you turned sixteen and become a patisserie chef, then when we went to Orlando as kids, and stopped off in Miami, you were all set to move there too and work in a café on the beach. You said you could just imagine how glamorous it would be to live there, working out on the beach even though you hate working out.’

‘But that’s when we were kids and—’

‘Last year, you were all set to move your business to Lille even though you don’t speak a word of French because you had that job there and you really like cheese.’

‘That’s what I mean! I know what I’m like so how do I know if this is real? I want to keep doing my job and travelling for work, but the idea of coming back here just makes me feel happier than the idea of ending an event and going back to England. I want a cosy little cabin here and to trample through the snow and go out and paint on my days off. But I don’t know if that’s all fantasy.’

‘Only you will know that,’ Isabel said then fell quiet for a moment. ‘You know, I felt the same when I visited Australia.’

‘You did?’ Hearing that, Violet’s feelings felt suddenly more valid.

‘Yeah. So I do understand what you’re saying, but we’re very different. I’d never felt like that about anywhere we’d visited, whereas you always

do. You always think it'd be so much better than England but maybe it wouldn't be. I wish I could help more, but listen, Mum and Dad gave me some great advice when I was first thinking about moving.'

'What did they say?'

'They told me to imagine living my worst day – a day where everything goes wrong at work, a day when you have a row with your boyfriend, or a friend, and you drop your shopping, the car breaks down, you've got nothing in for dinner and no wine, you're not feeling well – all that sort of stuff.'

'And … ?'

'Would you still want to be there? Because if you'd like to be there on your worst day, you're going to love being there on your best day.'

Violet fell back into the chair. 'Huh.'

'I know, right? That's pretty good for them because we both know how hit and miss their advice can be.'

'Like when Mum said I'd look great with blonde hair and I dyed it and looked like I had a yellow mop on my head.'

Isabel giggled. 'That was pretty bad. Or when I said Joey next door had asked me out and I was going to say no and she told me I should go on the date with him for the practice.'

'That was a disaster. Didn't he take you bird watching?'

She nodded. 'Bird. Watching.'

The two girls fell into fits of laughter.

'You know, that's really good advice, Issy, thanks.'

'I'm here if you need to talk, okay? But just be careful. Don't make any rash plans because you've wanted to move to nearly every place you've ever visited. So you need to think this one through before you do anything.'

'I know. I will. I promise. I'll text you later, okay? Love you.' Violet blew a kiss into the screen, and her sister did the same back.

With Isabel's, or should that be her mum and dad's advice, ringing in her ears, Violet paced the lodge, tidying the kitchen, the bedroom and the living room. Her brain was buzzing and not in a good way. Violet knew her tendency to lean towards fantasy, imagining life more exotic. For example, she was loving polar night right now, but what would it be like every year? Would she still find the lack of real daylight exciting and the sky beautiful or would it become a nuisance? Her heart might be saying one thing, but this was a decision for her head and she wasn't sure she could trust either.

An unexpected knock on the door forced her to leave her thoughts behind. She pulled it open to find Rasmus there, snow covering the shoulders of his jumper where he hadn't worn his coat, his ungloved hands in his pockets.

'Hi,' he said, shuffling a little, kicking the snow with the toe of his boot.

'Hi,' Violet replied. 'Everything okay?'

'Yes, I – I just thought I'd stop by and see if you were okay. All this stuff, I don't want it to ruin your holiday.'

'No, no, it's fine. Do you – do you want to come in?'

'Only if I'm not disturbing you.'

She stood to the side to let him in. She had no idea how he was wearing a jumper and no coat because she could feel the cold wind sneaking inside and snaking around her ankles. He wiped his boots on the mat and brushed the snowflakes from his shoulders.

'I did what you said and printed my brochure properly. I delivered quite a few today. It was a good idea. People didn't seem to realise just how much of an impact this place is going to have, and I've spoken to the resort too. They're happy to donate some money to the fund though they haven't said how much yet.'

'That's great!' She paused for a moment, her stomach rumbling. She'd planned on eating after her call with Isabel. Could she invite Rasmus to join her? The idea sent excitement tingling her nerves. 'I was just about to have dinner actually; did you want to join me?'

'Sure. I haven't eaten since breakfast. That'd be nice. Thank you. I can help if you like.'

'You could open some wine and pour a glass. If you're joining me that is.'

'I can have one small one.'

He took the red from the countertop and Violet handed him the bottle opener and collected two glasses from the cupboard.

'Cheers,' she said when he handed her a nicely full glass.

'So what's for dinner? And what can I do to help?'

'Umm … it's not very Laplandy or exciting, but it is one of the things I can cook pretty well. How's spaghetti bolognaise?'

'Sounds good to me.' Rasmus smiled as Violet gathered the ingredients. She suggested he sit at the table while she prepared everything. They could then discuss what was left for them to do.

They chatted happily until dinner was ready and Violet put their plates on the table and slid into the seat opposite Rasmus. She waited, hoping he'd like it and when he took a bite, instantly nodding, she relaxed.

'I'm sure it's not as good as something from Lumi's restaurant but it's not bad,' she said, tucking in herself.

'We better not tell him we had dinner together. You know what he's like.'

'He'll be picking out wedding outfits and save-the-date cards.'

Rasmus laughed. 'He would.'

The memory of those comments, that they were unsuited, danced in the air and the same hot prickling crept up the back of Violet's neck. The more time they spent together the more she thought perhaps they were suited. If she was staying, that was. And even if she was technically going home in a few weeks that didn't mean if they started anything it had to end. But what could she do? While they'd flirted he'd never tried to kiss her and though she thought he might like her, it didn't mean he even wanted a relationship. She glanced at Rasmus then dropped her eyes, aware that he was doing the same to her, glancing and then looking away.

'Where have you travelled for work?' he asked to break the awkward silence that had descended.

'Oh, here, there and everywhere, really.'

'And you like it?'

'I do. It's one of the things I love most about my job.'

'You don't find it … lonely?'

'Lonely?' She looked up, surprised at the question. 'In what sense?'

'You don't mind not being in the same place all the time? Having a community? Friends and family around you when you need them?'

She thought for a moment. She had a community in terms of her work and her business; she had her family but now she'd experienced just a little of the closeness of the community here, the way they were all pulling together, she did want to be a part of something like that.

'You've gone quiet,' he said, forking up some more pasta, then adding, 'and you're pulling a strange face.'

She laughed. 'I guess I would like more of a community. Would someone here bring me soup if I was ill?'

'Soup?'

'Yeah. Like, if I had the flu and no one to help me. Would someone drop off supplies to help me out?'

‘Of course.’ His brow creased like it was the most unnecessary question in the world. Then it softened. ‘I understand people don’t always realise how much places like this matter. I didn’t. Not until it was too late.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘When I moved away I realised quickly how much I missed the people here. Living in a big city, it wasn’t for me. I didn’t like the anonymity. I became … lonely but I wouldn’t admit it to myself or anyone else. And then I came back and—’

Violet waited. It was clear this was hard for him, and she didn’t want to interrupt. He was opening up and she wasn’t sure when or who was the last person he’d done that to. She felt blessed, like the connection between them, the mutual understanding of each other, was growing stronger.

‘And?’ she asked when his gaze seemed to turn inwards.

‘And when I came back my family had had to sell most of their businesses. I was off doing my own thing while they were struggling and I didn’t know. They didn’t tell me because they didn’t want to burden me when I was already feeling … down. Then by the time I returned it was too late.’

‘And you blame yourself?’

‘Of course. If I’d been here I might have been able to change their minds, or do some work to help turn things around.’

‘Why did you need to change their minds?’

‘Lots of our businesses had been in the family for generations. I would have liked to keep it that way. Keep our legacy alive. And I guess I felt guilty that they couldn’t talk to me about it because of my own problems.’

‘I’m sure they were just looking out for you. Are they happier now?’

The question seemed to take him by surprise. ‘Happy?’

‘Yes. It might have been a tough decision, and I can understand how you might have felt about it if they didn’t discuss it with you but … are they happier now?’

‘I guess so.’

‘You guess?’

‘We haven’t talked as much since they sold. There were … arguments. I felt they should have told me; they felt it was their decision. Now we barely speak at all.’

So he was estranged from his family, not just no longer close with them. Again, her heart pulsed with sadness and seeing the regret on Rasmus’s face

only made it worse.

‘Well, that’s sad,’ she said matter-of-factly, knowing Rasmus wasn’t one for sympathy. ‘I’m so sorry. But, maybe it’s time you spoke to them and checked in? It might help you all to move on.’

‘You sound like Lumi,’ he replied, and she laughed.

‘Has he said the same thing?’

‘Often.’

‘Then maybe that’s a sign. And are you happier?’

‘Yes. I was happier as soon as I returned.’

‘Then maybe things worked out better than you think.’

Rasmus looked up but didn’t speak. With dinner finished, Violet stood to clear the plates from the table and Rasmus helped.

‘I had better go,’ he said, fishing in his pocket for the car keys.

Just as he stepped towards the door, her phone buzzed to notify her of an email. She quickly glanced at the screen, surprised to see it was from the development company they were currently fighting against. She’d followed up after the meeting and emailed the rep a load of questions, all of which he’d answered, so she hadn’t expected to hear from him again. She clicked and started reading. It was from the same rep who’d spoken the other night, asking for a meeting with her. Not her and Rasmus, just her. An icy chill shot down her spine.

‘Is everything okay?’ he asked, sensing her change of mood.

After everything they’d discussed that evening, she couldn’t face telling him about it now. Plus, there was more text to the email than the little she’d read so far. She quickly plastered on a smile, deciding she wasn’t going to say anything until she’d read it properly and knew for sure what the situation was. ‘Yes, fine. Just a work email. That’s all.’

‘Then, will I see you tomorrow? We could go to another scenic spot. I have a couple more I’d like to show you before you leave.’

After the evening they’d spent together, she’d like that very much and she was eager to start a new painting and test her skills once more. ‘I’d like that.’

‘I’ll see you in the morning then. I’ll bring breakfast.’

‘Sounds good.’

He lingered, tossing the keys from one hand to another. ‘Goodnight then.’

‘Goodnight.’

To her surprise, instead of walking back towards his car, he took a step forwards, placed one hand on her upper arm and kissed her gently on the cheek. She inhaled the scent of him, a mix of gentle, simple scented aftershave and clean, fresh air from outside. Then he let her go, turned and walked back to the car, and without looking back, drove away.

Snowflakes drifted down in front of her eyes and the cold that had snaked her ankles earlier wrapped itself around her like a freezing blanket, drenching her skin in goose bumps. Still she didn't move, just watched the headlights disappear into the black night. An owl hooted somewhere in the trees and as the sounds of his engine faded, a smile firmly on her face, she closed the door and headed back inside, but Isabel's warning rang distantly in her ears. Could she trust herself this time?

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Chapter 15

Violet hadn’t bitten her nails since she was a kid, but here she was, staring at the email on her phone and chomping away.

The rep, Aro Heikkinen, wanted to meet her at eleven o’clock that morning at a café at the ski resort. Clearly, he was staying away from the town centre, which was probably sensible. He hadn’t said what he wanted to speak to her about, but she could guess it was the fair and the New Year’s Eve party and probably Rasmus, given that she’d been sat with him at the meeting. No doubt the company wanted to convince them both to stop what they were doing. Not that it would work. The more she heard Rasmus speak about his life here, his family, the town, the more she wanted to help, and everyone had been so welcoming, she felt a part of it already. She had thought about replying and saying no, but the idea that she might gain some additional information that was useful to them was tempting.

Too tempting.

The trouble was, going to the meeting meant cancelling on Rasmus and she really didn’t want to do that. Her mind kept replaying that kiss over and over again. The feel of his lips on her cheek, the way he’d looked so vulnerable but also certain that he wanted to do it. Her stomach flipped. How she’d love for those lips, that soft kiss, to be pressed to her mouth. Her crush on Rasmus was growing stronger and this was the first real indication he might like her too.

Urgh. There was no other way for it. She couldn’t see Rasmus and meet the rep. The real question was, did she tell him what she was up to, or did she not? She didn’t want to lie to Rasmus, but he might find it deeply insulting that the rep had asked to meet her alone. She knew she would. If she told Rasmus she had some unexpected work to do, which wasn’t untrue, she was sure he wouldn’t mind or think she’d messed him about, and then she could tell him afterwards, as soon as the meeting was over. But she had to speak to him now, before he got them both breakfast and drove out here. She emailed the rep back, agreeing to the meeting, then hesitated over

Rasmus's number. She wasn't going to text – that felt impersonal – but she felt slightly sick that she wasn't being totally upfront and honest with him.

Guilt still dried her throat, but the rep had made it clear the invitation was for her and her alone, and telling Rasmus seemed unnecessarily cruel when she could nip along, take the meeting (which she would make sure was brief) and then leave with Rasmus none the wiser. She could then meet him afterwards and mention it casually and pass along any information she'd gleaned. She didn't love the idea. It made her feel icky. But it seemed like the best solution. She dialled and her breath stuttered.

Rasmus picked up quickly. 'I'm just leaving so—'

'Rasmus, I'm sorry but—' The half-truth stuck in her throat. 'I've got some urgent work to do. A meeting I can't miss. I'm sorry but I need to postpone today. Is that a problem?'

'No, of course not.' He tried to hide the disappointment in his voice and guilt once more stabbed at her. The idea that he'd wanted to see her so much it was disappointing she couldn't make it, made her chest tighten.

'I'm really sorry,' she said again.

'It's fine. You have work to do. I know how much your business means to you. Of course I understand. And you've been doing so much to help me too.'

Oh God, and now he was being so nice about it. She felt physically sick.

'Let's reschedule to tomorrow, okay?'

'That's great. Thank you.' She rung off, reminding herself this was all for their event and to protect Rasmus's feelings. It was to help the town. She needed to know what this rep wanted, and she'd get more answers alone than if she brought Rasmus along uninvited. Glancing at her phone, which now displayed the time, she stood. She needed to get ready.

***

Violet was meeting Aro at the same café Rasmus had taken her to that first day they'd properly met. Now when she thought back to their first introduction it made her laugh. Him wielding a brochure ready to fight for his cause while she threatened him with a wooden spoon that would have done nothing.

Though polar night had begun, the sky wasn't exactly dark. The sun hadn't quite risen above the horizon, but its beautiful orange glow was still

visible. Thin strips of colour followed the skyline from a deep orange to palest pineapple yellow with dark navy clouds streaking the heavens. There was a strange bluey light, but the world didn't feel as dark as she'd expected and with the bright lights from the ski resort, she was surprised at how normal it felt.

A smile pulled at her lips as she arrived, but then Violet frowned almost immediately. Through the window she couldn't see Aro anywhere. She checked her phone. Right on time. Surely he hadn't stood her up? More likely he was running late. If the news of their events was enough for them to call another meeting, then she could imagine him rushing around in a flap trying to figure out what to do to stop them. If she'd called off seeing Rasmus only to waste her morning, she'd feel even worse.

Pushing thoughts of Rasmus and her guilt from her mind, she headed inside, removing her first few layers as soon as she was through the door. She looked around but still couldn't see Aro, then a man in a similar corporate suit stood up and smiled at her.

'Miss Church?' he asked in accented English.

Though confused, Violet headed towards the table, gloves and beanie hat in hand, running another through her hair and taming any errant curls to look presentable.

'I thought I was meeting Aro?' she said, approaching his table.

'Yes, I'm sorry. I'm afraid he was called to another meeting but asked that I meet you instead. My name's Mikael.' He held his hand out for her to shake and she took it. His handshake was limp, the type she hated most with flappy fingers. 'Can I get you a coffee or something?'

Knowing she didn't want to be associated with this man or his company in any way, even by the price of a coffee, she smiled politely and said, 'I'll just grab my own, thank you though.' She didn't offer to get him anything seeing his cup was still full.

She joined the queue and was certain she recognised the voice in front of her. 'Monika?'

Monika turned and smiled widely. 'Violet! *Hei*! How lovely to see you. What are you doing here at the resort?'

A wave of panic rushed over her, but she kept her smile intact. 'Just having a quick business meeting. What about you?'

'Oh, grabbing some breakfast before I see to the children. I can't look after them on an empty stomach; it's too tiring.'

‘I can imagine.’ Violet smiled as Monika was handed her tray complete with coffee and tiger cake. A second later, Violet was handed hers.

‘We should meet for a coffee and a chat soon. I’d love to know more about what you do and how!’

‘And I’d love to know more about you and how long you’ve been here. Let’s definitely do that. Here—’ She took out her phone and they swapped numbers. ‘Enjoy your breakfast.’

‘Hope your meeting goes well.’ Monika headed off to a table where she pulled out an e-book reader and began to read while digging in to her tiger cake.

Violet returned to the table. She hadn’t bothered with food as she still felt slightly sick at lying to Rasmus and would much prefer to eat when this was done and she could actually enjoy it. Seeing Monika had been lovely but it also added another layer of pressure, another layer of guilt, to her lie.

‘Thank you for meeting me,’ Mikael said as she placed her coat over the back of her chair.

‘You’re welcome. I’m interested to know what you have to say.’

‘Straight to the point.’ He grinned.

‘I’ve found it’s the best way sometimes.’

The other night, Aro had spoken confidently and while this man matched his demeanour, there was also a smugness to him that she didn’t like. Violet always tried to give people the benefit of the doubt because she knew there was a difference between smug and self-assured, but this man was definitely leaning more towards haughty. His smile was more of a smirk as if he was sneering at her. She wrapped her hands around her coffee cup, feeling the heat in her fingertips, refusing to be intimidated. She’d dealt with far scarier and far more senior people than him.

‘Aro told me you were at the meeting the other night, so I’m not going to repeat everything he said then, though I would like to reassure you that we are committed to saving as much natural habitat as we can. I know that’s a concern of your friend Rasmus.’

She thought about responding, but decided silence might be a better tactic. People hated silences. They very quickly became awkward and uncomfortable and Violet had learned you could often find out more by remaining quiet and letting others fill the gap. As she’d predicted, he did just that.

‘So, we are aware of the … the work you and Rasmus are doing. We’ve heard about the Sustainable Tourism Fund and your New Year’s Eve events. They are very creative and a lot of work to do in a short space of time. It’s very impressive.’

‘Thank you, but I still don’t see—’

‘We would like to donate to the fund.’ He placed his forearms on the table, clasping his hands together.

Violet had lifted her coffee cup to her lips but then paused, the coffee almost, but not quite, falling over the side. She hadn’t expected that. Not at all, and it took a moment for her brain to catch up. ‘I see.’

From the corner of her eye she noticed Monika glance in her direction. Another wave of guilt prickled down her spine. It was fine. She’d tell Rasmus about all of this as soon as it was done.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘I would need to take your offer to Rasmus, but I have to say, I don’t think he’ll be in favour and, to be honest, neither am I.’

‘You might be more interested when you know the amount,’ he replied, conceit exuding from his expression.

It didn’t really matter how much, but it was a useful statistic to have. ‘How much were you thinking?’

‘Ten thousand euros.’

Crikey, that was a lot of money. Much more than they were likely to raise through donations and the event itself. Plus they’d have to run events throughout the year to keep the fund topped up. It was all going to be a lot of work. A fact she wasn’t sure Rasmus had fully realised yet. Well, *they* weren’t going to have to do it, Rasmus was, because she wouldn’t be there. A weight settled on her shoulders, but she kept her thoughts on the matter at hand.

‘I see,’ she said coolly, ensuring her voice didn’t give any emotion away. ‘That is very generous of you. But I can’t help but feel like you’re trying to buy us off.’ She cocked her head, her expression neutral but also slightly challenging.

‘No, no. I wouldn’t put it like that. But we would like to see more acceptance of our plans in exchange. Perhaps less aggressive disagreement at meetings, or that you believe we are committed to protecting as much of the natural environment as we can while building and after we’re open too. We don’t expect you to agree with everything we’re doing, but we would

like to – to find a way forward that suits all parties and ensures the people of the town aren't being … unduly influenced.'

Unduly influenced? Violet bit the inside of her cheek. A siren was going off in the back of her head. This was bribery, plain and simple. It made her skin crawl. Rasmus, thankfully, would never go for this. That he had integrity was another thing that drew her to him. Another thing she liked.

'And while you consider that,' Mikael continued, 'we would also like to speak to you about your events business. We – I mean – Aro and my bosses – have been very impressed with the work you're doing here, even though I believe you're on holiday. Again, it is very impressive, and we will be holding numerous events throughout the year at this resort and at others we own. We would be more than happy to talk to you and your company about those events. Give your company priority to pitch to us, maybe even agree some things now. Someone with your skill set would be very well suited and we would of course pay you generously.'

While she couldn't deny the opportunity to grow her business piqued her interest a little, she wasn't going to take him up on his offer. It would hurt too many people, like Lumi and Ritva, and others she'd gotten to know in the town. Her eyes flicked towards Monika who was now chatting with a neighbour at another table. As flattering as it was, it was an opportunity she would have to let pass by for the sake of her conscience.

Mikael looked at her expectantly.

'That's very flattering and an interesting proposition but—'

Before she could finish her sentence, two things happened at the same time that completely distracted her from what she was about to say. Firstly, Mikael saw something out of the window that made him lift his head and then shrink a little in his chair. Secondly, as the door burst open, Violet knew from the lump that had formed in her throat and the dread settling like a rock in her stomach, why Mikael had reacted in that way. He'd seen Rasmus and before she could even think what to do, Rasmus had walked in and marched up to the counter with his usual long strides. Violet's stomach dropped to her shoes.

Her heart pounded against her ribs as her rapidly increasing heart rate shot through the roof. What would he think? He'd know that she'd lied to him and from the suit in front of her it was clear this man worked for a large corporate firm. Rasmus wasn't stupid and would easily put two and two together. Oh, this had been a very, very bad idea. Violet's eyes flicked

between Rasmus at the counter, his back towards her, and Mikael in front of her.

'Was there anything else?' she asked, unable to stop her voice from shaking a little. She had to get him out of there as quickly as possible.

'I don't think so.'

Violet stood, and though surprised, Mikael did too, swiftly glancing over his shoulder.

He shook her hand once more. 'Well … do consider our offer, Miss Church, and if you could put our proposed, generous donation to the fund to Mr Korhonen, we would appreciate it. Goodbye.'

Violet glanced over his shoulder as he grabbed his coat, checking where Rasmus was. *Come on*, she thought. *Just leave already.* But it was too late. Rasmus turned, the smile on his face vanishing instantly as his eyes fell on her. He stared at her for a moment then his gaze flicked to Mikael. She watched as his pupils swept down the length of Mikael's body, taking in the suit still visible as he put on his coat. Mikael headed out of the door and towards a parked car.

Violet swallowed the lump forming in her throat, but it didn't move. She walked towards him. 'Rasmus,' she said cheerfully, trying to keep her nerves at bay.

'He was from the development company, wasn't he?'

'I—' She faltered, her voice weak with shame and straining with remorse. While she hadn't told out-and-out lies she hadn't been totally honest either and now she couldn't remember her reasoning for not just telling him. 'Yes, he was.'

Rasmus's eyes widened in surprise. 'I see.' His jaw twitched. 'Why did you meet him behind my back? Why does everyone feel the need to go behind my back?'

'Maybe because you react like this,' she fired, her frustration mounting. 'But it really wasn't like that. He asked me to meet him. Just me, you …' She didn't know whether to continue, but now she'd been found out it seemed the truth was the best option. 'I'm afraid you weren't invited and I didn't see the point in turning down the meeting when—'

'When you could just lie to me and go anyway?'

Sensing there was drama, the whole café had grown quiet at the exact moment she said that last sentence. Everyone could tell something was happening even though they weren't screaming and shouting and the diners

were trying their best to listen. Monika looked like she'd rather be anywhere else than where she was currently sitting, studying her e-book.

This was horrible. She'd never cheated on an ex, but she could imagine this was what it felt like to be found out. She felt dirty and like she'd betrayed Rasmus. But she just needed to explain, make it clear why she was there and find out what he'd heard.

'Listen, Aro emailed saying he wanted to meet me, and I wanted to find out more in case it was helpful to us.'

'Us?' he scoffed.

'Yes, us. You, me, Lumi … But he didn't turn up, that man did. His name's Mikael. He works for Aro or alongside him at least. He had an offer for you – for me too but—'

'He offered you a job?'

Why had she said that? For God's sake, she was only making this worse. This was absolutely not going the way she'd hoped it would. This whole thing had been a very, very bad idea. Didn't her mum always advise her to tell the truth? Why hadn't she done that? Yes, he'd probably have been annoyed at first, but he'd have gotten over it pretty quickly, whereas this was going to take much longer if he ever did at all. Rasmus might not have liked it, but he would have respected her decision. She had to admit, how he'd reacted to Lumi had played on her mind, but she hoped he might have learned from that mistake. Obviously he hadn't.

'Did he offer you a job?' he asked again, his tone colder.

'It's not what you think, Rasmus.'

'No? I know how much you love your business. How much you want to expand into Europe. So you met this man behind my back so you could further your own business interests. Network and make contacts. You used this town's problems to your own advantage.'

'That is not true.'

'Is that why you spoke to them after the meeting? To make a contact?'

'What? No! I was going to tell you about the meeting as soon as it was done.'

Even the staff were seeming uncomfortable now, and Violet glanced at Monika who shot her an apologetic look and shuffled out from behind her table to leave.

Rasmus continued. 'You say you understand how much the community need to fight this, but you don't. Maybe if you'd ever been part of one

you'd understand.'

His words stabbed a deep wound into her, and in response, anger swelled inside her too. No, Violet had never really experienced a community before, but this one wasn't perfect either. She scoffed.

'Why are you making that noise? That pffft noise?' he asked.

'Don't pretend like everything here is perfect, Rasmus. You hate some of your neighbours for selling and you don't get on with Ritva for some unknown reason, and you really dislike anyone who's even thinking about talking to the development company even though you don't know why they might be doing it. So don't pretend your world is perfect.'

'I'm trying to make it better,' he replied, but she could see her words had stung and though she'd been defending herself she felt awful for it.

Violet knew she'd done the wrong thing meeting that man behind his back. She could have just told him the situation and what she planned to do and not kept him in the dark, but that didn't mean she didn't care about this place, and she wasn't going to let him accuse her of something like that.

'Listen,' she said, trying to calm the situation down rather than draw more attention to themselves. She took another step towards him, lowering her voice further. 'Can we sit down and talk about this? I realise I've made a mistake, but you can't say I don't care about this place. I've spent my holiday helping you when I could have been relaxing and enjoying myself.'

'You only started helping so you could see the places other people don't get to,' he fired back. 'And paint them.'

It was true that had been the start of their agreement, but it had become so much more than that. She thought he understood that, understood her, but clearly he didn't. Painfully, she realised he didn't know her as well as she'd thought he did. She shouldn't have been surprised really. They'd only known each other a short while and she'd obviously done what she always did and romanticised this place and everything she was doing. She'd romanticised him too.

'Enjoy the rest of your holiday, Violet. Lumi and I can manage the rest of the event from here.'

He turned and walked out, leaving her humiliated in front of everyone in the restaurant. Thank God Monika hadn't seen that horrible end bit. Humiliation set her cheeks on fire and her stomach felt tight. The other customers whispered and muttered, and Violet kept her head down as she slumped into her chair, giving Rasmus time to get ahead of her. She didn't

want to run into him outside and she couldn’t go after him. What would be the point? He wouldn’t believe her.

She turned her coffee cup in its saucer, determined to keep hold of the last of her dignity. As the interested looks of the other customers grew too much, she couldn’t stay there any longer and threw on her coat before stepping out into the cold. The freezing air made her shiver and seemed to glide under the layers of her coat and hat. With no idea of where to go or what to do to fix the mess she’d gotten herself into, she began to walk back to the lodge hoping something would occur to her on the way. Something other than this awful, painful tearing in her chest and the bruising of her heart.

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Chapter 16

11.35 a.m.
Violet: Rasmus, please can we talk about this? If I can explain everything, you'll understand.

11.55 a.m.
Violet: I know I should have told you about the meeting and I'm sorry I didn't, but I wanted to hear what he had to say in case it was useful. I'm sorry he didn't invite you but that's not my fault.

12.45 p.m.
Violet: I get you're upset, Rasmus, but ignoring me isn't going to help. I do actually have things to tell you. Things we didn't shout at each other in the café.

1.15 p.m.
Violet: Fine. I'll just tell you on here.

Violet had paced the lodge so many times since she'd got back she was surprised there wasn't a worn-down track in the wooden floor. Her messages had been delivered but were unread. Was he was giving her the silent treatment? The twinkling Christmas lights on the tree and the soft crackling of the fire were doing nothing to calm her down. Unwilling to let things stay as they were with things unsaid, she flopped onto the sofa and typed out the rest of her message, explaining that Mikael and his company had offered ten thousand euros to the fund, which she didn't think they should accept, and that yes, he had offered her the possibility of work, but she had no intention of even meeting with him or his company to talk about it and was about to decline when he walked in.

There was nothing else she could add and if that wasn't enough for him then he wasn't the man she thought he was. Yes, she felt guilty and sorry for the way she'd handled things, but she hadn't thrown him or the town over like he thought. That he'd even accuse her of that sent pain shooting into her ribcage, not to mention his crack that she didn't know what community was. But now he knew everything and he knew she was sorry for meeting Mikael behind his back, she wasn't going to beg for forgiveness. No one should have to do that, especially with a friend.

She put her phone down, knowing she needed it out of her hands or she'd go mad. She'd already looked at it so much she had a headache but then a message pinged up and she'd moved so fast to grab it, she ended up knocking it off the sofa.

'Damn it.'

Hope swelled in every muscle, but when she looked at the screen it was Monika. She was sorry about the disagreement with Rasmus and was there if Violet needed to talk. That was sweet. Violet knew she could really do with a friend right now. She'd thought about calling Isabel, but she didn't want to burden her sister any more than she had already, especially as she would inevitably tell their parents and then they'd all be fussing over her right before Christmas.

That was another thing. How was she supposed to spend Christmas Eve, which was fast approaching, with Lumi and Rasmus? She'd have to cancel. There was no way she could sit opposite him now and pretend everything was fine. It would be too awkward. Too weird. She'd stay in her lodge like she'd originally planned.

Another message from Monika popped up in response to Violet's own, inviting her for coffee the next morning. Violet accepted. She'd planned to go into town anyway to buy Christmas gifts for her family and she wanted to set the record straight with somebody, even if it wasn't Rasmus.

Violet stood and paced around, energy burning in her muscles, needing release. She felt restless and craved fresh air. She was, after all, on holiday and here to enjoy herself. Though enjoying herself might be too much to hope for after today, but she could definitely get the fresh air on her own. She was itching to paint, eager to release the emotions pent up inside her. Grabbing her supplies, her coat and heavy boots, she made for the door.

Violet began walking through the forest, thinking she'd find a view that caught her attention, or a particularly picturesque tree she could paint, but everything seemed to remind her of Rasmus and the urge to check her phone again took over. Determined not to, she focused on the world around her and when she came across a sort of hidden walkway in the forest, a trodden-down path where people had walked before, she followed it. She wasn't sure how long she walked for, but eventually she came into a small clearing, the sun sending shafts of light to the ground. It was stunning and she decided to set up here and paint, this time without sketching, conscious

that it didn’t matter what the painting ended up looking like, it was all about letting go of the tense, negative emotions built up inside her.

Settled on a rock that she’d brushed as much snow off as possible, Violet sat with her palette and paints and began applying generous strokes to the canvas. It was a style of painting she’d never tried before and though a voice in her head told her it was rubbish and childlike, the voice of Grandma Louisa overpowered it, telling her it was good, part of her journey. This was therapy. This was about letting go.

Lost in time, Violet painted, adding colours or scraping them off with her palette knife if it wasn’t right. She had no idea how long she sat for until she dropped her brush and realised her fingertips were red with cold and that the light was changing, the little bit of light polar night gave them fading quickly. She shivered, suddenly coming to, an edge of fear sneaking in as watched the sky growing darker by the minute. If she didn’t hurry, it would be completely black soon and she needed to head back before she couldn’t find her way home.

Violet packed up her belongings quickly, finding a way to carry her canvas that meant she didn’t smudge it, but honestly, who’d be able to tell? The only good thing was, she didn’t hate it, which was strange. It wasn’t as clear and precise as she normally painted, but she felt like it had more of ‘her’ in it. Perhaps she could combine this approach with her usual one? But she hurried away, now wasn’t the time to ponder these sorts of things. She needed to get back because the temperature was falling rapidly as darkness descended.

Violet looked around for the path she’d taken, spinning on the spot.

‘Oh no.’

Which direction had she come from? All sides of the clearing suddenly looked the same. Where she’d spun on the spot, trying to find the route she’d taken in, she was now completely discombobulated. A swell of panic surged, but she pressed it down as much as she could.

‘No need to panic yet,’ she told herself out loud, as if it was the only way her brain would understand it. That wasn’t going to help anything. She looked again at the clearing; but still couldn’t figure out where she’d come in. Tears stung the back of her nose. She widened her eyes to let the wind dry them. The last thing she needed was stinging wet cheeks. She had to get a grip on herself. She pulled out her mobile phone and turned on the torch. Shining it around she tried to remember any particular feature she’d noticed

when she'd walked in; a tree that stood slightly apart, a fallen branch, or a plant or flower.

The rock! She could use the rock as her anchor point. Violet closed her eyes and remembered approaching it from behind. She did just that and used her weird painting to match the view as much as possible, but she still couldn't locate the path. It couldn't have disappeared. Another wave of alarm began to roll up her spine. She had to make a decision. She couldn't just stand here, and time was not on her side. Soon she'd be truly in trouble.

As long as she headed away from the rock – the opposite direction from when she arrived – she was sure she'd come upon the path and if she didn't, she'd at least be going in the right direction and would end up on the right side of the wood anyway.

Probably.

Hopefully.

'Aren't you full of great ideas today, Violet. Heading off into the blimmin' wilderness without thinking,' Violet muttered to herself as she walked through the brush, treading ground she was positive she hadn't walked on before.

A sudden noise stopped her in her tracks, and she gasped, her hands starting to shake slightly. Ritva had listed all the wildlife that lived there at the meeting. Bears! Was it a bear? Was she about to get eaten? She'd read once that bears were often more afraid of people than people are of them, but Violet found that hard to believe and she didn't really fancy testing the theory out, thank you very much. Especially given her only way to defend herself was to throw paintbrushes, or squirt the tubes of paint at it. A slightly hysterical laugh bubbled in her chest, and she allowed those endorphins to calm her before turning her mind back to her current predicament.

Well, she wasn't prepared to die at the hands of a bear today, which meant getting the hell out of there somehow. She quickened her pace, almost jogging through the rough, snow-covered terrain. She really wanted Rasmus. He'd know the way. He'd also be able to fight the bear if one approached them. He'd tell her off for wandering off on her own, but right now, she'd take it on the chin knowing he was perfectly right. For the second time that day, she'd been an absolute idiot. The wilds of Lapland weren't just tourist spots; they were beautiful and dangerous in equal measure. Hadn't Rasmus shown her that already?

With her heart racing, somehow, she stumbled onto the main path she'd taken into Levi, relief flooding her as she recognised her surroundings. It was completely dark now, the only light the orange house lights in the distance and the torches of anyone else on the path, but she could make her way back to the lodge from here, she was sure. She kept her pace up, her arms aching with the load of her painting supplies and her heart beating hard in her chest from adrenalin and fright. A torch light grew brighter and for a second she thought it was Rasmus but then she noticed the form was taller and thinner.

'Violet?'

Lumi. Relief flooded her system and if her arms hadn't been full of supplies, she would have hugged him.

'What are you doing out here? You shouldn't be wandering the woods in the dark; it isn't safe for tourists.'

'I got lost,' she said, tears springing to her eyes, but she tried not to let them take hold. She didn't want to start sobbing in front of Lumi. 'But I'm okay now.'

'Are you sure? You're shivering. Here, let me walk you back.' He took the basket of painting supplies from her, and they headed to her lodge.

'How did you come to be out here? On your own?'

So Rasmus hadn't told Lumi what had happened. Violet made a split-second decision to tell him the truth. She'd now told Rasmus everything, even though he still hadn't replied, so she might as well do the same to Lumi. She took a deep breath and outlined the morning's events.

'You haven't seen him then?' she asked at the end.

He shook his head. 'Not today, but I don't see him every day. He could have been busy with his guests or the lodges.'

'He hasn't answered my messages,' she replied sadly. 'I don't think he's even read them. I tried to tell him everything.'

'He will answer. He's just a stubborn idiot sometimes.'

'You're not angry with me then?'

Lumi glanced at her grinning. 'Of course not. Do I think you should have told Rasmus from the start? Yes, I do, but only because if I'd have told him about that meeting I went to it would have stopped us falling out. I learned my lesson.'

'I really did think I was doing the best thing when I went.'

‘I know. And he’ll realise that too. It just takes him longer than it takes us.’

‘Because of the stubbornness?’

He chuckled. ‘Exactly. That and …’

‘And what?’ Violet prompted after a few seconds when he hadn’t continued.

‘I think he has some wounds from when his family weren’t honest with him. Wounds that, though he won’t admit it, haven’t quite healed yet.’

Of course.

‘I should have taken that into account,’ Lumi continued. ‘But I didn’t and that’s why he reacted the way he did.’

She’d known all that too but hadn’t put the pieces together. Now she felt even worse.

When her cute little lodge came into view she resisted the urge to run to it, and slam the door on the world, leaving behind this awful, horrible day. She thanked Lumi and with a few reassuring words he headed on his way.

Violet closed the door behind her, taking a moment to lean against it. The fire crackled low in the grate and the warmth caressed her skin. Her heart rate slowed and her muscles unknotted. She was safe. At least physically, though her emotions were more of a jumbled mess than they had been before, especially after Lumi’s comment. She’d been inconsiderate and hadn’t realised just how deep Rasmus’s wounds were. A tiredness she hadn’t felt before suddenly drowned her body.

‘I’m never going exploring alone again,’ she said to herself, heading straight for the kitchen and a fortifying cup of tea, or something stronger if she had some wine left.

Not without Rasmus.

That pig-headed idiot. As she stared into the small glass of wine – the last she had left – she couldn’t make sense of anything running through her head. They hadn’t known each other all that long, but from working together on the event, and him siting with her, chatting while she painted, she’d felt something she never had before – a connection that she’d wanted to believe was special. How could she right this mess? First of all she needed Rasmus to read her messages and understand the situation fully. But she was beginning to realise that she hadn’t fully understood him either. Violet grabbed her phone to turn off the torch and, unable to stop herself, checked to see if he’d replied. Her heart tore further, the rip from earlier

reaching deeper, as she realised all her messages were still unread and he hadn’t sent a single one back.

Exhausted both mentally and physically, the tears she’d been holding back over their argument, getting lost in the woods, and her own guilt and stupidity over pretty much everything she’d done today, sprang to her eyes. Unable to stop them, she let them fall, one hand braced against the countertop, the other the stem of her wine glass, as her body juddered with each great, shattering sob.

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Chapter 17

The next day, Violet dressed, ready to head into town. She needed to buy some more food supplies, Christmas presents, and there were also parts of the town she hadn't explored, so now seemed to be the perfect opportunity to do it. Her eyes were sore from crying, but after a good night's sleep she felt a little more hopeful and there was no way she was going to waste the rest of her holiday avoiding Rasmus or sitting and sulking inside her lodge. What she was going to do about the rest of the event she wasn't sure yet. She'd give Rasmus another day or two and then text again so they could sort it out, but for now, she was off to meet Monika and to shop.

Annoyingly, thoughts of him were constantly on her mind and had been all night, but thinking about him wasn't going to change anything. She would focus on her holiday and do something fun to cheer herself up and keep her distracted. Violet pulled on her thickest jumper over a thinner one. For some reason, today she couldn't get warm and even though the lodge was toasty and she'd had a hot shower she felt cold through to her bones. Perhaps it was to do with her excursion yesterday. Had she got a little too cold? Her head was a little stuffy too with a pinching at her temples. She'd have to grab some painkillers in town. Grabbing her coat, hat, scarf and two pairs of gloves, she headed out into the beautiful, eerie light.

After yesterday's shenanigans, Violet stuck to the path and was in Levi in no time. When she'd been here before, doing jobs for the event, time had always been against her, and she'd had to quickly visit here or there. Today, though, she meandered the snowy streets, staring in the shop windows at their pretty Christmas displays and enjoying everything the place had to offer. The warming glow of streetlights and shop windows spilled onto the pavement, and she took time to visit the home décor place she'd visited before. Charle greeted her warmly, as she chose a cute, colourful sheep that seemed to have been made out of tiny round marbles and a wildcat sculpture of beautiful light brown wood for her mum. She also grabbed a book for her dad and a beautiful shirt for Lumi. No matter what happened

with Rasmus, or after she left, she wanted to remain friends with him and so it felt right for her to buy him just a small something.

As Violet stood in a clothes shop, primarily looking for something for Isabel, her eyes wandered to the men's section and to a display rack of wallets. Her heart flipped as she remembered Rasmus pulling out his battered old one to buy reindeer food, how tatty and broken it was. She strolled over and found a plain dark brown leather wallet. It wasn't the most inventive gift ever, but it could form something bigger. It seemed she'd decided subconsciously that she was getting him a present after all.

For a second, she let the subconscious thought surface, and she took a moment to interrogate the idea consciously. Whatever had happened yesterday, Rasmus had showed her some beautiful parts of the country that had inspired her painting and for that she would always be truly grateful. This holiday had been unlike anything she'd ever experienced, and she owed him something for that. For the time he'd spent with her so far, even if they didn't continue how they had been. A small Christmas present, even if she didn't attend Christmas dinner and simply left it at Lumi's for Rasmus to pick up, was, she felt, appropriate.

Now it was time for coffee with Monika. Violet saw her and her friends as soon as she stepped inside the café they were meeting at. A shiver overtook her as she stepped inside, even though it was warm, and her stomach swirled unpleasantly at the scent of coffee. She really wasn't feeling herself today and definitely needed to get those painkillers before she headed home. Monika waved and beckoned her over.

'Violet! These are my friends Essi and Niina.'

The two women smiled widely.

'Can I get you a coffee?' Essi asked.

'No, that's fine. I'll just grab one. Can I get you guys anything?'

They declined and Violet ordered a herbal tea, hoping it would calm her stomach, and a *munkki*, which smelled and tasted just like a doughnut. The sugar-coated dough looked delicious and she hoped the sugar would lift her energy levels and help get rid of her headache. She hadn't had breakfast as she hadn't really felt like it so maybe the pain in her temples was down to that.

'So,' Niina said when Violet sat down. 'We are all very excited for the fair.'

'And the party,' Essi added. 'What a brilliant idea.'

‘Thank you. How do you guys all know each other?’

The three women launched into a story about how they met at a party Monika threw with her husband for his thirtieth birthday.

‘They work at the resort too,’ Monika added. ‘Essi is a receptionist and Niina is another ski instructor.’

‘I moved here from a small town about thirty miles away,’ Niina added. ‘And Monika took me under her wing straight away.’

‘Then I got dragged in to save them from themselves one night,’ Essi said. ‘And now we chat every day and make sure we see each other properly at least once a week.’

‘If not more.’ Monika sipped her coffee.

Violet listened as she sipped her tea, hearing all the gossip from the resort and feeling comfortable and at home as they asked her questions about herself. She could easily imagine meeting them once a week and how wonderful it would be to have female friends as close as this. She had Ellen on her team, and her sister, but her life was lacking friends like this, and she often saw comments on social media saying there was nothing quite like female friendships to get you through the ups and downs of life. Right now she could well believe it and realised how it had been missing from her life for a while now.

After another round of coffees, which Violet didn’t partake in, Essi and Niina slipped off to the toilet and Monika leaned in.

‘Are you okay? I didn’t want to ask about Rasmus in case you were upset, I hope that’s okay?’

‘I appreciate it. I – I messaged to explain but he hasn’t responded.’

‘I haven’t seen him around town today or at the resort. I’m sure he’s just busy and will message soon. You didn’t upset him on purpose, and I totally understand why you met the rep alone. You know why Rasmus is so keen to protect the town, don’t you?’

‘He did mention his family owning businesses and having to sell.’ Violet wasn’t sure if it was the subject matter or the tea, but she was still feeling decidedly queasy.

‘It was hard and at the time there was lots of fighting between people. Neighbours arguing over if they should sell or who they should sell to.’

‘Like now,’ Violet commented.

‘Yes, but worse. Much worse. Rasmus’s family was hit hard by it all. More than most. I think they’re now totally estranged. Never speaking.

Never visiting.’

‘It sounds awful.’ That fit with what Rasmus had mentioned earlier but hearing it from Monika drove home how painful that must have been.

‘And they were always so close before. It’s so sad.’ Essi and Niina’s voices sounded across the room and with them returning, Violet didn’t get the chance to ask for more details and Monika changed the subject, frowning at her. ‘Are you okay? You look quite pale, but your cheeks are pink.’

‘I think I’m just a bit tired and maybe I’m getting a bit of a cold?’

‘It does take a while to get used to the temperature here.’

She didn’t mention the whole freezing in the forest and getting rescued by Lumi thing.

When Essi and Niina returned, the three women packed up and went their separate ways. Monika headed to work for the afternoon and Essi and Niina to shop before starting their own shifts later in the day.

Violet decided to take one last look around the pretty shops before heading back, taking in the snowy landscape all around her and the heavy veil of cloud making the pale light even paler. She couldn’t help but look out for Rasmus or wonder where he was. It angered her that he was in her brain, and she figured it was because everything still felt so unresolved. If she could only talk to him, she knew they could find a way through this to at least still be friends. But perhaps that wasn’t what he wanted.

Violet shook the thought away and wandered down a side road she hadn’t intended to go down. She spotted a sign hanging from a building for a gallery and given how much she loved art she had to go inside. This would also be a great addition to the New Year’s Eve fair if she could convince them to come, and if Rasmus didn’t like that she was still doing things for it, he’d just have to lump it.

She walked in, unable to take her eyes off the beautiful large canvas of a snowy vista in the window. Whoever had painted it was very good.

‘Oh!’ she said when she saw the owner come out from behind the small counter. ‘Ritva! Hello.’

‘*Hei,*’ she replied with something that actually resembled a smile this time. Maybe the older woman was warming to her.

‘Is this your gallery?’ Violet asked, taking off her hat and smoothing her hair.

‘It is. I own a few businesses in town.’

‘How brilliant. I heard you’re an artist too.’

‘I was. I don’t paint as much anymore because of this.’ She lifted her hands to show curled, arthritic knuckles.

‘I’m sorry.’

Ritva shrugged. ‘It is part of getting old.’

Violet wandered around as the different paintings called to her, taking in each of them in turn. There were landscapes, portraits, still lifes, animals. So many different styles too, but they all had something in common: the town or the landscape or just Lapland. She couldn’t imagine seeing any of these paintings anywhere other than here. They were so in tune with the place.

‘You like it?’ Ritva asked as Violet stared at a particularly wonderful painting of the Northern Lights.

‘Very much. Whoever did this has made it seem so real. I haven’t seen the Northern Lights yet.’

‘What? Rasmus has been showing you around, hasn’t he? How can he not have taken you to see the Northern Lights?’

Violet gave a shrug and a polite smile. That he wasn’t likely to now sent a shot of pain into her heart. ‘We’ve been quite busy with the New Year’s Eve event. But I love this.’ She pointed to the painting again.

‘I did it,’ Ritva said matter-of-factly and Violet whipped her head around to stare at her.

‘You did?’

Seeing Ritva’s wide-eyed reaction to her surprise, Violet worried that she’d inadvertently insulted her. Ritva crossed her arms over her chest, then to her surprise, she laughed, wrinkles crinkling around her mouth and eyes.

‘These hands might be old, and it might take me a long time, but I can still produce beautiful pieces.’

She smiled. Grandma Louisa had said something very similar to her once. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to insult you.’

‘It’s fine. I don’t like being out in the cold for so long now I’m getting older either, so I work from photographs. Rasmus used to take them for me.’

‘Used to?’ There was no hiding how much she wanted to know more about their relationship. She had the feeling, and Ritva’s comment had confirmed it, that they’d once been close but something, probably town politics, had driven them apart. Maybe they’d been a casualty of the last

time the community was fractured, when people were struggling and had to sell. ‘He doesn’t do it anymore?’ Violet asked.

‘Things change,’ was all the old woman would say.

‘My grandmother was an artist,’ Violet said, changing the topic. ‘Not as a job but as a hobby, and she taught me to paint too. This is a lovely gallery.’

‘Thank you. Are you enjoying your holiday?’

She had been, up until yesterday. ‘Yes,’ Violet replied, hoping her smile was convincing. Her head throbbed painfully.

Ritva scowled. ‘Hmm.’

Maybe her smile hadn’t been as convincing as she’d thought.

‘Has Rasmus spoken to you about the New Year’s Eve fair?’ Violet ploughed on, not enjoying Ritva’s assessing glare. ‘It would be wonderful to have you display some paintings.’

‘I know about it, but Rasmus hasn’t mentioned the gallery being involved. I’ll consider it, but I can’t promise.’

‘Of course. And I’m sure Rasmus will be thrilled. I bet he hasn’t mentioned it because he’s so new to event planning on this scale, whereas it’s what I do every day. I don’t think he meant any offence.’

‘I’m sure he didn’t and none has been taken. I know he is busy. His mother has been sick, and he has gone to see her.’

‘Oh?’ This was news to Violet. ‘When did he—?’

‘He left yesterday. He called to tell me and had to leave right away. She is fine – his mother – it was a nasty fall on the ice, but she is okay now. He is coming back tomorrow.’

‘I had no idea.’

While it didn’t explain why he hadn’t given her even a quick reply, it did explain some of his silence. Despite her headache and the stuffiness in her nose, some relief seeped in. When she knew he was back in town, she’d try and contact him again to start a conversation, but for now she’d leave him be.

‘So—’ Ritva said, waking Violet from her thoughts. The woman had eyes that seemed to see straight into her head and her heart. ‘You should go home and rest. I don’t think you’re well.’

‘It’s just a headache. Maybe I got a bit too cold yesterday.’

Ritva went behind the desk and opened a drawer, taking out a box of painkillers. She handed them to Violet. ‘Take these.’

‘Thank you. I will. I better get back.’

‘Yes. Rest.’

‘I will.’ She edged towards the door. ‘See you again soon.’

‘No painting until you’re better.’ Her tone was tough, but there was a note of care there too and again it reminded her of Grandma Louisa who was kind but wouldn’t put up with nonsense. The two were surprisingly similar.

Violet left and while she really wanted to head back and crawl into bed for a nap, she made straight for Lumi’s restaurant. She needed to know if he’d heard anything more, especially as Ritva had said his mother was injured. The restaurant was only half full, the lunchtime crowd not yet there, and she perched on one of the bar stools.

‘Ah, you’re here,’ Lumi said, picking up a wine glass and tipping it towards her.

Violet shook her head. ‘Just some water please?’

‘Are you okay after yesterday? You don’t look well.’

It was getting annoying that everyone kept saying that. Like they were instead shouting ‘You look terrible’ straight into her face.

‘I’m fine,’ she lied.

Fear still sat heavy in the pit of her stomach whenever she thought about those panicky moments in the wood, worrying she’d end up lost and nothing more than bear food.

‘Liar.’ He poured her some cold water from the fridge and handed it to her. ‘Have you spoken to Rasmus?’

‘Not yet. You?’

‘Actually—’ Lumi leaned on the bar and Violet noticed the pattern on his shirt was of tiny Christmas elves. ‘I have. Only this morning though. He mentioned he’d handled everything wrong. That maybe he’d overreacted.’

‘He did?’ Hope sparked in her chest. At least that was something even if he hadn’t spoken to her directly.

‘And I reminded him he’d acted exactly like he did with me when I went to that meeting. I told him he’s a fool and would have said more but then he had to go. His father was calling.’ Sadness filled Lumi’s expression.

‘Ritva told me his mum had an accident.’

‘She is okay now, but they were very worried at first. He had to leave straight away.’

‘I wondered why he hadn’t responded to any of my messages.’

‘I know he hadn’t long read them when he called this morning, but where his parents live, the reception is not so good so I’m sure he isn’t ignoring you; that isn’t his style. As you know, he is normally very forward. He will tell you if he’s not happy about something.’

She grinned. That was definitely true.

‘When he called me it kept cutting out.’

So he might not be ignoring her at all. That spark of hope began to grow, warming her from inside, and she couldn’t help the smile climbing over her face despite feeling more and more unwell by the second.

‘I told him there was no way you were considering whatever job offer they made you.’

‘Of course not. And they offered ten thousand euros towards the Sustainable Tourism Fund, but I don’t think we should accept. They were basically trying to bribe us. Asking us to put up less opposition in exchange for the money. It was gross. But the more I think about it, the more I think it could be a good sign.’

‘You’re think they’re worried?’

‘I think they might be.’ Violet took a sip of her water, allowing the cold liquid to soothe her aching throat. ‘Why else would they make such a generous offer and ask us to back off?’

Lumi nodded. ‘You’re right. Rasmus will be pleased.’

‘Ritva said he’s due back tomorrow?’

‘He won’t stay longer than necessary. His family is … complicated. So, what have you been doing without him, besides getting lost?’

‘I went to Ritva’s gallery. I’d love to be displayed in a gallery one day.’

She must be ill if she’d said that out loud. Though the thought had danced on the edges of her mind over the years, this was the first time she’d ever said anything to anyone. If she’d been at home, speaking to friends and family, she might have felt embarrassed at such a wild notion, but here, she didn’t and she still believed that if she was ever to create something good enough to display it would be here where she felt so inspired and where her connection with Grandma Louisa was so strong.

‘You should speak to Ritva then,’ Lumi said. ‘She might do something for you.’

Violet shook her head. ‘She scares me.’

He laughed. ‘She scares everyone, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try. What have you got to lose? And if she says no and you’re embarrassed,

it doesn’t matter. You’ll be going home soon and may never see her again. Though I hope you’ll come back to us. Maybe next year? Same time?’

She smiled thinly. ‘Yes, maybe.’

Could she ask Ritva? He was right that she didn’t have much to lose. But his comment about never seeing her again, perhaps never even being here again, made her heart ache. That strange niggly feeling, which had been coming up time and again, sprung up once more and she remembered her sister’s advice. Yesterday had been one of her worst days but she’d still rather have been here, going back to the lodge, than returning to her home in England.

She took another sip of the cold water. The thought was too heavy to deal with now, too much for her tired, pounding brain. She needed to go back to bed just for a little while.

‘Let me take you home,’ Lumi said when she confessed she wasn’t feeling herself and was going to head back.

‘It’s fine. It’s not a long walk and the fresh air might do me good.’

She batted away Lumi’s insistence one more time and by the time she got back, shivers made her whole body shake and her head pounded like someone was using her brain as a drum. She crawled onto the sofa, pulled the blanket around her and covered her eyes praying she would feel better tomorrow. Thoughts of Rasmus were now thankfully gone, her mind full of nothing other than the thumping in her skull and how ill she felt, and that there was no one to help look after her.

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Chapter 18

Violet awoke a few hours later, her head throbbing and her mouth and throat dry. The fire had burned down to embers and shivers wracked her body, though she was sure it wasn't that cold in the lodge. It did have central heating too, which she'd also switched on before she left. She pulled her legs around and placed her feet on the floor, but every movement made her body ache and her head spin. What was wrong with her?

As she trudged to the kitchen to get a glass of water, her brain, as foggy as it was, took an inventory of her ailments. She ached, she shivered, she was sweaty too, her head pounded, and her nose was stuffy. It was obvious she had a really bad head cold or, worse, the flu.

'Urgh.' Violet grumbled out a noise that was something between a groan and a moan at the pain in her head.

She really couldn't get the flu. She'd miss too much of her holiday and what would she do about the event? She needed to be on top form. There was still so much to do. They needed to market the thing otherwise all their hard work would be in vain, and there were practical things to sort out. The number of tables and chairs needed at the fair for one, would they offer a welcome drink at the evening party for another. Her brain hurt just thinking about it, like it had grown larger and was now too big for her skull. She pressed a hand to her forehead and glanced at the clock on the oven, flashing eleven p.m. She'd been asleep for hours.

Groggily, Violet began to search her handbag for the painkillers Ritva had given her. She'd take some tablets, have a glass of water and get to bed. By the morning, she'd most likely be feeling a lot better. Remembering to make sure the door was locked, Violet trudged her way to the bedroom, changed into her pyjamas, shivering as she did so, and climbed into bed, never more grateful for the soft pillows and thick, comforting duvet.

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Morning came and as Violet slowly opened her eyes, grateful to be met with the pale sunshine of polar night, her eyelashes sticking together with mascara as she hadn't had the energy to take her make-up off, she felt even worse. Her head wasn't pounding quite as much and she wasn't quite as shivery, but she still felt completely awful. Her mum had always told her to feed a cold, and she did feel a little hungry but the idea of heading to the kitchen and making anything made her want to cry. Violet knew her body needed energy to fight off whatever this was, so telling herself to get a grip, she climbed out of bed and made her way to the kitchen. When she saw the milk was virtually gone and there wasn't enough even for a cup of tea, tears were falling from her face before she could stop them, and she scuttled back to bed and grabbed her phone.

Violet laid her head back on the pillow and closed her eyes. Rasmus had said people would always help each other out if someone was sick. As he was still away, and they technically weren't talking, she wondered who would be willing to help her. For the first time in her life, she wasn't sure who to ask. She was certain that Lumi would drop in some supplies if she asked him, and Monika too. She'd never had this conundrum before and whenever she was ill at home she simply Ubered in everything she needed to get better. There wasn't a friend close enough to deliver help both geographically and emotionally.

'Spoilt for choice,' she muttered, then took a sip of water to help ease the scratchiness.

She sort of knew Lumi better and she was sure he would help, but Monika might be on her way to the resort anyway, as she worked there, and could possibly drop something in on her way. Violet didn't want to put anyone out and almost put her phone down, but as Ubering wasn't an option she was going to have to ask someone. She decided she'd try Monika first and fired off a quick message. The reply came back almost instantly saying she'd be there in half an hour, and another burst of tears came out. Violet always got tearful when she was ill; she'd have to calm herself down and try and shower before Monika got there. No one needed to see her in quite as bad a state as this.

Half an hour later, Violet had managed a shower, had washed her make-up off and soaped her hair and was in fresh pyjamas and the fluffy robe left for guests. She'd relit the fire and was finally feeling warmer when Monika's knock brought welcome relief. Violet shuffled to the door as

quickly as she could, her body still aching and protesting at every movement.

‘Oh my, you look terrible!’ Monika said, rushing inside and placing more bags on the counter than was needed for the few items Violet had asked for. ‘Get back on the sofa, in front of that fire and under that blanket.’

With an attempt at a smile that made her face hurt, Violet did as she was told.

‘When did all this happen?’

‘Last night. I wasn’t feeling that well yesterday and thought it’d pass with some painkillers but last night I felt awful.’ She pulled the blanket up to her chin and switched on the TV, hoping for some relief. She needed a feel-good romcom or something to lift her spirits.

‘You poor thing. You need lots of rest.’ Monika unpacked the bags and came over with an armful of items. ‘I got you tissues, painkillers, some throat tablets, chocolate and ice cream. I also got some pretzels in case you were a savoury person as well as the other things you wanted. I’ll make you a cup of tea now before I go, but is there anything else you need?’

Violet’s eyes misted again. ‘Sorry,’ she said, wiping an escaping tear again. ‘I always get emotional when I’m ill. But also … this is so nice of you. Thank you!’

‘Don’t be silly.’ Monika perched on the edge of the chair. ‘It’s my pleasure. I’ve spoken to Lumi too and he’s going to bring you some lunch at about one o’clock. Until then try and sleep.’ She stood and went to the kitchen, finishing the tea and delivering it to Violet along with a large glass of water. ‘And drink lots of water too. Okay?’

‘Okay.’ She went to pull back the blanket to show her guest out. No, not her guest, her friend.

‘No, no, no! Don’t move. I can see myself out. Now rest.’ Monika blew a kiss and closed the door softly behind her and Violet had never felt so blessed.

She sipped her tea, closed her eyes and listened to the TV, giving her body the break it needed. Feeling warm with appreciation rather than a fever, she lay back against the armrest and closed her eyes.

Lumi’s knock at the door woke her from a not-quite-asleep doze on the sofa. The front door opened softly as he popped his head inside. ‘*Hei*, Violet?’

‘I’m here,’ she said, waving from the sofa.

‘You poor thing, you look like you’ve died and been brought back to life.’

‘It’s lovely to see you too, Lumi,’ she said with a grin. This time it didn’t hurt her face quite as much as it had before, but it was still pretty rough, like someone had smacked her across the nose.

‘I’ve brought you some lunch. It’s just soup from the restaurant but I brought a few tubs so you can have some over the next few days and for dinner too.’

‘Thank you. That’s so kind of you. I – I don’t know what to say.’

He grinned from around the open refrigerator door. ‘There’s nothing to say. You’re not well; I’ve delivered you food. It’s not that much.’

It was a big deal to her.

‘I won’t hug you,’ he said, keeping his distance as he moved back towards her. ‘But only because I can’t afford to get sick. I’m sending you a hug from here. But you might want to put a brush through that hair before it becomes a complete tangle.’

Violet reached her fingers up to her head. Where she’d been lying down and rolling around trying to get comfortable, her hair had formed quite a few giant knots. ‘I will,’ she said, deciding sitting up was too awful and that she had to lie down again.

Lumi followed, his voice softer. ‘Can I get you anything else before I go? The soup I left on the counter is hot and ready to serve. Would you like some now?’

‘I – I don’t know.’

‘Oh, you poor thing. Well, it’s here and it’ll stay warm for a while yet. I’ll let you sleep but call me if you need anything else. Anything at all. And it doesn’t matter if it’s the middle of the night. If you feel worse, call me or Rasmus.’

‘Is he back?’ she asked, unable to stop herself.

Lumi shook his head. ‘He’s staying another day. I don’t know why. He’ll tell us when he gets back. But promise you’ll call if you feel worse?’

‘I promise.’

Lumi left and despite her aching head, Violet’s thoughts settled on Rasmus, picturing his handsome face, his thick blond hair and pale eyes. She hoped everything was okay and his mother hadn’t gotten worse. She thought about texting him but hadn’t got the energy to compose a message.

Her eyes were only comfortable when they were closed, and her body was calling out for her to sleep some more. So she did.

As evening came, Violet felt ready to eat. She built up the fire some more and padded to the kitchen, noticing the Christmas tree twinkling in the corner. At least she'd be better for Christmas Day. She placed the carton of soup in the microwave and set it to heat up, the lodge filling with the delicious smell of tomato and roasted pepper. She grabbed a bowl and turned to place it on the counter, and screeched as a face pressed up against the window, peering in.

'What the—?'

The bowl clattered down and Violet placed a hand out to steady it, the unpleasant shock fading as she realised it was Ritva. Violet went to the door and let her in.

'Hi, Ritva.' She tried to sound normal but the tiredness, and illness, was clear in her voice. The older woman studied her, her eyes narrowing and Violet felt the need to add, 'Please don't tell me I look awful. I already know.'

'You do. You look terrible. So I will only come in for a moment, but I've brought you some treats.' She walked in with a tin under one arm, which she dropped onto the kitchen island. 'I made *mokkapalat*. They are like brownies and this—' she produced a small net packet from her coat pocket '—is my secret weapon against winter colds.'

'What is it?' she asked a little nervously.

'Nettle tea. It doesn't taste good, but it works. You can add some honey to make it a little bit nicer, so I brought that too.' She pulled a bottle from her other coat pocket, thumping it down on the counter.

Violet, who had decided she'd cried enough today, and it actually only made her face hurt more, felt tears sting the back of her nose. Everyone was being so kind to her, and she was only a tourist, someone who would be leaving again soon. It was kind. Special. She grabbed a tissue and blew her nose, determined not to let actual tears fall.

'That's really kind, Ritva. Thank you.'

She gave a single, curt nod. 'Let me know if you need anything else. Here is my number.' She placed a card down next to the tea and honey. 'Now go back to bed. But drink the tea at bedtime. It will help. And you can use it again in the morning if necessary.'

She left quickly and as the microwave pinged that her soup was ready, Violet stared at the supplies all around her. The thoughtful extras, the homemade meals, the secret remedies she'd been gifted, and something shifted inside. Rasmus had been right. She'd never had a community before and now, she knew for certain that this was the type of thing she wanted in her life. Not only to receive, but to give too. She wanted to be a part of one and not just any community but this one, with these people. She coughed and the stark reminder that she was in no fit state to make deep life-changing decisions or think about life-changing things pushed the idea away, but she knew it'd be coming up again soon enough. That niggling in the back of her brain that wouldn't go away told her so.

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Chapter 19

The next day, after drinking the tea at bedtime, which tasted absolutely disgusting no matter how much honey she poured into it, Violet felt better. Not totally well, but more like she had nothing more than a bad cold that she could cope with, rather than an illness that was akin to the plague and required her to stay away from everyone in case it swept through the town like something from a horror movie.

She'd managed to dress and eat some porridge – a staple here, she'd noticed – served with cloudberries Monika had bought her as part of her care package. They were delicious little amber-coloured bobbly fruits that were sweet and tart, and she could actually taste them. She'd never even heard of them till she got here and even then she'd thought they were made up until she actually saw them.

A knock at the door was timed well as she'd just scraped the last of the food from her bowl. She opened it expecting Monika or Lumi to be checking on her and the idea brought a smile to her face, but was surprised to see the tall, broad-shouldered man her heart and head kept focusing on.

'Rasmus!'

He shuffled and pulled the beanie hat from his head, making his hair stand up in all directions. In his other hand he clasped a white box. '*Hei*, can I come in?'

'Umm … Sure. Of course.'

'Thank you.'

She stood to the side, and he moved into the warmth of the lodge. It was as if she could suddenly reach out and touch the air. It had become thick and heavy with the weight of unsaid words and unspoken feelings, of expectations and disappointments.

'Lumi – well, everyone – told me you were unwell. Are you okay?'

'Just a bad cold I think.'

He shook his head. 'I'm sorry. Maybe we shouldn't have gone to so many places when you're not used to such low temperatures.'

She knew it wasn't cold weather that caused illness and that she must have picked up a bug from somewhere – most likely the plane – but didn't know what to say in response. 'It's okay,' she said after a moment. 'I'm feeling much better today thanks to Ritva's miraculous tea.'

'Disgusting, isn't it?' He smiled.

'Very.'

For a moment they stared at each other until she couldn't bear it anymore and had to speak just to break the fragile silence.

He held the box out towards her. 'I – I bought you some cake. Some of the *tiikerikakku*.'

'The chocolate marble cake? Thank you!' Her stomach grumbled at the idea. She was definitely starting to feel better.

'You seemed to like it before.'

She looked at him, another fragile silence – loaded with emotion – began to form. Before tears welled again, she said, 'Lumi told me your mum had an accident. Is everything okay?'

He nodded. 'She is, thankfully. We were worried at first because she hit her head very badly when she fell and didn't seem to know who she, or my dad, were, but then it faded and she was back to herself.'

'That sounds horrible.'

He shrugged in that way men do when an emotion is too much for them to contemplate or acknowledge, let alone speak about. 'I owe you an apology though, Violet. That's – that's what I'm here for.'

She sucked in a breath, waiting.

'I read your messages, but even before then, I shouldn't have reacted the way I did at the café. I'm sorry.'

'Thank you. When you didn't reply I—'

'The signal in my parents' town is very bad. *Very* bad. I did think about replying last night when I got back, but it was so late I didn't want to disturb you. And I planned to come and see you today to explain that I thought it'd be better if we talk face to face. What was a few more hours?'

'I understand. And I'm sorry for meeting—'

He held up a hand to cut her off, but his expression was kind rather than annoyed. 'You don't have to apologise again; you've apologised enough and you didn't need to apologise anyway. The invitation was to you. It was only right you went alone. I was … unreasonable and for that I'm sorry. I

sometimes find it hard when people aren't upfront with me. I think people say that's a me problem, not a you problem.'

She appreciated his apology more than she could put into words.

'Now,' he said cheerily. 'I had hoped to take you out somewhere to apologise properly but I think we might need to wait if—'

'I really am feeling much better,' she said, eager to spend some time with him and keep this conversation going. She could always take some more painkillers. But disappointment flooded her when he shook his head.

'I would love to, but I think you should rest again today. Ritva's cures work well but you must still rest too.'

'Honestly—'

He stepped forwards and placed a gentle kiss on her cheek. Considering no one else who'd visited had come too close, she found that touching and the kiss itself set her heart jumping. 'I insist you stay here. Another day's rest and I'll be back tomorrow to take you out if you feel up to it.'

'Okay.' She had to admit another day to recover did sound appealing – her head was beginning to ache again already. He headed towards the door.

'But, Violet?'

'Yes?'

'I am truly sorry.'

He closed the door behind him and the smile on her face made her feel instantly better, even momentarily banishing the pain in her temples. She went back to the sofa and snuggled under the blanket, her grin staying throughout the afternoon.

***

Rasmus arrived the next morning and Violet was feeling almost back to normal. Her head was stuffy and her nose was red, so she didn't look her best, but she could at least move without her head feeling like custard.

'So where are we going?' she asked.

'I'm not going to tell you.' He chuckled. 'I haven't any of the other times, have I?'

'Okay, but do I need my painting supplies?'

He shook his head. Then glancing around he saw the painting she'd done the night she got lost in the woods. 'When did you do this?' He walked towards where it was drying on the easel.

‘The other afternoon,’ she said, absolutely not telling him the rest of the story. ‘I know it’s not the way I normally paint but I wanted to try—’

‘It’s beautiful,’ he said, studying it intently.

‘Do you think so?’

‘I do.’ He stood up and took a step back from it, still peering at it. ‘I don’t know anything about art, but I like this very much.’

She crossed her arms over her chest. ‘You’re just saying that because we had a falling-out.’

‘I’m not – I promise you. There’s something about this painting. Something different. It feels more like you. Like there is more of you and how you see the world in it.’

Well, if that wasn’t one of the most inadvertently romantic things anyone had ever said to her. She didn’t quite know how to respond. She loved a compliment like any woman, but for some reason this hands-down beat being told she was beautiful or clever or funny.

‘I really like it.’ His cheeks were turning a fierce shade of pink but so were hers and they smiled at each other.

She had the overwhelming urge to reach out for his hand.

‘Shall we go then?’ he asked and she quickly moved towards her coat.

‘Yes! Ready when you are.’

They headed out and into Rasmus’s car and drove down roads she’d never seen before. The banks of snow at the side had gone down as there hadn’t been any fresh snowfall for a few days, and the branches of the tall pine trees were visible where the mounds had melted and fallen to the ground. She could finally see the greenery beneath, and they looked like perfect traditional Christmas trees.

With polar night still casting the sky strange colours, Rasmus made conversation about the ticket sales and how well they were going.

‘I’m glad,’ she replied, the shadow of their argument still lingering over the subject.

‘I do still want your help, if you’re willing to give it.’ He kept his eyes on the road. ‘I was an idiot to say Lumi and I could take it from here and Lumi told me so.’

She giggled. ‘Good. I’m glad he did.’

‘I did deserve it. But I promise I will make up for it today. We’re nearly there. Just wait for …’ He pointed at the road sign just coming into view.

‘Rovaniemi!’ she exclaimed. ‘Isn’t that—?’

‘The official home of Santa Claus.’

‘Are we going to Santa’s village?’ she asked excitedly, unable to help the joy bubbling inside her. Yes, it was a bit childish, but who wouldn’t get excited at the thought of seeing this place.

‘It is nearly Christmas.’

‘Eeeeeeeeeee!’

Rasmus laughed. ‘Is this the right place to apologise for being an idiot?’

‘It is. Most definitely.’

‘Good. Let’s park and go exploring.’

They did just that and were soon wandering the streets of the utterly charming, magical village. Unsurprisingly it was incredibly busy with families and small children running around, but it only added to the magic of the place. The streets were full of snowmen built by passers-by, and she gaped at the small huts with their roofs lit up in different colours. Polar night only made it more enchanting. Children would truly believe this was Santa’s home. Her eyes widened as a jolly Father Christmas with a flowing white beard and dressed in a heavy red cape came wandering down the street waving at overexcited children, jumping up and down for his attention.

Violet turned to Rasmus, grinning widely, and Rasmus smiled back.

‘It’s quite a place, isn’t it?’

‘It is.’

They walked around the different shops all selling traditional wooden decorations. One toy shop, owned by a lovely woman named Karola, was so excited by the fair she was asking if she could attend, which calmed Violet’s nerves that word wasn’t getting around. There were so many delicious smells around her, she found herself growing hungry for something more than soup. Her stomach grumbled, so after Violet had treated herself to a nutcracker decoration, something special to remember this place by, they stopped at a café where she had a delicious hot chocolate piled high with real cream and marshmallows. Rasmus stuck to his normal coffee but smiled as she tucked in.

‘You should honestly try this – it’s delicious.’

He shook his head. ‘It would be too sweet for me.’

‘Maybe you need sweetening up.’

‘I probably do.’ He pulled out his phone and checked it before putting it away again.

‘Everything okay?’

‘I just wanted to check there were no messages from my family.’

‘Of course. I remember you said things were difficult with them. It must have been a tough couple of days.’

‘Actually, I think it made some things better. We … talked. We put some things behind us. I’ve always blamed myself for them having to sell but you were right, they are much happier now and it was good to speak to them and let go of the past. I wish I’d been there for another reason of course, but at least something good came out of it.’

‘That’s brilliant news.’

Relief flooded Rasmus’s features as though saying it out loud was helping him finally accept it. ‘It is. I feel like things will change from now on. We can be a real family again. It’s been too long and we wasted a lot of time.’ He looked up, chasing away the sadness with a smile. ‘We now have a family WhatsApp group.’

‘You didn’t have one before?’

He shook his head. ‘No one wanted to talk to each other. Back when the rows happened, people said things, difficult things. It was hard to undo them.’

Blimey. She couldn’t imagine not having her family WhatsApp group. It was always pinging with her mum’s weird and wonderful updates, her dad’s silly jokes and her sister’s gifs or funny anecdotes about her kids. Sometimes Violet had to mute it when she was working or on a deadline because it was always so distracting, but she loved how connected it made them all feel, even though they were miles apart. It made her sad that he hadn’t had that.

‘What family do you have?’ she asked, realising she didn’t know. ‘I’ve got a sister who lives in Australia and my parents obviously.’

‘I have my parents and two brothers. They’ve all moved away from Levi now. I think that’s why I fight so hard for the town, so other families don’t have to split up like we have. They can stay and own houses and run successful businesses in the town they were born in.’

It was a lovely sentiment, and another aspect of his personality seemed to slot into place. She finished her hot chocolate as he told her all about them and soon it was time to head back.

As he dropped her off outside her lodge, she said, ‘We need to do some work in town tomorrow. Check in with Lumi about the event, and the arts

centre, get into more detail about how it'll run on the day and the logistics of everything. And we should speak to Ritva about displaying some of her artwork. I went into her gallery before I got sick and I think it would look amazing on the walls.'

'Okay. I'm not sure she'll say yes, but we can ask. I'll pick you up at ten, shall I? I can treat you to breakfast again. There are more Finnish delicacies you haven't tried.'

'I'd like that, thank you.'

She paused, wanting to ask him to stay. She'd enjoyed the way everything had gone back to how it was before.

'Do you have everything you need?' he asked, seemingly as unwilling to leave as she was. 'It's going to snow again tonight.'

'How can you tell?'

He pointed at the sky where clouds had gathered, rolling into and on top of one another. Just like when she got lost in the forest, the light was rapidly fading. 'Those grey clouds, they are snow clouds. There will be lots of it. The world will look very different tomorrow. You have enough firewood?'

She glanced over and nodded. The housekeepers had been in and topped her up. She just needed to build a fire and keep it going, but the lodge also had heating throughout so she would be lovely and warm no matter what.

'Good,' Rasmus replied. 'Get the fire burning. You don't want to get sick again. I don't want you to get sick again. And look out of the window in about—' He glanced at the sky once more. 'An hour's time? Two at the most. You'll see it then.'

He backed away, smiling as he had that day at the reindeer park, the day he'd kissed her on the cheek. She wanted him to kiss her again. She wanted him to stay. But with a final glance in her direction, he walked down the steps and back to his car.

An hour and a half later, with the fire burning, filling the lodge with its beautiful orange glow and crackling musically in the grate, Violet looked out of the window and sure enough, flakes were falling from the sky, their pace growing quickly. She settled back on the sofa, and watched as more and more settled on the ground, forming mounds and banks and little piles on the windowsills. It was captivating, and she knew for certain that that view, this place, this life, this part of the world, would never, ever get old.

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Chapter 20

It was still snowing faintly when Rasmus arrived to collect her the next morning. The temperature was the lowest it had been and her teeth chattered as she stepped outside and locked the door. She jumped into the car as quickly as possible, grateful for the heated seats.

‘Where first?’ he asked.

‘Let’s start with the arts centre and check on everything there. That’s the biggest part of our event.’

‘And then breakfast?’

‘And then breakfast,’ she agreed with a chuckle. After an amazing night’s sleep and a long lie-in that fed her body and soul, she was more than ready for it.

Violet warmed a little during the short drive but wasn’t keen on getting out again when they parked up. While she was almost back to normal and still loved the idea of living somewhere like here, she wasn’t used to this much cold. She supposed she’d grow accustomed to it if she did ever relocate, just as everyone in Britain was used to the constant rain, but again, was she just idolising everything even more because people had been kind to her? She pushed the thought aside, knowing she needed to concentrate on the work ahead or the event would be a disaster. It was time to work.

When they entered the arts centre, Helmi rushed towards them, a strange look on her face. ‘I’m glad you’re here. I was just about to call.’

‘Is everything okay?’ asked Violet, shedding her gloves and hat and unzipping her thick coat.

‘No. I’m sorry, but it’s not. I was going to say something earlier but then I heard you got sick and Rasmus had an emergency. Are you both okay now?’

Violet smiled though her stomach had bottomed out. ‘I’m fine, thanks.’

‘Yes, me too,’ he added. ‘What’s wrong, Helmi?’

‘We can’t now hold the New Year’s Eve fair. I’m so sorry.’

‘What?’ Rasmus’s eyes widened.

Violet did her best to remain calm, but this was possibly the absolute worst thing that could happen. ‘Can I ask why not?’

‘It’s – it’s complicated.’

‘Is your exhibition running over or is there a problem with the room?’

Helmi glanced over her shoulder, then dragged them to one side, whispering, ‘I wish it were that but no. All I know is that the development company came in for a meeting with the head of the arts centre, and the next thing, I’m overruled and told we can’t host your exhibition and I’m to cancel.’

‘That’s outrageous!’ Violet replied, her voice louder than she’d intended, her calm vanishing. Thankfully Rasmus was lost for words. She could just imagine what he’d say when it sunk in.

‘It’s never happened before.’

‘And let me guess, they offered a large donation with conditions attached?’

Helmi shrugged. ‘I don’t know the details, but I think so. What will you do?’

Violet and Rasmus shared a worried glance. ‘I don’t know yet,’ she said honestly. ‘I need to rethink.’

‘I am truly, truly sorry.’ Helmi pressed her hands together. ‘If it was up to me—’

‘I know.’ Rasmus put a hand on her shoulder. ‘This isn’t your fault. We’ll figure something out.’

Helmi thanked them both for being so understanding and they left in a daze. The cold wind brushed their cheeks but did nothing to tear Violet’s mind away from what a problem this was. It was, without doubt, the biggest and worst thing that could happen.

‘What do we do now?’ asked Rasmus, tucking his ungloved hands under his armpits.

‘We have breakfast,’ she replied matter-of-fact. ‘I can’t think while I’m hungry and we’ve definitely got some thinking to do.’

He smiled and opened his arm for them to walk along the street. He led them to another cute-looking café, one she hadn’t been in before, and they settled at a table. Violet picked up the menu. She was absolutely ravenous and ordered two *korvapuusti*, the delicious cinnamon rolls, and a bowl of porridge with cloudberries along with a large coffee. Rasmus had the cinnamon buns but declined the porridge.

‘So what do we do?’ he asked again as she tucked into one of the delicious, warm pastries, the scent of cinnamon filling her nose.

‘Okay, logically, we need to find another venue and tell all our vendors.’

‘You make it sound simple.’

‘I said it was logical, not simple.’ The sweet treat calmed her nerves, and the coffee helped her focus. She pulled out her phone and began searching for other possible venues. With so little time this was going to be an almost impossible task, but she’d try her best. With only large hotels as other options she was pretty certain the idea of the fair was dead in the water. ‘If all else fails we’ll have to postpone the fair and only go for the party. Not ideal but that’s a fairly decent plan B. We can still launch the fund at the party and then add money to it when we hold the fair.’

‘But it will be after you’ve left.’

‘Oh. Yes, it will be, won’t it.’ She’d been so wrapped up in problem solving she hadn’t thought of the timeline. She looked at Rasmus and sadness passed over his face. It filled her voice too. ‘Well, you and Lumi will have to carry it on, won’t you. And I can always help set up the event from back home.’

He nodded without speaking and placed a torn piece of pastry in his mouth.

‘Okay,’ she said, quickly avoiding the growing pain-filled silence and the ache in her heart. ‘So it looks like the only other options are the hotels. They’ll have conference and function rooms but I’m pretty sure they’ll all be booked out. But it’s the only option we have. Shall we start going round and trying some after this?’

‘I thought you said we shouldn’t turn up without appointments?’ His voice carried a lighter, teasing tone and it helped ease the tension between them.

‘Yes, but sometimes seeing people face to face means we can put a little bit of pressure on them and that can work to our advantage.’

‘Okay. Let’s give it a shot. What do we have to lose?’

‘At the moment, nothing. But let me finish my porridge first. I need to be on top form for this.’

‘I can tell you’re feeling better – you’re getting energetic again.’

‘Scary, isn’t it?’

‘Just a little.’ He grinned.

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The first hotel was a complete bust, as was the second. They were booked solid with parties and events and though Violet kept her smile intact, her spirits were sinking fast. This final hotel on the outskirts of town was their last chance. As they approached the young man responsible for events, Violet didn't hold out much hope and as she'd expected, his answer was no.

'I'm sorry but we have an event in the evening. It is New Year's Eve after all.'

Rasmus looked defeated and her heart ached.

'Is it booked all day? Or just the evening?' she asked, suddenly wondering if they could shorten the timeframe for the fair and still hold something.

'Just the evening but we need time to—'

'Set up, I know. But … I know we're asking a lot but is there any way we could have the room for a few hours during the day? We'll do all the setting up and taking down and we could be out by three, which would mean you have more than enough time to set up for your evening party. Please? This is for a really good cause.'

She went on to explain everything about the fund, the developers and how this would help local, smaller businesses in the town.

'We do like to support other businesses. We're a chain but we always send guests to the local lodge owners if we can't accommodate them or their needs. It's important we all work together.'

'It's a shame the new developers don't think like that,' Rasmus said.

'Yes, we've had some … issues with them too.'

Violet knew this was her chance. 'Is there no way you can help us, even for a few hours?'

He sucked air in through his teeth. 'I'll need to check. Hold on.'

He motioned for them to take a seat before heading towards an office. Violet sat, her hands clasped in her lap while Rasmus paced. If this didn't work out, she was out of options and there'd be no other choice but to postpone it. After what seemed like hours, her nerves a tight ball in her stomach, he came back.

'We can give you a few hours. Ten till three, and that needs to include set-up and take-down.'

'We'll take it. Thank you!'

She shook his hand and Rasmus did the same, almost tearing the poor man's arm off in his joy.

'You did it!' Rasmus said as they left, pulling her into a hug and holding her tightly.

She laughed in surprise and wrapped her arms around him too. But then he didn't move, didn't let her go, and everything else fell away. It felt so natural to be with him, to be in his arms. She closed her eyes, breathing in his fresh, outdoor sent and the light hint of aftershave, the smell of the cold, fresh air on his clothes. And then he loosened his grip and suddenly they were face to face, only millimetres apart. His eyes met hers and then dropped to her lips. She found herself raising her head, seeking a kiss. Her body yearned for his lips to meet hers, for a kiss that was both gentle and fierce all at the same time.

'Ah, you're still here! Good!' The events guy was walking towards them waving a piece of paper. They jumped apart, Rasmus fidgeting with his sleeves and collar. 'Here's a copy of the contract terms. I can email one to you as well.'

'That's great,' said Violet. 'Thank you.'

He scuttled off again and Violet tried to catch Rasmus's eye, but he was avoiding her gaze, his cheeks flushed.

'What's next?' he asked after a moment, still staring out of the window as though looking at her might give something away.

'We need to tell everyone about the change of location.'

'Then we better get started.'

He marched ahead and she followed, her heart pounding in her chest. This was supposed to be a simple, fun, easy holiday but now it was becoming anything but and it wasn't all down to the event she was running. The attraction between them was growing stronger, fiercer, and she wasn't sure how much longer either of them could control it.

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After telling everyone who'd agreed to come to the fair, their last stop was Ritva's and as they approached, Rasmus said he'd wait outside.

'Are you sure?' she asked. She'd been warming more and more to Ritva and wished she and Rasmus could get over whatever it was that had caused such a dislike of one another. 'You really should come as you're also

organising this event.’ She tilted her head, fixing him with a don’t-be-a-baby look.

‘Fine,’ he sighed.

Once inside, Rasmus held back as Violet delivered the news, which Ritva took surprisingly well. Then the older woman lifted her chin and spoke to Rasmus in Finnish. A quick conversation took place that she didn’t understand, Rasmus shuffling uncomfortably. As they spoke, her eyes wandered over the beautiful paintings on the walls and remembering Rasmus’s reaction to her forest painting, and Lumi saying she should ask Ritva to stock her work, she felt courage rise inside like her belly was filling up with it. But almost immediately nerves took over, pressing her courage down.

While Lumi was right that if she said no she could leave the embarrassment here rather than take it home with her, the idea of having to cope with it now made her shrink. But then, a wave of joy at everything she’d already achieved that day washed over her, and she heard Grandma Louisa in her head telling her to take this chance, that she was good enough even if she was an amateur. As Rasmus and Ritva’s conversation ended, she found her mouth opening and words tumbling out she’d had no intention of saying when she walked in.

‘Ritva,’ she said, pulling out her phone. ‘I have some paintings I’ve been working on that I wondered if … well, I wondered if you’d consider displaying them here or at the fair?’

She pulled up some photos she’d taken of them and turned her screen so Ritva could see. Violet braced herself to be torn apart, but to her surprise the older woman took the phone and studied the photos then replied, her voice kind.

‘You are talented. More than I thought you’d be.’

It wasn’t quite the compliment she’d hoped for, but Violet’s hopes rose.

‘But you’re not quite there yet,’ Ritva continued, and a cold shiver, like she’d had when she’d been ill, ran over her. ‘Close, but not yet.’

‘Oh, right.’ A violent heat overtook the chill, rising into her cheeks, and Violet knew she’d turned a bright red. She should have kept her mouth shut and never asked. It was a stupid idea and now she couldn’t take the words back.

To make matters worse, though he thought he was doing a good thing, Rasmus added, ‘I’ve seen her work, Ritva. She is very good.’

‘Yes,’ Ritva replied. ‘She is. But not ready to exhibit. Soon though.’ She turned back to Violet. ‘If you paint something truly brave, from the heart, painted with your soul, I will display it. Let yourself go when you’re creating. Don’t hold back.’

‘Right.’ Violet nodded, pretending she wasn’t dying and though she appreciated the woman’s advice, her burning humiliation meant she couldn’t think of anything except getting out of there. Getting away into the cold air to cool her cheeks and back to her lodge where no one would see her embarrassment.

She made for the door and Rasmus quickly followed.

‘I’m sorry she won’t—’

‘It’s fine!’ Violet pushed all the joy she could into her voice, but it sounded strained and she knew it wasn’t showing on her face even though she was smiling. ‘It was just an idea. No worries.’

‘Violet—’

‘Honestly! I’m fine. What was that conversation about?’ she asked, desperate to change the subject. ‘You normally keep it to English when I’m around.’

‘Oh, nothing. Nothing. I was just thanking her for looking after you when you were sick.’

‘Oh, right.’ She wasn’t sure she believed him given the grave looks on both their faces and the clipped sentences. She’d didn’t speak a word of Finnish, but she could read tone and intonation well enough.

‘Violet—’

‘Let’s crack on, shall we, because it’s Christmas Eve tomorrow and everyone will be closed.’

It was her turn to march ahead, but she couldn’t bear his look of concern, or worse, his pity. She was sure he had second-hand embarrassment for her and the last thing she needed was him being nice to her. It would only make things worse.

A small voice in her head was trying to push through the negative thoughts, telling her to pull herself together. Ritva had said some lovely things and some confusing things too. What did she mean be brave? To paint from her soul? Violet wasn’t sure what that meant or if she was even capable of it. With her vacation almost over, she wasn’t even sure she’d have the chance to find out.

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Chapter 21

Violet couldn't believe Christmas Eve had come round so quickly. While she was excited to go to Lumi's and celebrate with him and Rasmus, especially after the blip they'd had, she was still a little embarrassed about the gallery, and this milestone event meant the end of her stay was drawing closer. Far too close. So close that she didn't want to think about it. Not at all. Her return flights were already booked and the reminder to check in online set on her phone, but the thought of returning made her feel ridiculously sad.

Waking up that morning, seeing fresh snow fall, the white powdery landscape had filled her with excitement and she'd walked into the living room, the Christmas tree twinkling brightly in the corner, and sent messages to all her friends and family. While they wouldn't have celebrated properly until tomorrow, she was looking forward to experiencing a Finnish Christmas. She'd then snuggled under a blanket and allowed the immense feeling of contentment to wash over her. How wonderful it would be to walk into the Santa village every year, maybe even one year, with children in tow. Her own children. She'd never really thought about the prospect until now and couldn't help but wonder if it was tied to this whole really-feeling-at-home thing. She also pictured Rasmus by her side then told herself to stop being so stupid. Everything would be changing soon when she went back to England and while her heart ached at the thought of leaving here – leaving him – she told herself that they'd both get over it soon enough.

She'd have to.

Before gloomy thoughts could settle, Violet concentrated on the exciting day ahead. While she'd always loved Christmas at home with her family, she was looking forward to her first solo Christmas – eating at Lumi's then coming back later for an evening doing exactly what she wanted (and eating what she wanted) – no expectations, no requirements. Just her and the treats she'd bought for herself, and perhaps some painting.

She was due at Lumi's at twelve and had told Rasmus she'd meet him there as he was visiting his parents that morning. Taking her time, she dressed, exchanged more messages with her friends and family and made her way through the beautiful snowy forest, down the path that led into Levi. Noise from the resort reached out over the slopes, making Violet smile. What an amazing way to spend Christmas. By the time she reached Lumi's, her cheeks were pink with cold, her nose icy, and she was more than ready for a celebratory glass of champagne.

'Violet!' he cried, arms wide as she stepped inside. '*Hyvää joulua*!'

'I take it that means Happy Christmas?'

'It does indeed!'

'Then *hyvää joulua* to you too!' She hugged him and his friendly greeting warmed her heart.

The restaurant was already busy with customers and staff running around. She made her way to the counter, losing the thick coat and her usual hat, scarf and gloves. While she'd had a small panic over what to wear, thinking she should wear a pretty dress or something a little special, she'd eventually decided that, given the temperature she had to walk in, black jeans and a long, thick, red, Christmas sweater with her thermals underneath would be fine. While she wanted to look nice, hypothermia didn't really suit anyone.

'I've put you, me and Rasmus over there.'

He pointed to the table they'd sat at before, after the developer meeting. A bottle of champagne chilled in an ice bucket in the centre, and three glasses were already laid out.

'I have a little bit of work to do, then I will join you. Help yourself to a glass of champagne. Rasmus will be here soon and here are some small plates for now.'

He popped down a small bowl of nuts and one of crisps and she settled in the comfortable corner. The restaurant was lovely and warm from the heat of the kitchens and the air of celebration and chatter that surrounded her. Through the main window, the town looked beautiful, the snowy streets lit by the tall orange streetlamps and the polar night sky was more glorious than ever before. The world was a faint blue, the sky a shade somewhere between pale blueberry and frosted teal.

Before long, Rasmus arrived, smiling as soon as he saw her. He greeted his friend, who was still busy helping his staff and serving the early diners,

with a hug, and made his way over to Violet in the cosy corner booth.

She moved to the other side of the table so they could hug properly, and he kissed her cheeks, his lips soft and warm against her skin. She felt a buzzing in her belly and her breath tight in her throat as they looked at each other, the same longing from the other night clear in his eyes, the same feeling, she knew, reflected in her own.

'*Iloista joulua*,' he said with a grin.

'Oh, that's different from what Lumi said. What does that mean?'

'We have lots of different variations of the normal merry Christmas greeting. That one means happy, cheerful Christmas.'

'What are some of the others?' She slid back into her seat as Rasmus shook off his coat and sat too. Violet held up the bottle of champagne.

'Yes please.' He sat down, pushing a hand into his thick blond hair. He was wearing his normal plaid shirt in Christmas reds and greens and once more it was stretched attractively over his shoulders and arms. 'We Finnish like to mix things up so we have peaceful Christmas; bright Christmas; Christmas peace; unrushed, relaxing Christmas.'

'I like that last one,' she said with an eyebrow raise. The last few days hadn't been exactly relaxing, but she planned to make up for that now.

'Me too.' He took a sip of his champagne and Violet found her eyes drawn to his lips as the glass rested on them. He glanced at her, and she quickly turned away, not wanting to be caught staring.

'So how were your family this morning?'

'Good,' he replied, relaxing back into his chair and smiling widely. His eyes lit with genuine affection. 'Things are so much better. Did you know, I hadn't been home for the last few years? Just sent a message or delivered a present or two but never stayed. This was the first time I actually saw them. We drank coffee, we talked, we exchanged gifts and watched each other unwrap them. It was … it was like when I was little and I'm glad things are better.'

'I am too.'

His gaze turned softly towards her. 'I'm sorry. You must be missing your family today.'

'Me? No! Not at all! I've already spoken to them, and we've agreed to call later this evening too.'

His brow creased. 'So you're not missing them?'

She sipped her champagne and shook her head. ‘No.’ At his concerned glance she laughed again. ‘Don’t get me wrong, I love them so much, but we talk every day, so I always feel like I’ve seen them even if it’s only over a video call.’

‘I see. I hope that’s what it’ll be like for us now. I was worried you would be sad today because it’s Christmas and you’re not with your family.’

Well, if that wasn’t the sweetest thing she’d heard all day. ‘I’m in the most beautiful place on earth with some great people. How could I possibly be miserable? And I’ve always been independent and happy in my own company. That’s probably why I’ve loved travelling solo for work so much.’

But now … ?

Violet’s heart was yearning more and more for something different. For a home base. A location that she couldn’t wait to come back to every time she was away, and she was pretty sure that place was here. But though those thoughts danced around her head and they felt right at this moment, Isabel’s words of warning rang in her ears. She always saw the best of places and let her imagination run wild. This holiday had been so unique, so different. Was she just being swayed by how nice people had been, by how handsome Rasmus was, and by her own imagination? She couldn’t move her entire life to somewhere new just because she’d had an amazing holiday there. Reality would, she told herself, be very different.

She needed to slow her consumption of champagne, even though it was delicious. Violet could feel her good sense slipping down and the last thing she needed was to say something she’d later regret.

Rasmus raised an eyebrow.

‘What?’ she asked with a giggle.

‘It just sounded like you hadn’t quite finished that sentence.’

She shook her head. ‘Oh no, I had.’ She took the carafe of water and poured herself a glass.

Different emotions passed over Rasmus’s face. The first she could identify: confusion, and she didn’t blame him. The conversation had ended abruptly, but then there were other feelings dancing in his eyes and they appeared and disappeared so quickly she didn’t have time to figure each one of them out.

‘I have something for you,’ he said, placing a beautifully wrapped box on the table. The red paper shone in the light and a gold ribbon had been tied

perfectly around it.

Violet's breath stuttered in her lungs. He bit his lip as if nervous and she let the smile growing in every cell of her body slide onto her face. 'I have something for you too. And for Lumi.' She put the two boxes on the table, and they grinned at each other as if a secret message was being passed between them. Somehow she knew he could tell that while she'd bought a present for Lumi too, there was something extra special, something additionally meaningful, about the one she'd got for him and him for her. They gazed at each other for a second too long, the beautiful pale blue of his eyes warm in the cosy lighting, his smile perfectly even and broad, making them twinkle.

'Did I hear my name?' Lumi asked, sliding into his seat and grabbing the bottle of champagne, pouring himself a glass and topping up everyone else's.

Violet grabbed some of the nuts, knowing she needed to eat to absorb the alcohol and control her racing mind. She'd been too ill to think about the niggling thoughts of home, what it meant and where it should be and for them to spring up now was more than a little annoying. She found her gaze constantly pulling towards Rasmus and, when she finally gave in and flicked her eyes towards him, she discovered he was still watching her. The thrill of it shot butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

A second later, he turned to his friend, giving him another, different Christmas greeting. '*Ihanaa joulunaikaa*.'

'What does that one mean?' Violet asked with an incredulous laugh.

'Lovely Christmastime,' they answered in unison.

'Why do you have so many?'

'Because we are greedy,' Lumi said, sitting back in his chair, instantly relaxing. 'I am so happy to be finished. It has been a busy, busy day.'

'There're way more people to come, aren't there?' asked Violet, glancing at the time on her phone.

'Yes, but my second-in-command will take over now, at double pay, I might add, so I can spend the rest of the day with you two. My two favourite people!'

Violet's heart hummed in her chest like a cat purring at the comment. 'Well, cheers to that.' She raised her glass and they did the same, clinking them gently together.

‘And before you think I’m a terrible boss, they’re having New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day off. My second-in-command is younger and wants to party at the resort. So we agreed to divide things up.’

Violet grinned approvingly. ‘That’s lovely.’

‘Is one of those presents for me?’ he asked, knocking back his champagne in one go and then signalling for another bottle.

‘Yes!’ Violet handed over her gift and Rasmus pulled another present from beside him, but this one wasn’t as beautifully wrapped. He handed it to Lumi.

‘Am I going first then?’ Lumi opened his gift from her and smiled at the shirt and tie set. The material was beautiful and the pattern of flowers and butterflies incredibly pretty. She knew it would suit him well and was very pleased as his face lit up.

‘Violet!’ Lumi exclaimed. ‘This is gorgeous. I love it! I’ll wear it tomorrow when I see my family. They’ll love it too. Thank you! And what did you get me, Rasmus?’

‘Open it and find out!’ Rasmus chuckled at his friend’s childlike delight. ‘He’s always like this over Christmas. You wouldn’t think he’s an adult with his own business.’

‘I’m all for getting in the Christmas spirit,’ Violet replied. ‘It’s a special time of year.’

Lumi tore open the box and thanked Rasmus for the bottle of aftershave. ‘I know it seems a boring gift,’ he said to Violet. ‘But I asked him to get it. I’m running out.’ He put it to one side and opened the newly delivered bottle of champagne with a pop, then turned to Violet as he refilled her glass. ‘Your turn!’

Violet opened the small gift bag he handed over to find a beautiful scarf of the softest pale blue wool. ‘Oh, Lumi! It’s gorgeous! I love it.’

‘The one you have is boring. Black is—’ He waved his hand. ‘What’s another word for boring?’

‘Dull?’ she offered, chuckling.

‘Yes, dull. And you are not dull. You should wear beautiful colours. Like this. Ones that show off your lovely hair.’

‘Well, thank you. I’ll wear it home today.’

Home? The word had tumbled out so naturally and this time it wasn’t all because of too much champagne.

‘Now Rasmus’s gift,’ Lumi said, his tone changing slightly. ‘I know he spent a lot of time thinking about this and deciding what to get you.’

Lumi’s teasing tone was clear, but Rasmus didn’t argue; instead a blush crept over his cheeks as he handed her the gorgeously wrapped present.

Nerves gathered in her stomach as she carefully untied the ribbon and then unwrapped the paper. The plain wooden box didn’t look like anything special, but when she opened the lid to find an enormous set of acrylic paints in as many different shades as she could imagine, she pressed a hand to her open mouth.

‘Rasmus! It’s wonderful!’

‘Is it okay?’ His voice wavered with uncertainty, but when he saw her smile, he relaxed.

‘It’s perfect! Thank you so much. I can’t wait to get back and use them.’ She kept taking the tubes out and examining the colours, making him and Lumi laugh.

‘And now you,’ Lumi said, handing Rasmus his gift. He leaned into Violet. ‘He is always so difficult to buy for.’

Rasmus carefully unwrapped the paper and was excited to see a book on native Lapland wildlife. He grinned widely at his friend. ‘Thank you! This is perfect.’

‘You don’t have that one?’

He shook his head. ‘I was thinking of buying it. You’ve saved me the trouble.’

‘And now Violet’s gift.’ Again, Lumi’s voice was full of teasing, and she shot him a look as she handed it over.

‘I hope you like it,’ she said as her certainty faded. She felt the need to add this warning in case he hated it. After Ritva’s comments, she wasn’t sure she could take any more embarrassment right now. He pulled out the first item from the gift box she’d put together. ‘It’s a reusable water bottle,’ she added for clarity.

‘I know,’ he responded with another warm smile that lit his eyes. ‘I love it, thank you.’ He picked up the next gift: the new wallet.

‘It’s made from recycled materials. All of this stuff is so it’s good for the environment.’

‘Exactly the type of thing I like and mine is falling apart.’

‘I know,’ she added shyly. ‘I saw when we were at the reindeer farm.’

‘That is so thoughtful,’ said Lumi, topping up his glass again. ‘Isn’t it, Rasmus?’

‘It is. I love it too. And finally …’ He unwrapped a small wooden reindeer and though he looked a little puzzled at first, the clear reminder of the day they’d spent together brought light to his face. ‘He’s wonderful.’

‘Just a thank you for showing me such amazing things while I’ve been here.’

Lumi picked up the champagne bottle, and it clinked against Violet’s glass as he clumsily topped it up. ‘And there’s one more, isn’t there, Rasmus?’

‘You need to drink some water,’ he replied, his tone a gentle warning for his friend to slow down.

‘Are you kidding? It’s Christmas and I’ve finished work for the day and I’m celebrating with my friends. Anyway, tell Violet about the trip you have planned for tomorrow.’

‘What trip?’ she asked, excitement rushing in at the thought of seeing him and of something clearly special he’d organised.

Rasmus was currently scowling at Lumi. ‘It won’t be until the afternoon so you can enjoy today and be lazy in the morning, but we are going somewhere special.’

‘And my paints?’

‘He shook his head. No, you won’t need those.’

She was surprised. She’d assumed it would be another painting opportunity, but her experiences were turning more into moments in her life she knew she’d treasure forever, and wherever she’d gone, she’d taken lots of photographs so she could paint the scenes later.

‘We’re not going to see bears, are we?’

Both Lumi and Rasmus stared at her, their brows meeting as they frowned in confusion.

‘Umm … no,’ Rasmus replied first.

‘Why would you go and see dangerous bears?’ Lumi asked a second later.

‘Just checking.’ They all burst out laughing. ‘Here—’ She picked up the champagne signalling to Lumi for another bottle. ‘I think we need some more of this.’

It was the most wonderful, happy, laughter-filled Christmas Eve she’d spent in a long time. She always enjoyed her time with her family, which

was full of silly games, teasing and lots of food and drink, but she had never felt as contented as she had at Lumi's. They'd settled back into conversation and enjoyed a delicious traditional Finnish Christmas dinner of baked fish, a large ham served with mustard, a pickled beetroot salad, and a root vegetable casserole. It was just what she needed to soak up the champagne. And afterwards they'd had gingerbread cookies, Christmas spiced cakes called *maustekakku*, a large delicious bundt cake. It was all scrumptious.

After the last remnants of daylight had faded and the evening meals had been served, the final customers left, the staff cleared up and were sent home by Lumi with thanks, presents and bonuses for their hard work. The three of them settled back into their little corner for more conversation, wine and leftover cookies and cake. As she sat there, taking in the feeling of pure contentment, she knew she would remember this moment for the rest of her life. In years to come, when she thought back on it, she knew she'd still be able to feel the warmth on her skin and hear the laughter as clear as it had been that evening.

Eventually, and reluctantly, it was time to leave. The sky was the deepest, darkest black she'd ever seen, the stars twinkling and visible all around them. Without snowy clouds the temperature felt even colder, or maybe it was the shock from leaving the warmth and comfort of indoors.

'I will walk you home,' Rasmus said.

'Are you sure? Will you be all right on your own in the dark on the way back?'

He cocked his head. 'I've been walking here on my own in the dark for a long time. I know what I'm doing. And besides, I know how to fight, or at least avoid, bears.'

'Ha ha.' Wrapped up against the cold and with Lumi toddling in the other direction to his house, which was only a few streets away, they headed back towards the forest and the path to the lodges. 'I'll have you know my fear of bears is perfectly rational. You not having a fear of bears is odd.'

'They really don't bother coming near us if they can help it. They're actually quite shy and afraid of humans, and who can blame them?'

'Here—' He held out his hand. 'So you don't wander off and get eaten by bears.'

She slipped her hand into his, wishing she could feel his skin and not have to wear gloves.

‘It’s a beautiful night,’ she said after a few moments of comfortable silence as they walked along together.

‘It is.’ He looked up at the sky, then added, ‘And I hope tomorrow will be just as beautiful.’

‘Whatever we’re doing, I know it’ll be magical.’

With Rasmus by her side, the walk through the forest felt peaceful. In the quiet, he pointed out the hooting of owls and calmed her when the rustling undergrowth made her nervous. They fell into step and were soon back at the lodge. She didn’t want this moment to end, and her heart screamed for this night, this Christmas, this holiday, to last forever.

As she unlocked the door, sadness began to sweep her, but she reminded herself she’d be seeing Rasmus tomorrow.

‘This—’ she said quickly before she lost her nerve. ‘This has been one of the best Christmases of my life. Thank you.’

Rasmus edged closer. ‘It isn’t over yet. Christmas Day is tomorrow. And —’ He unzipped his coat and pulled a small gift box from inside his coat packet, handing it to her. ‘I got you this, so you have something to open on Christmas Day. I know that’s when you would usually celebrate.’

She took it, her breath catching and faltering in her lungs. It was so thoughtful. So kind. And it had to mean something, didn’t it? A gesture like that. How could it not? She looked up into his eyes to find him staring straight back at her.

Before she knew what was happening, the cold air that brushed her skin was gone and his soft lips were on hers. She savoured the feel for a second, committing the shape and firmness to memory before she wrapped her arms around his neck, pushed her body closer to his and kissed him back. His arms wrapped around her. Well, around the giant thick coat she had to wear, but she could feel his strength as he pulled her towards him. Her heart spun in her chest, and her stomach fizzed with expectation and yearning.

The kiss deepened, the weeks of wanting and longing crashing to this. He was gentle, and pulled away for a second meeting her eye, silently checking that she wanted this as much as he did. After a shaky breath passed between them, she was the one to move closer and kiss him.

They parted breathless. The cold air once more swept over her skin and she wanted to pull him back and do it all over again. To repeat the moment from the beginning and relive every second of it.

‘*Jouluiloa*,’ he said gently, his thumb stroking her chin and the corner of her mouth.

Though her throat felt shaky, she managed to mumble, ‘What does that one mean?’

‘Christmas joy.’

She smiled. ‘*Jouluiloa* to you too.’

It had been the most joyous Christmas Eve she’d ever had, and it wasn’t over yet. She had whatever tomorrow would bring, and she couldn’t wait.

He kissed her again, gently, just brushing her lips. ‘Goodnight, Violet. Sleep well.’

She wasn’t sure she would, given the power of that kiss was still ricocheting around her body, but she wished him goodnight anyway and reluctantly went inside. Unable to stop herself, she watched him through the window until he was out of sight. She placed the gift he’d given her under the Christmas tree in the corner of the room, wondering what it could be. She’d find out tomorrow.

Locking the door and moving to the bedroom, she changed into her pyjamas, brushed her teeth and climbed into bed. As she suspected, when she closed her eyes her thoughts were full of Rasmus. Of his laugh, his smile and most of all, that kiss. A kiss that was, hands down, the best kiss she’d ever had in her life. A kiss that had stirred every emotion inside her as though she’d been sleepwalking through all her previous relationships. A kiss that, she had to admit, she would happily stay in Lapland for. Forever. It had touched a part of her soul no one so far ever had.

And in a week’s time she’d have to leave it behind. Unless she could do something about it. Something like moving here. Was it even possible? It was certainly irrational. Some might even consider it outrageous. And it was absolutely, without doubt, outlandish. But she could do it. There was no real reason why not. But was it even a good idea?

Self-doubt began to plague her. She was doing it again, romanticising this place, and while right now this thing with Rasmus … whatever it was … felt real, what if she was just being swept up in the excitement of it all?

Her final thoughts as she drifted off to sleep were not of strange plans or decisions to be made, but of Rasmus, his mouth on hers, his eyes looking deep into her own, and as her breath grew calm and rhythmic, a sense of peace washed over her, and she fell into a deep, comforting sleep.

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Chapter 22

The next morning, Violet danced about as she dressed, her thoughts full of Rasmus. With a cup of hot, sweet tea, she called her parents and chatted to them before leaving them to their own celebrations. She was just about to hang up when her sister said, ‘Wait, Vi, don’t go.’ Isabel hurried her parents away, urging them to take a walk on the beach and a heavy, sinking feeling grew in Violet’s stomach.

‘Everything okay, Issy?’ she asked as her sister settled back in front of the screen.

‘Yeah, it’s just … what’s happened? I can tell something has.’

Violet grinned. ‘Okay, I was going to text you last night, but I was too …’ Too what? Wound up? Discombobulated? In love? ‘Anyway—’ she said, moving her thoughts on. ‘So Rasmus kissed me and it was the most amazing kiss I’ve ever had in my life. Like—’ Her body reacted as she replayed it, filling with yearning for him again. ‘Just whole-body amazing and now I’m thinking about what you said and I was wondering about whether I’d found the place I want to call home and now I really think I have.’

‘Okaaay.’

Violet sensed the shift in mood. Her sister wasn’t smiling. Why? Why wasn’t Issy as happy as she was? ‘What’s wrong? You’re not happy for me?’

‘No! It’s not that, I just …’ Isabel didn’t finish the sentence, and Violet’s unease grew. ‘I know you, Violet, and I know we talked before and if you decide that you want to move there you know I will one hundred per cent support you but—’

‘But what?’

‘Just be careful.’ Her voice was soft, but Violet could sense the firmness behind her words. ‘I thought so long and hard before moving to Australia and we visited a few times before committing to it. We did tons of research too. You’ve only been there for a few weeks and I know you like this guy but—’

‘But you’re worried I’m getting swept up in things.’

‘I’m sorry,’ her sister said, genuinely. ‘I’m not trying to discourage you from anything that’ll make you happy. I’m just urging you to really think about this before saying or doing anything, especially to this Rasmus guy.’

Violet’s good mood began to disappear and a part of her wished she’d never told her sister, just kept her own little romantic bubble around her, but another part of her knew Isabel was right. She’d once, while at uni, visited Milan and loved it so much she’d nearly changed her course to fashion and made plans to move there after she’d finished. And of course there were all the other times she’d nearly changed her life because a holiday had seemed like perfection. Violet hated that she could see where her sister was coming from.

‘All I’m saying is,’ Isabel continued, ‘just think about the advice Mum and Dad’s given me. And if you really think it’s the right thing then move there, but you can’t just move for a holiday romance after a couple of weeks.’

Violet couldn’t believe that was all it had been. It had felt so much longer as she and Rasmus had spent so much time together. But she wasn’t sure if that meant her feelings were most definitely real or if it meant there was even more chance in her getting swept up in something that wouldn’t work outside of this holiday.

‘I mean,’ her sister continued, ‘you’d never have picked Lapland to even visit, would you?’

‘No.’ Violet had to admit she wouldn’t have.

‘I don’t mean to be a Debbie Downer. Love you,’ her sister said with a sorry smile.

‘I love you too.’ Violet brightened, not wanting Isabel to feel guilty for looking out for her. That’s what family did and when it had been the other way around, she’d given her sister plenty of warnings before she’d moved, making sure she was certain of her decision before breaking the news to their parents. ‘I need to go, okay?’

‘But we’re good? I haven’t ruined your day?’

‘No! Not at all.’

She had to admit it had tinged it a little and she was a little less enthusiastic about whatever she and Rasmus were up to now, but she accepted Issy’s point of view. With a final goodbye, she rang off. Violet eyed her extra present from Rasmus that sat under the tree and, after

grabbing it, curled up under the warm woollen blanket in front of the log fire and opened it.

She unwrapped the paper carefully, lifting the lid to see a beautiful silver necklace with a poinsettia pendant at the end. She'd noticed the red Christmas flowers in every place she'd visited, and the pendant was beautiful and delicate. She immediately put it on, grateful for another thoughtful gift. There could be no doubt now, especially after last night, that he had developed feelings for her, just as she had for him. But was Issy right? Was it just a holiday romance? She couldn't believe it was, no matter what anyone said. Her heart was definitely telling her it was something more, but could she trust it? Could she trust herself?

Despite everything, for the next few hours Violet was like a schoolgirl waiting for her first date, counting down the hours until Rasmus arrived. He'd said it would be late afternoon, and she had definitely enjoyed the lie-in and the slow start to her Christmas Day, though like a local she felt like she'd celebrated actual Christmas the day before. Her present from Lumi and the box of paints from Rasmus had been left at the restaurant, so that she hadn't had to carry them home last night, and Rasmus had said he'd bring them today. It was another act of kindness from the man she hadn't thought capable of it when they'd first met.

Now, she paced the living room, waiting, hoping that he'd greet her with another of those delicious kisses. He did, climbing out of the car and pecking her lips gently as he handed over the presents he'd collected from Lumi's.

'I could get used to greeting you like that,' he said, causing a blush to rise up her cheeks.

When they'd deposited the presents inside, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him again, both melting into the moment. Her wild ideas of the night before rushed in, as did her imminent return to England and Isabel's warning, but she kept them firmly at bay. She wouldn't even think about that today. It was Christmas Day after all.

'Are you ready?' he asked as they left the house having stored everything inside.

'I think so.'

'Then let's go.'

They climbed into his car and after a short ride he parked on the outskirts of Levi next to a giant horse and carriage. Violet's mouth hung open as she

stared at the beautiful creatures and the pretty, fairy-tale carriage.

‘What’s this?’ she asked after Rasmus finished speaking to the driver. He held out his hand to help her up and into the seat. ‘Are we … ?’

He nodded as she slipped her hand into his and climbed up the steps. It was lined and cosy and there were blankets to cover their knees too. She took one and wrapped it around her for extra warmth. Rasmus climbed in beside her and as she smiled at him, he leaned down and kissed her once more.

The carriage pulled away and, leaving the town behind, the horses were soon taking them through snowy forests and the white arctic landscape. They passed a lake, its surface calm and serene with ice formed in places. The journey was slow and peaceful and when they pulled up at a rustic wooden lodge, she couldn’t believe there was more to this day than she’d already experienced.

‘Welcome to your wild dining experience,’ the man helping them out of the carriage said.

‘Our … ?’

‘Wild dining. Please take a seat by the fire.’

They were shown to a table between two roaring fires. As she sat, she looked around to see they were surrounded by tall pine trees, nature spilling out around them. The last weeks of polar night meant that there was a little more light on the horizon, the same stripes of colour visible behind the trees. It was only the two of them and she leaned in towards Rasmus.

‘Is no one else coming?’

He shook his head, grinning. ‘No, I called in a favour. Well, Lumi and I both did. We have the place to ourselves.’

‘But—’

‘I wanted to apologise properly for my stupidity over the rep from the development company and thinking you were doing something you weren’t.’

‘You didn’t have to do that. You’ve already apologised.’

‘Yes, but not properly. I wanted to show you that I really mean it by treating you to an experience you’ll never forget.’

Given the kiss they’d shared, he’d already done that.

‘I definitely won’t,’ she replied, staring around again in wonder, the warmth from the flames making her as comfortable as if she’d been inside. The menu was brought out along with some drinks.

‘Now,’ said the waiter. ‘All our ingredients are from the lakes and forests you see around you, sustainably caught and prepared with traditional cooking methods and a lot of love. I’ll give you a moment to have a look and then be back for your order.’

‘Thank you,’ she replied, her smile as wide as it could possibly go.

Rasmus echoed her and pulled her close as they read each delicious-sounding dish and debated what to have. Violet opted for the fresh fish and forest greens while Rasmus had the game. After they’d ordered, they snuggled next to each other, Rasmus’s strong arm around her shoulders holding her tightly.

‘Thank you for this. You really didn’t need to apologise again, but I like that you have. I wouldn’t have done anything like this otherwise,’ she said with a grin.

‘You deserved more than just an *I’m sorry*. Lumi did too. I—’ With his free hand he pushed his fingers under his hat and scratched. ‘I know I see the worst scenarios sometimes. See the worst in people. I don’t mean to, I just do.’

‘We all have things like that. No one is perfect.’

‘I was selfish to go away when I did—’

‘You were studying!’

‘Yes, but … I was so wrapped up in myself and what I was doing, what I thought I needed, that I didn’t call home as much as I should. I was so busy feeling sorry for myself that I didn’t like it.’

‘You said you felt really down, Rasmus. That’s not feeling sorry for yourself or just being a bit lonely, and you shouldn’t minimise those emotions.’

‘Maybe.’ He sat with her words, the firelight shining in his eyes. ‘But I have to take my share of the responsibility too. I didn’t ask them for help or show enough interest in their problems, give them enough support, and by the time I got back and realised what was wrong, it was too late and everything had changed.’

‘Change can be hard,’ she agreed. ‘Even good change.’

Her own thoughts were echoing that sentiment to her. Her sister’s warning dancing around her brain.

‘I think …’ Rasmus began again, faltering. The earnestness in his voice strained her nerves. ‘I think because of that, I’ve thrown myself into building the community here. Protecting it. Getting it back to what I

remember it being before I left, before my family fell apart. It helped me heal, and now my family is too.'

'And is that also why you don't necessarily trust outsiders?' she teased. 'Tourists like me?'

'I think so.' She admired his honesty, even though it felt slightly brutal. 'But I know not all outsiders want to cause harm. I've realised that.'

He looked deep into her eyes, then turned to the flames, watching them dance and sway in the breeze. Violet knew it was her turn to be honest and took a breath before beginning.

'You were right about me too to a certain extent.'

'How so?'

'I've never really had much of a community around me or been part of one. I've got my team at work, and I couldn't ask for anyone better, and I've got my family who I adore, but there isn't that community feel where I live. Not like it is here. And while this one isn't perfect, I can see how you all come together when you need to. How you all look after each other when you need it. They did it for me and they barely know me. I've never felt …' She searched for the right words. Even though her mind had been running the problem through time and time again, it was only now that she spoke honestly to Rasmus that her thoughts and feelings were fully clarifying.

'Never felt what?'

'I don't know …' Isabel's warning about being careful what she said to Rasmus still sat in her mind, but he'd been so honest with her, she felt she owed him that in return. 'I guess I've never felt … tethered to a place before. I've travelled here, there and everywhere for work and I've loved that freedom. I've seen beautiful places, enjoyed cities so hot it felt like I was working in an oven and cold ones too – not like this, but still cold – and I've thought I was the luckiest woman in the world. I've embraced it all, but now, I have this feeling, this niggling inside that I want something more permanent, more meaningful, and nowhere has ever felt like this before.'

'So could you … ?' The hope in his voice was unmistakable, the question clear. Could she stay? But her heart ached as she couldn't shake her sister's warning.

'I don't know,' she admitted. 'My whole life is somewhere else.'

The words hung in the air. She waited for Rasmus to speak but what could he say? She'd be heartbroken to leave, but she had to, and he would

stay. Their lives were in two different places. Rasmus reached out and cupped her face, kissing her tenderly. It was as though there was a silent agreement from both that neither would acknowledge those difficult, painful thoughts. The first course was brought out, and they shuffled far enough apart to be able to eat.

As the meal continued, they spoke of other, less emotional things and Violet felt a little like she was camping, but also like she was experiencing some of the most high-end cooking from an extremely talented chef who belonged in a Michelin-starred restaurant. The food might have been local and traditional, but the flavour combinations and presentation were out of this world. As the night drew on and just when she thought it was about to end, Rasmus began looking around.

'What is it? Is something wrong?'

He smiled, shook his head and stood, holding out his hand. He led her away from the fire and into the quiet night. Suddenly, the most beautiful, vibrantly colourful dancing lights lit up the sky.

Violet gasped. 'The Northern Lights!'

They stood side by side watching the aurora shimmy in shades of green and pink, twinkling stars visible behind it. It was the most magical, incredible wonder of nature she had ever seen and as Rasmus wrapped his arm around her waist, a moment so special she knew she would never forget it. He kissed the top of her head and she turned, unable to resist kissing him properly for bringing her to this incredible sight. The lights shimmied and changed colour from light to dark and back again, and Violet felt the urge to paint it, her fingers twitching then and there.

She took out her phone and took several photographs though she knew they wouldn't be able to capture the incredible significance of this moment or its true beauty. Grandma Louisa would have loved to have seen this.

'It's beautiful, isn't it?' Rasmus said, his cheek resting on the top of her head.

'Amazing. How many times have you seen it?'

'Too many to count, but I never get tired of it. It is a wonder of nature.'

'It is.'

They stood in silence and tears welled in her eyes at just how amazing it was, knowing that no matter how much she might romanticise life, nothing would ever be as special as this moment. She curled in closer to Rasmus, wrapping her arms around him, and he held her tight. Leaving him behind

was going to break her heart but when they'd had so many fairy-tale perfect moments, she wasn't sure she could trust herself to see fact from fiction and until she could, she couldn't risk hurting him further. Their quiet understanding that she would leave as planned and their fledgling relationship would end was better than promising something she later regretted, even if it was tearing her heart in two.

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Chapter 23

Violet woke the next day with no plans to see Rasmus, as he had some repairs to carry out on one of his lodges and some guests arriving in another. Her emotions were still rocked by the evening they'd spent, her mind and heart battling each other.

They'd taken the horse-drawn carriage back to Levi and from there Rasmus had driven her home. They'd kissed once more on the porch under the moonlight, a kiss that felt final, like an ending, and in spite of that, or maybe because of it, she'd been sorely tempted to ask him inside, but she hadn't. It was now sort of acknowledged that their time together was going to be so short they had to make the most of it, but there were limits. Spending the night together felt like giving over a bigger piece of themselves than either felt able to give. She had to protect her heart and so did he. It was going to be hard enough when she left in a week's time.

Her new painting supplies sat temptingly in the lodge's cosy living room, and she knew exactly what she wanted to spend the day doing. Painting.

Violet stood from the table, where she'd been staring into a cup of tea and ruminating, and strode towards her canvases and easel. She opened the huge box of paints Rasmus had gifted to her, her fingers itching to grab a brush and get started. She thought of how to approach the painting, using the sketching first technique her grandmother had taught her, or painting as she wished, as she'd done that time at the forest. Ritva's words bounced around her head too. *Be brave. Paint from the heart*. But how?

For a long while she stood staring at the blank canvas, her grandma's voice huffing at her to just get started, until she couldn't take it anymore, picked up a brush and simply began dabbing colour onto the canvas. Before she'd even really started, when the splotches of green paint looked like a child's first attempt, doubt shouted in her ears telling her to stop. Thankfully, Violet had always been more stubborn than was good for her, so she took out her phone, found her favourite Beyoncé playlist and began again, refusing to stop until she'd applied the first coat of colour. She had a

vision, a feeling of where the paint should go and she had to trust the process.

With a few breaks to stretch out her hands and back, it wasn't long before she had to leave the canvas to dry. That doubting voice still told her it was rubbish and it wasn't going to work out but, deep down, she had a feeling Grandma Louisa would have been proud of her and she already knew what her next steps where – where the next colours should go. She was excited to get started.

When her phone rang, cutting off Beyoncé mid belt, she was surprised to see it was Archie.

'Hey, Archie, what's up? It's Boxing Day. You're not working, are you?'

'Not officially, no.'

'Archie!' she scolded gently.

'I know. I know. But I wanted to call. So, I've been digging into that development company like you asked, and … well, it's not good.'

She placed her brush down and began pacing. 'What do you mean it's not good?'

'So, they have another resort, one they built a few years ago in a different part of Lapland, and they're currently under investigation for breaking several Finnish laws regarding the protection of habitats. From what I've gathered, they make all these promises when it comes to protecting the animals and caring for them, but they don't deliver.'

Maybe that was why they'd been more cautious this time.

'There's even been a hushed-up scandal involving the displacement of nesting birds, which they were told to leave alone. A lot of that information is confidential or in the legal system so I can't get much but, basically, I don't think they're to be trusted. So that offer they made you, well …'

'Go ahead, Archie,' Violet reassured him. She was pretty sure his thoughts were an echo of her own.

'Well … I don't think we'd want to be associated with them anyway. In fact, it could damage our reputation.'

She loved that he felt such a part of her company he was saying *our*. It was exactly the type of atmosphere she'd always wanted to create at work.

'You're exactly right,' she agreed. 'Please tell me, though, you haven't been working on this over Christmas, have you?'

'I haven't – I promise. In fact, my girlfriend and I had our first Christmas together this year. She's gone to see her parents today and I just thought I'd

pass this on in case it helps.’

‘It does. It definitely does. Can you send me everything you’ve got so I can read it in detail later?’

‘Of course. Have a good one.’

‘You too. Oh, and Archie?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Take the rest of today and tomorrow off, please.’

‘I really haven’t been working that much—’

‘Archie!’

He chuckled. ‘All right. I will.’

Violet sat back against the sofa, on the blanket she’d laid out to ensure she didn’t get any paint on the seats and tapped her phone against her lips. So this was interesting information. Disturbing, but interesting. Her first instinct was to call Rasmus and let him know, but she decided to wait until she’d read all of Archie’s information later. She wasn’t going to repeat the mistake she’d made when meeting the rep. She would definitely tell him, but she wanted to have as many details to hand as possible so they could form a plan together. They’d have to be careful how they shared this information given that the developer’s rep at the meeting had already accused them of coercion, which was highly dramatic in her opinion. Still, she didn’t want to risk a defamation lawsuit.

Violet sat ruminating while she drank some tea and then gently touched her painting with her fingertips. The first swathe of paint had dried enough that she could begin the second coat, building up the colours and textures. She worked for the rest of the day until, as the sky grew completely dark outside, she collapsed, mentally exhausted but extremely pleased with the piece she’d created. She’d done exactly what Ritva had wanted and painted from her heart. She’d been brave, not allowing her own inner critic or thoughts of others’ expectations to hold her back, and tomorrow, she’d take it to Ritva and see what she thought.

⁂

Violet’s burst of confidence began to ebb the nearer Ritva’s shop she got. She carried the large painting wrapped in carrier bags she’d found in a cupboard inside the shop rather than the gallery as she’d already tried there. Thankfully, while the painting was bulky and awkward, it wasn’t heavy, but

she was seriously hoping Ritva did want it because she didn't particularly fancy carrying it all the way back home if she could help it. She hadn't yet figured out how she was going to get the other pieces she'd painted back to England and was going to have to arrange shipping them, because she couldn't bear the thought of leaving them behind.

'*Hei*,' Violet called out as she walked in. Ritva wasn't behind the counter and Violet hoped she was somewhere in the store, and she hadn't wasted her time and energy.

Ritva emerged a second later from stacking greetings cards down one of the aisles. She smiled more warmly this time and Violet had the distinct impression the older woman was getting used to her. 'Hello. Are you here for more supplies?' Ritva's eyes dropped to the large parcel by Violet's side. 'Or have you brought me a painting?'

'I have.' She began to unwrap it. 'You said I should paint from the heart and while I know the subject matter isn't the most unique, I did as you suggested and I wanted to see what you thought.' Her stomach began to fizz with nervous anticipation as she took off the last bag and unveiled it. 'Do you think it's … better?'

'Lift it up,' Ritva commanded in her usual grumpy way and Violet did as she was told, resting one end of it on the counter next to the till.

She stepped forwards, peering at the canvas, examining every brushstroke, every hue of colour. Violet had forgotten how to breathe or she was subconsciously holding her breath for some unknown reason. Most likely because there was no telling from Ritva's expression what she was thinking. The woman was always frowning a little, so it was hard to tell if she liked it, hated it, or was entirely indifferent to it.

'It's called *Aurora*,' she said. 'Not the most imaginative title, I know, but when I saw them … well, it was the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen and the best night too.'

At this, Ritva glanced at her and a blush warmed Violet's cheeks. Did she know she and Rasmus had kissed? Ritva had gone back to studying the painting though Violet was sure her eyes darted as much to her as they did over the canvas. When she couldn't take it anymore, Violet asked, 'So?'

She straightened up. 'Yes, I like it. I can see your spirit in the work.'

Violet wasn't sure what that meant but glowed with the compliment anyway and jumped forward to hug her. 'Thank you!'

‘Yes, yes, yes.’ Ritva’s tone was softer than normal and Violet could hear the smile on the older woman’s face as she let her go. ‘We should display it at the New Year’s event. I’ve picked some other works for the fair and Lumi suggested I hang some in the function room at the restaurant too. This will work well in both spaces. It’s bold.’ She caught Violet’s eye. ‘It is you. And I like it.’

‘Thank you!’ Violet said again, breathlessly. This felt like a huge achievement.

While she loved her job and was generally happy when she was working, she’d long neglected this artistic side of herself. She was one step closer to being a real artist, like her grandmother. This holiday, spending the time exploring something she’d always loved so much, had been more rewarding than she’d ever imagined. She’d have to make sure she carried on back home.

The door opened and Violet’s instinct was to cover the picture again, but when she heard Rasmus’s voice, she couldn’t help but smile.

‘Wow!’ he said, seeing the piece. ‘That’s amazing. Is that what you spent yesterday doing?’

She nodded, taking in his pale hair, the broadness of his chest and the strength of his smile, wishing once more that everything was different. That their relationship was at the beginning, not the end.

‘Time well spent,’ he said, turning his attention to Ritva.

‘Ritva’s going to display it at the fair.’

‘That’s wonderful.’ Though he edged forwards as if to put his arm around her, he seemed to catch himself and stay where he was. ‘If you’re not busy, shall we grab a drink at Lumi’s?’

‘Yes, I’d like that. I’ve actually got something I want to talk to you about.’

After saying their goodbyes to Ritva and leaving the painting as Ritva had said she would store it at the gallery to save Violet carrying it back home, they made their way to Lumi’s. Rasmus opened the door for her, and they settled at their usual table for a coffee.

They undid their coats and stuffed them on an empty chair as Lumi brought over their drinks.

‘Please tell me you two also had headaches on Christmas Day from the champagne?’

‘Not me,’ Violet teased.

‘Me either,’ Rasmus said. ‘I think you did because you drank it all.’

‘Ha ha.’ He set their cups down along with some gingerbread cookies.

‘Can you sit down too?’ Violet asked Lumi. ‘I have some news for you both. Something important.’

He slid into the seat next to her. ‘What is it? Is it good news?’ He looked expectantly between Rasmus and Violet and her cheeks grew hot.

Her stomach dropped and her eyes shot to Rasmus, but he didn’t meet her gaze and instead stared down at his coffee, watching the dark liquid swirl as he stirred it. Thoughtless. A burst of frustration tightened her jaw. She really liked Lumi, but she could also quite happily murder him sometimes.

She quickly carried on, hoping the weird atmosphere he’d created would fade as soon as she revealed what she knew. ‘So Archie, a member of my team, was looking into the development company, and he’s found some quite interesting stuff.’

She outlined everything she knew from their phone call and from what she’d read the night before. Rasmus’s expression darkened while Lumi’s eyes grew wider with every fact she revealed.

‘So we need to decide what we do with this information.’

‘We have to tell people,’ Rasmus said, leaning forwards. ‘Everyone.’

‘But when? And how?’ Violet asked. ‘None of us want to be slapped with a defamation suit and I really think they’d do it, so we’re going to have to be very careful with exactly what we say.’

‘But I know this will definitely change some people’s minds. We can’t just sit on it.’

Lumi and Violet both nodded, then all three fell into silent contemplation. After a few minutes where Violet couldn’t resist the gingerbread cookies any longer and ate two, Lumi suddenly straightened, drawing both her and Rasmus’s attention.

‘You’re both right. We do need to be careful, but … I have an idea. It’s a little out there. A little unusual—’

‘Just like you,’ Rasmus joked and Lumi grinned as he ran a hand down his latest exquisitely patterned shirt.

‘Just like me. Like Violet said, we need to be careful what we say but what if we raise awareness of what they’re doing using their own words, or the words of others?’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Violet, liking the start of this idea, but she needed to know where it was going before she could form a full opinion.

‘What if we print out the articles and reports and headlines of these … accusations and put them up around the fair and at the party?’

‘Lumi!’ She leaned over and kissed his cheek. ‘That’s a brilliant idea. There are lots of statements and responses in here from them. Lots of headlines and articles too. Using their own words against them is so clever, and it’ll highlight that while they say they care, they really don’t.’

‘Even Olavi might be swayed by this,’ Rasmus said. ‘He’s a businessman. He won’t want his reputation tied to something like this. Lumi—’ He raised his coffee cup. ‘You’re a genius.’

‘You absolutely are,’ Violet echoed.

Lumi pressed a hand to his chest. ‘Yes, thank you. I know.’

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Chapter 24

With only days to go until the event, from that moment on, everything was focused on the New Year's Eve fair and party. Violet and Rasmus worked together as much as possible, stealing every second together they could. Though there were no kisses, the silent recognition that to be more affectionate, even though both were crying out for it, would only end in disaster, in heartbreak for them both, was still present in both their minds.

There were times when his own business called and he had to deal with new guests arriving at his lodges or small emergencies his customers were having, and when he left she missed him more than ever. She wasn't sure if it was because her time left in Lapland could now be counted in hours or because she had actually, completely fallen for this passionate, energetic, kind man and was pretending she hadn't to minimise the pain that it would soon all be over. Whatever it was, her feelings were deep and overwhelming, and it was only staying busy and focusing on the event that kept them at bay.

The time flew by and New Year's Eve arrived in a scattering of snowflakes and with a pale sky that was the most beautiful shade Violet had ever seen. Polar night would be ending soon, and signs of it were noticeable in the slightly longer, brighter hours of daylight. Her flight home was on New Year's Day and so far, she and Rasmus had both ignored the fact completely and today, she had too much to think about to let her mind wander.

Running events was a job she loved and one she was good at, but this one seemed extra important. It was her parting gift to Rasmus, to Lumi, Monika and to the town that had welcomed her.

As usual, Rasmus picked her up from the lodge to drive her into Levi.

'Are you excited?' he asked as she climbed in.

'Excited and nervous. I always am. I will be until the party is underway this evening and I know for sure nothing is going to go wrong.'

'Nothing will go wrong and even if it does, we'll deal with it together.'

Her hand was resting on her leg, and he reached out and entwined his fingers with her own. He squeezed, then retook the wheel. For one of the final times she took in the scenery as they drove into town, snapping more photos than usual so she wouldn't forget any part of the place. They passed the arts centre en route to the hotel where they were starting the day, and Violet felt a pang of regret that they'd pulled out.

'I wish they hadn't changed their minds,' she said, watching the building pass by. 'It would have been the perfect place to showcase everything this amazing town has to offer. Still, it's their loss.'

'It is. And rumours are starting to circulate about them cancelling us and taking a big donation from the developers. No one is blaming Helmi, but they are blaming the people higher than her.'

'I wonder what they'll say when they see what we have planned?'

'They'll be embarrassed for sure. But if we can fight off these developers then hopefully we can all start to heal and move on. This community needs to come back together again.'

'It will,' she reassured him. 'With people like you, Monika and Lumi, it definitely will, and if we don't succeed and people still sell, then we know we've done everything we can.'

'I will keep campaigning to ensure they don't ruin local habitats or do what they've done elsewhere. My fight will not be over.'

She grinned. 'I know it won't. And—' She hesitated, unsure whether to say the thought that came into her head but committing to it anyway. 'I – I'll always help however I can, even when I'm not here. If you need events advice or just want to talk then you should call me.'

'Thanks.' His voice was gruff and she could tell it was as full of emotion as hers was. She'd struggled to keep her tone light, but it had wavered and scratched in her throat.

As she watched the town's golden lights fall onto the snowy pavements, she couldn't help but feel that maybe she wasn't idealising this time. Or even if she was, it didn't mean that she was wrong, that she couldn't trust herself. But once more doubt crept in and shut those ideas down. Another job offer, at least a request for a meeting that might lead to one had come in overnight and it had been a stark reminder that her life was elsewhere.

After a moment's heavy silence, sadness seemed to fill the car like a rain cloud. She watched the windscreen wipers clearing the tiny, delicate

snowflakes that were quietly pattering down. Then she *had* to speak, to say something that would shift the atmosphere back to how it had been before.

‘So there’s lots to do once we get there. We need to set up tables for everyone and ensure the vendors have what they need and then—’

‘Coffee,’ Rasmus said with a grin. ‘We will need coffee.’

‘Coffee might need to be first,’ she agreed with a smile and a rush of relief.

‘Then I’ll go and get coffee while you get started.’

‘That sounds like an excellent plan.’

They parked and went into the hotel, meeting the events manager and being shown to the room that was theirs for the day.

‘Please remember there’s an event in here this evening, so we’ll need you out promptly.’

‘No problem at all,’ Violet replied. ‘We’ll make sure everything is clean and tidy before we go.’

‘Thank you. I wish you luck with your event.’ He pressed his hands together and left.

Rasmus looked around the bare, empty space. ‘We definitely need coffee first.’

‘Agreed. And—’

‘Cookies. I know. I’ll bring lots to keep us going.’

She grinned as he walked away.

As she stared around the room, thinking of everything that had happened that holiday, all they’d achieved, the unexpected friends she’d made, the sense of being part of something more than herself, she ignored the intense feeling that a part of her heart would be left behind, a part that belonged here, with Rasmus. Isabel’s advice still plagued her, and Violet ignored it as she looked around the room, her hands on her hips.

Over the last few days, she’d spent time thinking about where each of the local vendors would go and had drawn a tentative plan. Now she needed to set out chairs and tables for them. She’d also organised use of the hotel’s own display boards, and had printouts from all the articles Archie had found in her bag, waiting to be pinned up. Excitement and worry filled her in equal measure, but she knew this was the right thing to do: a last attempt to convince people not to sell and convince those who had agreed to anything to use any get-out clauses they had available. She just hoped it would work.

Time to get started.

By the time Rasmus had returned with coffees and cookies, she'd sorted out about half the room but still had everything to pin up.

'You have a break and drink your coffee while I carry on,' he said.

She did as she was told, perching on one of the chairs while enjoying a delicious gingerbread biscuit. But Violet had never been one to sit around while there was work to be done, so she was soon up again and placing the display boards around the room.

Before long, the local shop owners began to arrive. Violet was welcoming them and directing them to their spots when Rasmus's phone beeped.

'It's Ritva. She's out front with her paintings. I'd better go and help her or she'll tell me off.'

Violet grinned. She was excited to see her painting but would have to focus on that later. The room was filling quickly, that sense of community palpable as chatter and excitement built. She spotted Karola, the toy maker from Rovaniemi, and showed her to her table.

'This is amazing,' Karola replied, looking around the space. 'And such a great idea. Thank you for organising it.'

'You're so welcome! And thank you for coming. I think a few more vendors from Rovaniemi are also here thanks to you.'

'I'm glad I could help.'

Violet had just finished showing her to her table, when Charle arrived with bags of goods from his home décor shop. 'Where are you putting me, Violet?'

'Just over here. What have you brought with you?' She peeked a look into one of his bags as he placed it on his table. There were so many beautiful little objects she wanted for her own home and to give to her family and friends. 'I'm going to have to stop myself buying everything from you before the visitors arrive.'

Charle grinned. 'If there's anything left I will give you first refusal.'

The snowmobile owner had a stall, thankfully not with a full-blown snowmobile on display, though he had travelled in one and it was now parked outside of the hotel in case anyone wanted to see it. But Violet showed him to his table where he pulled out lots of leaflets and his laptop to take any bookings.

Rasmus appeared at her shoulder with another coffee. 'Here. You should take another break. You haven't stopped yet.'

‘I will once we’re open. I still need to pin everything on the display boards, and we start in ten minutes. Normally, I’d do all this the night before.’

‘Violet,’ he said, placing his hands on her shoulders and turning her to face him. He looked into her eyes and her heart skipped. ‘This is amazing. All of this. None of it would have happened without you. I couldn’t have done anything like this.’

Their gazes locked for a moment, and more than ever she wanted to kiss him again, but then another shop owner arrived needing directions, and after a final glance, Rasmus let his hands drop. ‘Drink your coffee. I’ll deal with this.’

She took a sip, but wasn’t quite ready to stop yet, and went back to her bag, pulling out the information on the development company. As she began to pin up headlines, articles, reports, statements and anything else they’d been able to find, the people near them couldn’t help reading too. Their gasps and outraged conversations were satisfying, and she found Rasmus to tell him.

‘It’s working!’ she said excitedly. ‘You should follow up with them all individually over the next week or so.’

‘I’ll make time to chat to them now too. Let them know what they can do to make their feelings known.’

‘Yes! Go! I’ll keep pinning everything up and check everyone has everything they need.’

They went in opposite directions, coming back together half an hour later.

‘What did they say?’ asked Violet, taking another sip of cooling coffee.

‘They had no idea. As we thought, the developers have been charming everyone, promising jobs, secure futures, a better economy, but they haven’t mentioned any of this—’ He pointed at the displays. ‘I must thank Lumi. This is working better than anything I’ve ever done.’

‘Is he coming?’

‘Later. After lunch. He needs to work, but he’s directing as many tourists as he can to us, as are the other shops and towns like Rovaniemi, and of course, he needs to prepare for the party tonight and his restaurant is fully booked.’

‘He’ll need a drink tonight. But right now, we better get officially open, hadn’t we?’

The room had two sets of double doors, and they each went to one. With a quick glance, and wide smiles, they pushed them open at the same time, happy to see waiting tourists curious to find out what all the fuss was about and locals eager to show support.

‘Welcome to the Levi New Year’s Eve Fair,’ she shouted and Rasmus copied her in Finnish.

The room filled with excited chatter and Violet felt that she could finally relax. She grabbed her coffee, which was thankfully still mostly warm, and another cookie from the box Rasmus had brought, and found a quiet space to enjoy them.

‘Can I join you?’ Rasmus asked.

‘For a minute,’ she said, then seeing his smile fade, she added, ‘you need to circulate. This is for you—’ The words caught in her throat as his eyes widened, the true meaning there for him to see. It took a second for her to calm her heart and she swallowed down the lump in her throat. ‘You should be encouraging people to email their objections to the development company and your local government, getting people on board with the Sustainable Tourism Fund. I’ll give you five minutes then you have to go.’

Rasmus sat beside her, their thighs touching, sending heat into her body that turned quickly into longing. The way he looked at her with a mixture of sadness and happiness broke her heart. He opened his mouth to speak but clearly couldn’t find the words either, so after a moment together, he said: ‘I’ll get back to—’ And stepped into the crowd.

A second later he was swallowed up by the noise and the number of people in the room. Violet watched him go, noticing her painting on display on an easel by Ritva’s table. The moment was bittersweet. She was proud of all she’d achieved here – of the way she was helping the community to fight and hopefully to heal, of the way she’d made one of her own dreams come true, seeing her work on display – and tomorrow she’d be leaving it all behind. Tears welled in her eyes. She turned her head and focused on the ceiling, letting her misty vision clear before she looked back at the room, smiling at the tourists who passed.

The rest of the day flew by in a blur with Monika, Essi and Niina all stopping by, plus other townspeople she’d come to know. When it was time to pack up, everyone seemed reluctant to leave. Tourists were still arriving wanting to look around and locals were eager to talk to her or Rasmus about everything they’d found out about the development company. Violet

checked the time on her phone with increasing concern. They'd be needing the room back soon and she'd promised it would be spotless. As she surveyed the random bits of rubbish that had been inadvertently dropped, the displays she needed to clear and re-hang at Lumi's because they wanted the evening crowd to see them too, her stomach clenched unpleasantly and a heavy ball began to form. She also needed to get changed and ready for the party because there was no way she was going to a glitzy New Year's Eve event dressed as she was now. She went to find Rasmus and waited by his side until he'd finished his conversation.

As she drew him nearer, her hand on his bicep, a thrill tingled her body at the muscle under her grip. 'We really need to get moving and everyone leaving. Packing up is normally quicker than setting up but there's still a lot to do.'

'Okay, no problem. I'll go around the tables and tell everyone, and you start packing up the displays. Is that okay?'

'Perfect.'

People finally began to leave, and Charle came over holding out a small, beautifully crafted ceramic reindeer.

'Here. This is for you.'

'For me?' she echoed, a huge smile on her face.

'Yes. Most tourists come for their holidays, ski, eat, sleep and leave again. You … you've helped do so much for the town and we're all grateful. So please, take this with our thanks. It is from everyone here.'

Violet stared open-mouthed as she took it from him. 'I – I don't know what to say. Thank you.' She hugged him and he patted her back before leaving.

She placed it in her bag and as she straightened up she was surprised to see Ritva walking towards her. She jabbed her finger at her as she got close enough to speak.

'Violet, I need to talk to you.'

'Is everything okay, Ritva?'

'Fine, fine, but someone wants to buy your painting.'

'Someone … ? *My* painting? Like a real artist?'

'You're already a real artist. It's inside you.'

Violet's whole body seemed to stop in shock. Was she finally? If Ritva – an artist and gallery owner herself – was saying it, then could she really believe it? She could hear her grandma agreeing. Maybe even tutting that

Violet had never believed her when she'd said it, but Violet had been a child then and it had seemed like nothing more than a kindly platitude.

Ritva cocked her head and Violet came back to the moment. 'Do you want to sell it?'

'Umm … I don't know. Do you know who wants to buy it?'

Perhaps the hotel fancied it for their lobby or something. Whoever it was, she couldn't quite believe her work was good enough that someone would want to spend money on it. On something she'd created.

'I'm not sure I should say. They asked me not to.'

'Oh. That's a bit weird, isn't it? It's not the development company, is it?' She hadn't seen them there but there had been a lot of people and there were obviously more than just the two representatives she'd met. 'As much as I'd love to sell a painting to call myself a real artist, I can't sell to them, Ritva; it goes against everything I've done here. I—'

'It's Rasmus, you fool!' Ritva rolled her eyes, her voice a mixture of frustration and teasing.

'Rasmus?' Violet gaped.

Ritva's face instantly softened. She definitely enjoyed playing the grumpy old lady even though she wasn't actually that bad.

'He doesn't need to buy it. He can have it. I – I was thinking of giving it to him anyway.'

'Then maybe you should tell him? I'll take it back to the gallery with me and he can collect it from there.'

She turned and walked away, leaving Violet stunned and frozen to the spot. That he wanted something to remember her by was almost too much to think about. Thankfully, someone called her name, and she turned to see the event manager approaching with a reminder that they really needed the room back for their own event that evening and Violet had no choice but to get moving again.

Before long, the space was empty and tiredness swept over Violet from the relief. The fair had been a success. They began to move the tables and chairs, restacking them, and she even found a broom to sweep the floor, though she didn't have anywhere to put it so left it in a pile in the corner of the room ready to tell the events coordinator.

'There,' she said, rubbing her hands together. 'All done. And it went well, I think.'

‘It did,’ Rasmus agreed. ‘It felt like everyone was coming together again. Back to how things used to be before the developers started their plans. Most are saying they want to do this every year.’

‘That’s great!’

‘Yes, it is.’ He shuffled slightly, hesitating. ‘Would you – would you or your company help us again next year, maybe?’

‘Of course.’ She pushed all the enthusiasm she could muster into her voice, hoping it would drown out the pain. ‘I’d love to.’

‘Good.’

The silence of the room wrapped around them and neither seemed to know what to do. Violet’s heart rate had sped up and was pounding in her ears. She wanted to kiss his face off every time she looked at him, but tomorrow she’d leave and never see him again. She thought about mentioning the painting he wanted but decided to wait until later. It would be part of her final goodbye to him as the clock struck midnight and the new year began.

‘Right,’ she said, when the pounding in her ears became too deafening. ‘We need to set up for this party, and I need to get changed. We better get moving.’

‘Of course.’

Rasmus gestured for her to lead the way as they prepared for the final part of the event. Violet grabbed her bag, her fingers shaking. She still needed to pack for her flight, which was less than twenty-four hours away, and as her tangled emotions knotted tighter and almost became too much for her to hold back, she bit the inside of her cheek, forcing herself not to cry. Putting one foot in front of the other, she focused on moving forwards even though the further forwards she moved, the further away from Rasmus it took her.

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Chapter 25

It didn't take long to set up the restaurant ready for the evening party. Lumi had already welcomed the DJ, and he was now behind his decks with slightly cheesy flashing lights. Secretly, she loved them and was definitely planning on dancing the night away later, ignoring the fact that she'd be heading off to catch her flight home in the morning with barely any sleep. It was a small price to pay for eking out every last second of this night.

Now, she needed to get changed because she couldn't party in the smart, but boring clothes she'd worn for the fair. She'd packed a beautiful dress, just in case she had a need for it and Lumi had offered the use of his office on the floor above to glam herself up. He was looking gorgeous in a deep purple shirt with a slightly Seventies swirling pattern and a pink tie. On anyone else it might have looked too much, but it suited him.

Violet headed upstairs with her bag and dress. She had just freshened up and put it on when there was a knock at the door and giggles sounded from the other side. Violet opened it to find Monika, Essi and Niina all holding a glass of prosecco each with an extra one for her.

'We came to get ready with you!' Monika declared, handing over the extra glass. 'Essi has brought make-up too. We didn't know if you would bring your own as you had enough to think about.'

Essi waved a make-up bag and Violet giggled. 'You guys had better come in.'

The three women piled into the room and Essi dived into her bag, handing over powder and mascara, for Violet to use. She had brought a few bits of her own, but Essi seemed to have a whole make-up counter with her and Violet was grateful for the extras. After refreshing her curls and spritzing perfume over her fitted red dress, she slipped her feet into her heels and ran her hands down either side of her hips, smoothing the fabric of her dress and feeling good. If this was to be her last night here, with Rasmus, she'd at least be going out with a bang.

'You look amazing,' Monika said and Violet beamed.

‘You guys do too! Very glam.’

‘We don’t often get the chance,’ Niina added. ‘So it’s nice to go over the top when we can.’

‘I’m so sorry you’re leaving tomorrow,’ Monika said, and Violet bit back the sadness swirling in her stomach, upsetting the prosecco she’d enjoyed only a few moments before.

‘Me too. I wish I could stay.’ She had more words but the rest of the sentence fell away. Monika gripped her hand giving it a squeeze. Did she have an inkling about her and Rasmus?

‘I hate it when holidays are so good you don’t want to go home.’ Essi sipped her drink, her words resonating with Violet.

After all, a holiday was what this had been, nothing more. While her fervent imagination could pretend it had been something bigger, something more significant, that was all she’d been doing … imagining it. She stared out of the office window for a second.

The night sky was as black as coal, rich and velvety-looking, and among the clouds, the stars sparkled in palest gold. The streets were still busy with people heading out for dinner celebrations and delicate, lacy snowflakes drifted down onto their heads, dancing in the beams of light from the streetlamps. She was going to miss Levi so much, in a way she had never missed anywhere before, but it would fade, as all holiday experiences did. Becoming nothing more than a wonderful memory and a story to recount.

‘Are you okay?’ asked Monika and Violet turned, plastering on a smile.

‘Just a bit tired, but I’ll get my second wind soon.’

‘She needs more prosecco,’ declared Essi and Violet agreed.

‘I definitely do. Let’s go and join the party.’

Violet checked her reflection in the window one more time and headed out to make the most of her final night in Lapland.

Slowly, she descended the stairs as the music started. She didn’t want to make her entrance by tripping and falling down, then rolling through the door in a crumpled heap. That would be too embarrassing and not the impression she wanted to leave, especially with Rasmus. She took a deep breath hearing lots of voices as more guests began to arrive, and opened the door.

Her eyes went immediately to the man who’d stolen her heart. He hadn’t seen her come in and was busy talking to Lumi. For some reason, she’d imagined he’d still be in the clothes she always saw him in, the plaid shirt

and jeans, but tonight he was wearing smart trousers and a shirt open at the neck, his strong build emphasised by the tailored clothes. Violet took a deep breath to stop her body from reacting.

The other guests were reading the information on the development company they'd displayed around the walls, and she was pleased to see their reactions, but within seconds her eyes found their way back to Rasmus. This time, as she looked at him, he turned, catching sight of her and his double take sent a fizz down her spine. His eyes skimmed the length of her body in a way that set her pulse racing. They were full of appreciation and desire, and she made her way over to him, as if there was no one else in the room.

They met in the middle and for a second, neither seemed able to speak.

'You look stunning,' Rasmus said, his voice raspy. He took a sip from the small tumbler in his hand. 'Can I get you another drink?'

She nodded, her curls loose and bouncing. 'Yes please. I'd love another prosecco.'

They made their way to the bar, being stopped by locals thanking them for the day and for this brilliant end celebration. She felt Rasmus's hand on her lower back as he guided her through the crowd, the warmth of his fingers sinking through her clothes. She had to stop her mind from imagining more of his touch it felt so good, and she had to press down her desire, and her wish to act on it. Her body was calling out for his hands on her skin, cupping her face, drawing her in for a kiss, and though she was tempted to have a final night with him, again, it felt like giving over any more of herself would risk her heart breaking in a way she might not recover from.

As they passed Ritva, who was chatting away to a neighbour and drinking something that looked and smelled potent, she stopped them.

'This is a wonderful way to end the day. Thank you both.'

Stunned by such a cheerful, un-grumpy hello, Violet was momentarily lost for words. 'Th – thank you, Ritva. I'm so glad you're enjoying yourself.'

Ritva's eyes danced between them both as if secretly asking her if she'd told Rasmus he could have the painting. As she hadn't had a chance yet and was waiting for the right time, she smiled and hurried them on.

Rasmus ordered and passed her the drink, and she took a sip, enjoying the delicate taste and the tingling of the bubbles in her mouth. Violet

realised his collar was slightly askew and without thinking adjusted it. Her hand slid from the collar to his chest and she quickly removed it.

‘You look nice too, by the way,’ she said as his eyes flicked down to her hand. ‘Are you ready to make your speech?’

Rasmus’s blanched and his eyes widened in panic. ‘Speech?’

‘Yes,’ she laughed. ‘You need to tell everyone why we’ve done what we’ve done today and officially launch the Sustainable Tourism Fund, let everyone know what it’s for and how to donate to it if they want to.’

‘I hadn’t thought—’

‘Here—’ She opened her bag and pulled out a piece of paper. ‘I made some notes for you. It’s not a full speech but covers the main points. You need to tell people you’ll be running other events through the year to raise money for the fund, and you’d like their support with it.’

‘Okay.’ He nodded, his eyes skimming the page.

‘Ready then?’

‘What now? You want me to do the speech now?’ He looked like a trapped animal, and she glanced at the clock. It was almost eight so everyone who was coming was probably already there.

‘Yes, I think so. Just grab the mic off the DJ.’

‘Shouldn’t we … I don’t know, wait for a bit longer?’

‘For what?’

‘For anyone else to arrive?’

An overwhelming urge took hold, and she leaned forward and kissed his cheek. ‘It’ll be fine, I promise. I’ll get the mic. You’ll be happier once it’s over with.’

Violet moved away and grabbed the mic from the DJ who lowered the music. She caught Lumi’s gaze, both sharing a teasing look, knowing that Rasmus would hate this, but that there was no one else who could make this speech. It had to be him as he had and would continue to lead the campaign after she’d gone. That pang of sorrow hit her again and she swallowed a sip of her drink to push it down.

Without the music there was only the chatter of the guests and as Rasmus walked into the middle of the room, they quietened. He cleared his throat and held the microphone near his mouth.

‘Umm … hello, everyone, thank you for coming to the fair today and to this gathering this evening.’ He paused as everyone clapped. Lumi cheered and Rasmus shot him a ‘calm down’ look that made both Lumi and Violet

giggle. ‘You know that everything we’ve done is to save our beautiful town, our beautiful landscape, from developers who say they care about it but really don’t, and part of that is launching tonight the Sustainable Tourism Fund. We all know that running a business is not easy. It is very difficult. Times can be hard. Particularly off-season. But if we work together, if we launch the fund, we can help to support each other, so no one has to leave this beautiful place or sell their business unless it is what they want to do.’

Another round of applause circled the room and Violet swelled with pride. She noticed him glance towards Ritva who gave a nod of recognition and Violet wondered what that could be about, but whatever it was, the community that had been so torn at the beginning of her stay was united here in this room and she and Rasmus had helped make that happen.

‘There is someone I need to thank for making all this possible. Truly. I wouldn’t have been able to do it without her. I knew nothing about organising events and she turned up and within days had achieved what would have taken me months. Please, Violet—’ He turned to her, and where earlier his eyes had been full of appreciation and desire they were now full of something much more powerful, something she could only describe as love. ‘Come, and let us all show our thanks.’

With a loud whoop in her right ear from Lumi, she handed him her drink and made her way towards Rasmus in the centre of the room. Having run lots of events, she had at times been thanked and called onto the stage to receive gifts from the people she was working with, even make the occasional speech, but this … this was different. It was the look in their eyes and the genuine happiness on their faces that brought an unexpected tear to her eye.

Rasmus kissed her cheek as she met him, and the feel of his soft lips on her skin sent her pulse throbbing in her veins. She took the mic and grinned, whispering, ‘I’ll get you for this.’

‘No, you won’t. We owe you this. Take our thanks.’

‘Thank you, everyone,’ she said confidently, though with Rasmus’s eyes on her she felt anything but. ‘I feel privileged to have been a part of this and I really am grateful to you all for making me feel so welcomed and so …’ The huge lump that had formed in her throat as she’d started grew so big she could barely push the words past it. ‘So a part of this town. It really is the most special place on earth, and I hope the fund will help protect it for many years to come.’

‘What you’re saying is not true,’ came a voice from the crowd and Violet’s stomach dropped to the floor.

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Chapter 26

In a second, Rasmus was beside her, his hand again on the small of her back. The crowd began to part and Aro stepped forwards, followed a few steps behind by Mikael, the man who'd met her when Aro couldn't. There was also someone else behind them and from the whispers and dirty looks he was getting she recognised Olavi, the owner of the lodge she was staying in. Well, if he kicked her out at least she'd be on her way home and she could always go straight from here to the airport if she had to.

Aro stepped into the crowd and pretty much ripped the microphone from her hand. Rasmus took a step forward, but she held on to his arm. It would look worse to start a fight, better to stand their ground with quiet calm.

Aro cleared his throat. 'These two would have you believe that we are ignoring the law or we do not care about this beautiful place. That is a lie. We do care and we are doing everything within the bounds of the law. They —'

As he pointed a finger at her, Violet's blood boiled and she grabbed the mic straight back. 'That's simply not true though, is it? As all this demonstrates.' She gestured around the room and the display boards – all the information Archie had found. 'You can say what you like, but everyone here has seen this. Everyone here has read it. They know the real situation. That you talk a good game but as soon as you have the land you ignore everything. You damage the local environment; you don't even always deliver the jobs you promise.'

'Be careful what you say,' Aro said through gritted teeth. 'We wouldn't want you to end up on the wrong side of a lawsuit.'

'Do you know what? I'd risk it for this place. For these people.'

The words stunned her as much as everyone in the room and while silence fell, the smiles from those around her urged her on. Rasmus's hand went from the small of her back to the side of her waist as he edged nearer, holding her closer, and as she glanced at him, she was aware of the pride and awe in his face.

‘This is one of the most special places on earth,’ she continued, buoyed by his protective arm holding her tight. ‘And everything you say is a lie.’

‘That is not true and if you continue to accuse us of such things, then we will have no choice but to take the appropriate legal action to stop you.’

Violet was ready to continue the fight, all possible consequences ignored, but Rasmus took the microphone from her gently. Instead of speaking into it, he let it hang by his leg though everyone could still hear him. ‘You may leave now. This is a private event.’

‘I have a ticket,’ he said smugly.

Lumi stepped forwards. ‘You’re banned from my restaurant. All of you.’ Mikael and Olavi, both of whom had begun to read one of the nearby display boards, glanced at him, surprise clear on their faces.

‘What is this?’ Olavi said, pointing to a huge headline in Finnish that Violet knew read: *Developers Accused of Ignoring Animal Welfare Act*. He turned to Aro. ‘Is this true?’

Suddenly he was moving around the room, skimming the different articles. It was Ritva who replied to him while Aro stood looking like his world was falling apart.

‘I told you all this, Olavi. But you didn’t believe me.’ He spun to face her, his eyes wide and something like regret passing over his face. Ritva didn’t react and her voice remained calm and as terse as it always was. ‘Perhaps you will believe me now.’

He glared at Aro, then Mikael, who was so clearly out of his depth he didn’t know what to do.

Lumi stepped closer to Aro. ‘I think it is time that you left. Now get out of my restaurant.’

As they couldn’t argue with him, they scuttled out, back into the cold and snow. It was hard to tell who received the most withering looks, especially from Monika, Essi and Niina who were glowering terrifyingly. Olavi, as the local who’d betrayed them, ducked his head, and Aro and Mikael as the representatives of the hated developers kept their eyes on the floor. Violet’s heart was beating at a million miles an hour, her hands shaking where her body was flooded with adrenalin.

‘Let’s get this party back on track,’ Lumi said, his words echoing around the space as he signalled to the DJ to restart the music. ‘I think we can say that thanks to Rasmus and Violet they’re definitely running scared. Now we must keep up the pressure.’

Conversation erupted around them and the deep bass and pulsing rhythm of the music flooded into Violet's ears. She looked at Rasmus who seemed to read her mind.

'Shall we get some air?'

She nodded and he led them out of the room and out the back of the restaurant. He'd grabbed his coat on the way and seeing that she had left hers upstairs he took Lumi's too, placing it around her shoulders.

The night was quiet and still, and as she took deep breaths of the cold night air, her heart rate began to slow.

'Well, I wasn't expecting them to show up this evening. To be honest, I'd thought if they were going to come to anything it would have been the fair and when I didn't see them there I thought we'd gotten away with it. That was all very dramatic.'

'You were wonderful,' Rasmus said, and her gaze shot towards him. 'Like a mother bear protecting her young. Fierce. Beautiful.'

His words slowly filtered into her brain and she turned towards him. Suddenly his arms were around her, pulling her close and his mouth was on hers. His lips were gentle but firm, his hold tight with need. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. Her mind focused only on the moment, on the feel of his strong body against hers and the way her own responded, need for him pulsing in every cell of her being.

Violet had no idea how long they kissed for and would happily have stayed like that for the rest of the evening until the sound of a door and the word 'Oh!' broke them apart.

Rasmus and Violet turned to see Ritva, looking shocked and a little embarrassed for what Violet suspected was the first time in her life. She waved her hand as she turned on the spot and retreated back through the door calling over her shoulder, 'I'm sorry! I didn't realise you two were actually …'

Rasmus's arms had fallen from around her the second Ritva's voice had pierced the silence. Now they stood slightly awkwardly, until Rasmus said, 'We'd probably better—' and pointed at the door.

Disappointment and hurt swept through her like a cold wind. 'Oh, yes, yes, we should probably get back.' Did he regret what had just happened? Unsure, Violet found herself speaking anyway. 'It's cold and my feet are freezing.' They weren't. Her whole body felt like someone had lit it on fire, but she followed him back inside anyway.

They found Ritva at the bar and Violet didn't miss the chance to order another drink to calm herself. It was proving to be quite an unforgettable night.

'Ritva,' Rasmus said, 'is everything okay?'

She had, by now, composed herself and sat sipping another potent-smelling drink that Violet had no idea what it was. 'I wanted to say that I'm proud of you, Rasmus.'

While Violet was surprised at her words, Rasmus seemed utterly shocked. 'Your speech, everything you've done, has been wonderful.'

'Thank you, Ritva. I – I really appreciate you saying that.'

She tsked and shook her head. 'Isn't it about time you called me *mummo* again?'

Seeing Rasmus's eyes widen, Violet asked, 'What does that mean?'

'It means grandma,' Ritva replied.

'You're his – she's your – what?'

Ritva chuckled and took a sip of her drink, leaving Rasmus to pull himself together and explain.

'I told you there were troubles in my family when I went to study and after. Unfortunately Ritva—'

Ritva glared at him, terrifyingly.

'I mean *Mummo* and I – we fell out over my parents selling their business.'

'I supported them, but Rasmus felt he should have been told,' Ritva added. She shrugged. 'I realise now he was not wrong. He should have been told, spoken to about it all, none of it kept secret from him. He always understood business. It was an insult not to but—' She turned to him. 'You were dealing with your own feelings at the time and we didn't see how hard that was for you. We should have taken that more into account. It was still not your decision to make—'

'I know that now,' Rasmus added. 'I just wish I'd been given the chance to help, especially as coming home helped me feel better.'

'You should have been,' she agreed, cupping his cheek with her aged hand. 'Things might have been different, they might not, but we are here now. Where we are. It cannot be changed. But we can move on, put the past behind us.'

Violet knew that doing that with his mum and dad after her accident had helped them all heal. She hoped the same could happen now. Rasmus

smiled at Ritva in a way that seemed to show the boy he'd once been. Violet was sure she spotted a tear in the old woman's eyes as she wiped one from her own.

'I'd like that very much,' he said and he held out his hand and the two hugged closely.

'Wait,' Violet said. 'When you spoke in the gallery in Finnish, and you were all awkward and weird—'

Ritva chuckled at her description of Rasmus.

'Was that you guys starting to speak again?'

'It was. Ritva doesn't like the family WhatsApp.'

'It pings all the time and irritates me,' she added with a smile at Rasmus.

Lumi appeared at her shoulder, dabbing his own cheeks, and Violet wrapped her arm through his.

The party was soon underway again with everyone dancing and the clock edging nearer to midnight. Violet felt the countdown with a mix of pride, exhilaration and dread. She'd enjoyed the party, even with the strange interruptions, and had done her fair share of dancing since they came back inside while Rasmus chatted to Ritva seemingly catching up on all they'd missed while they'd been estranged. But as the start of a new year approached, she somehow felt the need for quiet, to take in what a strange and life-altering end to the year this had been.

With less than five minutes to go, Rasmus found her and when he took her hand, her body ignited as it had earlier. 'Want to get out of here?'

Without hesitation she replied, 'I do.'

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Chapter 27

They grabbed coats and all the heavy outer wear they needed to stay warm and headed outside. Thankfully she'd worn black boots with her dress and not strappy heels, or her toes would have frozen off by now. She would have ignored it though, for this moment with Rasmus, away from the noise. One final chance to be together, just the two of them.

'Where are we going? Are you going to tell me this time?' she asked, her hand still firmly in his.

'Not far. Just around the corner here.' He led them through quiet streets towards the edge of the town and around one final building. 'Look.'

They rounded the corner to where the wilds of Lapland lay before them. Miles of snowy fields gave way to thick banks of trees and above the tall, snow-laden treetops were the Northern Lights dancing in the dark night sky. They were as vibrant as they had been when she'd first seen them. The night was utterly, beautifully perfect.

'They are so incredible,' Violet said, her mind returning to the first night she'd seen them. The night Rasmus and she had kissed but also known the limits of what could be.

He stood next to her, his shoulder resting against hers, their hands hanging by their sides almost touching. Her fingers brushed his and his warm, strong hand slid into hers. The heat spread up her arm and through her body, as though it had entered her bloodstream and was pulsing around her. Silence settled as they watched the aurora borealis swirl in the sky in front of them and Violet knew this was the perfect moment to say something she had wanted to say all evening.

'Ritva told me you'd asked about buying my painting.'

Rasmus glanced at her, then back to the green, red and pink lights eddying in the sky. 'Yes, I'd like to. I think it's beautiful. It showed me you have the soul of a Laplander, even though you're not from here, but I knew that already.'

'High praise indeed,' she teased and a smile lifted the corner of his mouth. 'You don't need to buy it. I'm giving it to you. I'd like you to have

it.’

Moonlight reflected in his widened eyes. ‘You don’t have to do that. You’re an artist. I would quite happily pay.’

‘No, I—’

‘You are an artist, Violet. Even if you don’t think so yourself.’

‘It’s not that.’ Though she smiled at his kind words. ‘I do feel like an artist, and I love my job, so I don’t want to give that up but I – I did achieve what I came here to do. I’ve honed my skills and remembered how much I love painting, so I’m determined to keep it as part of my life. But I—’ She made herself look at him, even though pain stabbed into her heart. ‘I want you to have it. To remember me by.’

He scanned her face, his eyes flicking over her features. He raised his hand, settling it under her chin, lifting her head till their lips met. He kissed her with a firmness that seemed to say everything each of them wanted to but never could: gratitude, regret, something powerful and important all mixing into one press of their bodies together.

In the distance, opposite the lights, in the sky over the resort, fireworks exploded, particles of light glittering and twinkling until fading away. It had hit midnight and the ski resort was celebrating in style but neither Rasmus nor Violet moved. They kissed again, both hungry for each other, the moment deepening, and eventually, though reluctantly, they inched apart.

‘*Onnellista uutta vuotta*,’ he said, his voice husky and his lips deliciously swollen.

‘*Onnellista uutta vuotta*,’ she repeated, knowing it meant happy new year, or a variation of it.

How much of it was going to be happy she didn’t know. The start was going to be difficult to say the least.

‘I will never forget you, Violet.’ He tucked a curl behind her ear, and the wind pushed it straight back out again. He smiled as he tried once more to secure it down. After finally taming it, his fingers trailed the line of her jaw, and she lifted her head to receive just one more kiss before their time ran out.

Rasmus lingered. His mouth moved a fraction as though he was about to say something and as he looked deeply into her eyes, and she into his, she could almost hear his thoughts, certain deep down in her soul that they were an echo of her own. The words ‘I love you’ seemed to dance between them unheard and ephemeral, like the swaying Northern Lights in front of them.

She willed him to say it out loud. Willed herself to say it too. And yet neither could speak. What would be the point of saying something so important, so monumental when there was no future for them? No way forward together.

A shot of rage shot through Violet's core. This wasn't just idealising a holiday like she always did, this was more, wasn't it? But could she move her entire life? Niggling doubt asked the question: what if she was wrong? What if she did move and the reality was so totally different that she and Rasmus ended up hating each other? She wished she could see clearly but the path in front of her was misty and fogged. The fear of regret, of her and Rasmus's feelings fading, was too strong. But regardless of all those things, whether she was right or wrong, she was sure that, in that moment, she loved him, even if she couldn't say it.

Rasmus, with a sadness in his eyes that she too felt deep inside, kissed her again. The unspoken words were gone, the moment passing beautiful and bittersweet. Both were saving each other pain while fully aware of the agony the other was feeling.

Another firework went off, and they turned to watch them burst into sprays of glittering light. She rested her head on his shoulder and he held her close. The words still lingered in the air, but there was nothing either could do to make this end any differently. His life was here, hers was elsewhere, and tomorrow she'd return home to England, to her business, and start her life again.

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Chapter 28

After watching the fireworks they returned to the party. Violet was reluctant to let go of Rasmus's hand, but when they entered the busy room, she had to. She didn't want people getting the wrong impression. As they moved through the crowd, Monika grabbed her arm, excitedly.

'Where did you two disappear off to?'

'Oh, I – we – just got some air, that's all. It's pretty hot in here.'

Monika grinned. 'Ah, air, yes.' She took a sip of her drink. 'You know, I've never seen Rasmus like this over anyone. He's going to miss you when you go.'

She was going to miss him. In fact, it felt like her heart was ripping in two. 'I, umm – I'm just going to get a drink.'

Before she could leave, Monika pulled her into a tight hug. 'I'll miss you too, Violet. Do you think we can stay in touch? I'd like to, very much.'

'I'd love that too,' she replied when she was released. 'And thank you for helping me when I was sick and just being so lovely and welcoming.'

'It was my pleasure. Now, go and make the most of this time with Rasmus.'

'Yes, I will, thanks.'

Violet had been aware of Lumi and Ritva watching both her and Rasmus through the evening. As Violet walked towards Lumi, she smiled and braced herself for more teasing and matchmaking, but this time he didn't crack any jokes. Instead he yanked her into a tight hug.

'You can come back anytime you like and stay with me if you ever want to, and I really hope you do want to. We've loved having you here. It's been good for you, good for the town, good for Rasmus.' Their eyes went to him, and he smiled when he caught them looking, though there was also a comical hint of concern that pinched his eyebrows. 'You know that he's in love with you, don't you?'

Lumi's words silenced all other noise in her head like gunshots.

'Lumi, I—' She didn't know how to continue the sentence.

‘I know. You’re here on holiday. You can’t be expected to move your life and we both know that he isn’t going anywhere. This town is in his blood. I’m sorry it’s all so *Romeo and Juliet*.’

‘I don’t think either of us plan on dying so it’s not quite that bad.’ She tried to laugh but it sounded high-pitched and tinny in her ears.

Lumi studied her. Perhaps he could hear how subdued she was or see how the pain bubbled just beneath the surface. Her emotions swirled and mixed inside her, battling between believing this was the real thing, her heart urging her to trust her instincts, and her brain guarding her to be cautious. To listen to her sister’s words and take stock.

When it was time to leave, Lumi gave her a final hug. ‘Come back soon, okay?’

She simply nodded, unable to find the words, and turned to find Ritva waiting to hug her too.

‘Keep painting. Please.’

‘I will.’ Tears filled her eyes as she glanced between her and Rasmus who was stood beside her.

‘Shall we go?’ he asked, and she nodded.

With a sadness that made her heart as heavy as a rock, she left the restaurant with the other partygoers and Rasmus, and she walked away from the town back to the forest path and her lodge. Their time had finally run out, and though she wanted to eke out every second, she needed to get to bed to try and get at least a couple of hours’ sleep.

They both struggled to find something to say, and so hand in hand listened to the night owls hooting, the rustling of wildlife (not bears) in the undergrowth. At the door, Rasmus lifted his hand, cupped her cheek and kissed her once more. A kiss that felt more like a goodbye than any words could say.

‘Thank you for everything you’ve done. You’ve helped save the town.’

‘There’s a long way to go yet, but I’m glad I could help. And thank you for all the amazing places you’ve shown me. I’ll always be here to help with the fund if ever you need me.’

‘Thank you.’ The word was gruff and muted, as though he’d pushed it out.

Despite the wonderful evening she’d had, the wonderful holiday she’d enjoyed, tears fell down her cheeks as she said a final goodnight and headed inside the lodge. She took a deep breath of the pine-scented air from the

Christmas tree twinkling in the corner. Logically, she needed to get some sleep and prepare herself for tomorrow morning, which would undoubtedly be even more painful, but she knew she wouldn't get a wink. Her heart and head were too full of Rasmus and the amazing evening they'd had, and the knowledge that tomorrow her heart would break and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

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As Violet zipped up her suitcase and dragged it to the front door the next morning, she took one last look around the cute lodge that had been her home for four amazing, busy but blissful, weeks, her eyes tired and gritty. She'd seen so many places around the world, but there was no denying that Lapland had been different and had earned a special place in her heart. Rasmus had too and as he knocked at the door, she swallowed down the pain closing her throat, determined to be brave. She had lots of work lined up that would keep her busy and there was no point making this moment harder than it already was.

'Hi,' she said, unable to sound cheerful but happy she hadn't immediately burst into tears. Her heart was aching so much she was sure it was about to fall out of her chest.

'Hi,' Rasmus replied. She'd never seen him so solemn. 'Are you ready?'

Violet nodded and went back to collect her case. With a final look she closed the door behind her. She'd packed as many painting supplies as she could and Ritva had agreed to courier back the paintings that were too big to fit in her luggage. As soon as she brought her case out he took it from her and loaded it into the car.

Without speaking, they climbed in and Rasmus pulled away in silence. Only once they were on the road to the airport did he speak. 'Are you looking forward to going home?'

'It's just a pit stop really,' she said, glancing at him, but not staring too long in case it made her cry. 'I'm home for a couple of nights then Archie and I are off to some appointments. Our first stop is Stockholm and then Gothenburg. A Swedish company – a nice one – heard about what we were doing here and contacted me through my website. Ellen picked it up and has booked in a meeting with them, then just as that one was sorted another one popped up too.'

‘That’s exciting.’ Rasmus tried to inject enthusiasm into his voice but, like Violet, he failed miserably.

‘Yes, it is. It’ll be great to see what they want and I’ve never been there. I’ve done a few European events, but this could really be the start of something for me. It’s a great opportunity.’

‘I’m sure you will impress them.’

She almost said, *I’ll let you know*, but held back. As much as she wanted to, she wasn’t sure what was going to happen after today. Would it be too strange and too painful to stay in touch with him?

The rest of the journey was made in silence with occasional small talk about the snow, the state of the roads and other mundane things that felt safe to chat about. When the traffic became heavier, and the signs started directing them to the airport, Violet’s muscles tensed, her chest hard and heavy. She adjusted her seatbelt and pressed a hand to her belly as if that would help, but her body was reacting to the dread growing inside her as the moment of goodbye approached and nothing was going to make that any better. Part of her hoped for traffic, for a delayed or cancelled flight, but really it was only putting off the inevitable. The pain would come eventually if it was now or in a few hours’ time.

They pulled into the car park, and Rasmus helped her with her case, then walked her to just inside the airport entrance. People bustled past them, cases dragging noisily along the floor, those huge trolleys being steered this way and that. Laughing families, full of excitement for the trip that lay ahead, rushed around them as they hesitated, causing a blockage. They pulled to the side out of the way.

‘Do you want me to wait with you?’

‘No, it’s fine, thanks. I can manage from here and I don’t have long to wait.’ She worried if she stayed in his company she wouldn’t be able to step onto the plane.

‘Are you sure?’

She looked up and saw the pain in his eyes. A stabbing so hard and sharp hit right through her ribcage, and her heart felt sore, like it had been used as a punchbag. It was bruised like someone had reached into her chest and squeezed the life out of it. She’d never felt like this before over anyone, or anywhere for that matter, but the last month in Lapland had been amazing. She’d felt things she’d never felt before. She’d felt like she’d found a home, but she forced the rational part of her brain to take over. This would fade,

she told herself. This would all fade, and she couldn't get swept up in fantasy land. She had a business to run in England and that was where she lived.

Violet checked the time on her phone. She really didn't have long now. It seemed the moment was finally here. 'Well,' she murmured, unsure how else to begin. 'It's been … it's been amazing. Thank you for everything you've shown me, Rasmus. I don't think I've ever had a holiday like this before. One that was quite literally life-changing.'

He smiled, appreciation, sadness and regret washing over his gorgeous almond-shaped eyes. 'Thank you for helping us ward off the developers. I think the tide is turning against them thanks to the fair and party last night.'

Had it only been last night? It seemed like a moment ago, but also a distant memory, something that was a whole world away. Although the bags under her eyes and the gritty tiredness that made her want to rub them could attest that it hadn't been.

'I'm just happy I could help you all.'

Rasmus didn't say anything else and before the silence could grow awkward she pressed up onto her tiptoes and placed a kiss on his cheek. She knew she was taking longer than she should, that she'd have to run to security and pray there weren't enormous queues, but she wanted him to know how much he'd meant to her, and she couldn't find the words.

When she pulled back, she smiled, her eyes watery, her lip wavering as tears stung the back of her nose. The same emotions played on his face, his jaw tensing and he pulled her into a tight hug, wrapping his arms around her and holding her close.

'Goodbye, Violet,' he said when he let her go and she struggled to say it back, the pain too strong and overwhelming.

Her words were strained, pulled thin with emotion, but she forced out a quiet 'goodbye', grabbed her case and wheeled it away from him.

Unable to stop herself, she glanced over her shoulder to see him watching her, his expression desolate, his arms folded across his chest. She told herself her sister would be proud of her, not getting swept up in the fantasies holidays always induced. But why was doing the right thing so painful? So hard? That couldn't be right. Could it?

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Chapter 29

Stockholm was beautiful.

She'd never been to this city before, but so far she'd enjoyed every minute of it, the cobblestone streets, the medieval buildings of the old town, the vibrant feel of the place and the impressive eighteenth-century buildings. She'd especially enjoyed meeting with another arts organisation who wanted her to put on a midsummer ball in a grand, historic hotel that looked like something out of a movie. It was going to be one of the biggest events of her career and while she was smiling, and excitement made her nerves fizz, a sadness, like a dull, heavy ache had refused to shift from the pit of her stomach ever since she'd left Lapland.

That day, she'd come home, cried her heart out at the pain pulsing inside her and thought again of her sister's advice. But this time, it hadn't been her warnings that had caught her attention, it had been the question: *where would you want to spend your worst day?* As Violet had looked around her comfortable home she seemed surer than ever that it wasn't there and even though she'd continued to paint, the landscape of Kent hadn't been enough to excite her the way Lapland had, and she'd felt her connection with her grandma waning. She thought constantly of the people she'd met, the friends she'd made, and of course, of Rasmus. He was the last thing she thought about at night and the first thing on her mind in the morning.

A number of times she'd pulled out her phone, her fingers hovering over the keys ready to text him, but each time she'd wavered and eventually put her phone aside to concentrate on something else, usually work. What could she say that wouldn't cause them both pain or remind them both that they were apart and always would be? She told herself repeatedly that the rose-tinted experiences she'd had would fade soon enough, but now, two weeks later, it was still as strong as it had been there in the snow, and all she could do was try to ignore it.

'So what do you think?' asked Archie, who'd accompanied her on the trip.

Violet had wanted him to start gaining some more experience with clients rather than staying behind the scenes all the time, so she'd insisted he accompany her. Ellen and Ahmed had no interest in travelling to meet clients because of their own family commitments, and Violet was proud to have Archie with her. She loved watching her mentee grow and was only more and more impressed by his professionalism. They'd also had a blast exploring the city.

'I think this event could be pretty amazing, don't you?' She pressed her hands together in her lap.

'I do,' he agreed. 'They were really enthusiastic and this could be huge.'

They were sat at a cute café in a medieval building, inside because it was only January and absolutely freezing. The whole city was utterly beautiful, and Violet sat expecting her usual romanticising to commence but so far it hadn't and it wasn't because she was there on a business trip; that had never stopped her before. Perhaps it was because they were only there for a couple of nights, or, more likely, it was because nothing could ever compete with Lapland. She almost laughed at the thought. Of all the places she'd been, all the things she'd seen and experienced, Lapland was the one to catch her heart. Lapland and Rasmus.

'Thanks for bringing me along,' Archie said almost shyly. Sometimes she forgot he was only in his early twenties.

'You were fabulous with the clients and your ideas when you saw the space were outstanding. I think it's time you started doing more meetings. Maybe some on your own.' He looked up sharply. 'Would that be okay?'

A smile spread across his face. 'Yeah! Yeah, definitely. I'd love that.'

'Me too. And hopefully we'll continue to get more and more clients.'

'So what's next here?' He looked around the café and Violet did the same once more, waiting for those feelings of excitement at being in a new place to take hold.

'So we've got meetings with a couple of possible suppliers for this event this afternoon. It's always good to use local people if we can, and as the client's recommending them, we should definitely check them out. And then dinner and an early flight tomorrow.'

The thought of flying back to the UK, to her normal, uninspiring house, didn't exactly fill her with happiness and she stopped herself from comparing it to her beautiful, cosy lodge by taking a sip of her coffee.

'Can I ask you something?' asked Archie after taking a sip of his drink.

‘Sure. Go ahead.’

‘Are you okay?’

The question shocked her and the smile she’d had plastered on her face since she returned from Lapland fell away. She hastily put it back in place. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Like – and I’m sorry if this seems out of turn – you’ve just not been your usual self since you got back from that holiday. We were worried that maybe with running that event while you were there you hadn’t really had time to relax and recharge.’

‘We?’ She raised an eyebrow.

‘The team. We weren’t talking about you badly or anything,’ he was quick to reassure her. ‘We’re just concerned, you know?’

Violet gave him an appreciative smile. ‘I know. You guys are the best. I’m lucky to have you all. But I’m okay. Really.’

Her phone rang and she saw it was her sister. ‘Sorry, Archie. Do you mind if I take this? It’s my sister.’ She stepped away, outside into the cold, fresh air. ‘Hey, Issy, what’s up?’

‘Just checking in. How’s Stockholm?’

‘Yeah, it’s good.’

‘Hmm.’ Her sister peered at the screen. ‘You’re still sad.’

Violet bit her lip. She’d tried to hide her true feelings but the times they’d talked since she’d got home, Isabel had soon seen something was wrong and Violet had found herself telling her almost everything.

‘I—’ Violet thought about lying and pretending she was okay, but the truth – the whole truth – had been cumbersome, weighing her down for the last two weeks and now she had the opportunity to unburden herself, at least a little bit. She sighed. ‘Yeah, I am still a bit … sad. I’m trying not to be, but Lapland was amazing and I’ve never felt like that about anywhere.’

‘Or anyone?’

‘Or anyone,’ Violet repeated sadly. ‘But it was never going to work, was it? Because – well, because I live somewhere that’s like a four-hour flight away and I’ve got my business in England and he’s never moving from Lapland, so … It was great, but … And I kept your advice in my head about how I always picture myself living anywhere I visit and how that means I don’t see places as they really are.’ She took a deep breath, pinching her temples. She’d started now and she couldn’t stop the words falling out. She’d kept them locked inside, too scared to think about them, but now

there was no stopping them. ‘Despite all that, I know it was never going to go anywhere but I can’t help feeling that it could have, you know?’ She was babbling, and Isabel, to her credit, was listening to every word. ‘Holiday romances,’ she said with a sardonic chuckle and a shrug. ‘It just better fade soon, you know, because it hasn’t yet. If anything it feels like the worst break-up of my life, even though we weren’t really, technically like … together.’

‘I hate to say it and admit I might have been wrong because we know I hardly ever am but … maybe it wasn’t just a holiday romance.’

Violet stopped pacing. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, like, a holiday romance is normally like a short, intense week of making out and … you know.’ She wiggled her head side to side and smiled.

‘I do know, but we didn’t do that.’ The idea of it made her core hot and the heat travel through her body because she would have liked to. She really would have liked to.

‘Well,’ Isabel continued. ‘This doesn’t sound like that. Like you spent a solid four weeks together; that’s quite a long time to get to know someone and even if it was insta-love, that’s totally a real thing too.’

‘Isabel, this is confusing. Like, the opposite of what you were saying before.’

‘Love is confusing, and so is a massive decision like this, but I guess what I’m saying is, I know I warned you to be careful but if you’re still feeling this, it doesn’t sound like it was a meaningless romance. It hasn’t faded since you’ve been back, which I thought it might have if it was just you idealising again. You’ve just been low-level sad all the time and that’s not like you at all. So maybe you need to think about making this work somehow.’

Violet’s mouth hung open. ‘How? My business is here. My life is here—’

‘In Sweden?’

‘No. England, but—’

‘But don’t all your team work remotely?’

Violet glanced back at Archie who was working away on his laptop. ‘Yes, but—’

‘So you could relocate if you wanted to, right? Or you could do long-distance.’

‘But a lot of my clients are in the UK.’

‘For now. Didn’t you say you were already building a client base across Europe? And in some ways, it might be more useful to be over there rather than England.’

Violet’s brain felt like it was about to explode in the most unpleasant way possible. In the last few seconds, Issy’s words had picked her up, thrown her around and landed her back on earth with a thud.

‘Issy, where is all this coming from?’

‘You’re my sister and I love you and I want you to be happy. So I’m going to ask you again: where would you want to live your worst day? Because I think I know what the answer is and I might even add on “and who with?”’

Violet fell quiet. The cold wind swept across her face as everything they’d just said ran through her mind. Her emotions were swirling, her mind working overtime. Everything and nothing made sense all at once. The picture of her life and future was both blurry and clearing. She’d been right to focus on her sister’s advice, but she’d focused on the wrong bit. Instead of heeding her warnings over her own imaginative tendencies, she should have thought about where she wanted to live her best and worst days. Suddenly the fog cleared, her path becoming clearer.

She remembered one of her first days in Lapland, walking to Ritva’s store. Seeing the world around her that existed for eons before she got there and would be there forever. She’d felt a sense of calm and peace she’d never had anywhere else.

She *could* move, and she was surer now than ever that it wasn’t just a fleeting romance, or a passing crush. She was in love with Rasmus. She’d nearly told him so on New Year’s Eve and she’d been sure the same words were dancing around his head too. But changing her whole life was a big deal and she needed to make sure she’d love every part of it. Even if she had romanticised Lapland, it had given her so much more than the man of her dreams. It had given her a community. A home. She hadn’t expected to find one there and the one she’d found hadn’t been perfect, but it was real. She loved the way they’d all come together and the way they’d looked after her too.

She missed the friends she’d made there, knowing her friendships with Monika, Essi and Niina would have grown so much stronger if she’d had time. She already missed them and chatting via text and video calls felt like a weak substitute. There was Lumi too who she was missing like a brother.

And last but not least, the beautiful landscapes there, taking time to point and observe them, had connected her to her art – because she was an artist, she knew that now – and her grandma in a way nothing ever had, or would, in England.

As she mentally turned over the idea, she became sure of two things. Firstly that she could absolutely move her life to Lapland if that's what she wanted to do and secondly, she really, really did want to do that. She loved travelling for work, but Lapland had been the home base she'd always been looking for. Again, she almost laughed at the idea that of all the places she'd been, it should be there, somewhere she'd never before thought to go and somewhere she'd only visited through a twist of fate.

'Isabel,' she said, the immovable sadness in the pit of her stomach vanishing and a sense of hope refilling her, soothing her bruised heart. For the first time since she'd returned she felt calm, happiness growing and flowing into her soul.

'Yes?' her sister said, grinning back at her.

'I think you're right.'

'I know I am. I always am,' she replied with a smirk, before they both fell into laughter.

Trusting her instincts, as she should have done all along, Violet knew exactly what she had to do.

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Chapter 30

Violet stepped out of the taxi that had driven her from the airport, her luggage by her side, her thick coat protecting her from the freezing temperatures, her beanie hat tight upon her head. Knowing it would have squished her curls, she pulled it off and pushed a hand into her hair, teasing the spirals downwards. She wanted to look her best for this moment.

Her heart was racing in her chest and had been since she'd realised this was where she wanted to be. Now, her stomach roiled and her fingertips tingled with energy as well as cold. With a deep breath, she took a step forward and opened the door to Lumi's restaurant.

When she'd decided that Levi and Lapland was the place she wanted to call home for the rest of her life, she'd spoken to her parents who were excited to be able to split their time between sunny Australia with one daughter and snowy Lapland with another, while of course enjoying their own home and the trips they wanted to take. Violet hadn't had any doubt that they would be supportive of her decision, but their sheer joy and enthusiasm was more than even she had anticipated.

After that, she'd organised everything at work. All of her team were surprised but also excited, especially given the new requests they were receiving from other European organisations that had heard about them and wanted to discuss events. All in all, it had been surprisingly easy to change her life but there was one person she had left to tell, and he was waiting for her inside.

As usual, Lumi's was busy with tourists and in the far corner – their corner – sat Rasmus nursing a coffee, looking glum. Lumi, who'd clearly been looking out for her, spotted her first, and the wide grin on his face matched her own. He didn't speak and give away she'd arrived. Instead he smiled widely, glanced at Rasmus and winked. He'd made sure his friend was here as Violet had asked him to, and she'd thank him for his help later. Right now, she was forcing the urge to just run to the man she loved and jump on him, but she wanted this surprise to be worthy of a romcom movie moment.

She edged further inside, and Lumi and his staff all moved strategically to hide her from Rasmus's view as she took off her coat, left her case in the corner, and made her way through the restaurant.

'Lumi,' Rasmus said to his friend's back. The timbre of his deep voice resonated in Violet's heart. She'd missed everything about this man. His smile, his passion, his kisses. 'I really need to go. I have a new booking to see to.'

'In the name of Rakkaus?' Violet asked and with Lumi still tactically placed to hide her from his view, she heard his sharp intake of breath.

With a grin, Lumi stood to the side to reveal Violet, and Rasmus's eyes widened. His mouth dropped open and he froze.

'There is someone here to see you,' Lumi said.

Rasmus didn't take his eyes from Violet's face, and she stepped a little closer, her hands clasped together in front of her. 'Hello.'

'I – hi!' he said, blinking as if bringing her back into focus. He stood, moving out from the table. 'What are you doing here? Did you forget something?'

Lumi rolled his eyes and then pinched the bridge of his nose. 'I think if she'd left something here she would have asked me or you to post it back to her. I don't think she'd have flown all this way just to retrieve a toothbrush or a pair of underwear.'

'Yes, thank you, Lumi,' Rasmus said, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

'I didn't forget anything,' Violet began, her heart still beating against her ribcage. It was squirming in her chest, knocking all the air from her lungs. 'But I did realise something. I realised that of all the places I've been in the world, this place, these people, and … and you … felt like home.'

'What do you mean?' Though his voice was gravelly with emotion she could detect the note of hope in it, and it gave her the strength to continue. He edged closer to her and she did the same, taking a tentative step on shaking legs.

'I mean that I've decided I want to live here, in Levi, with you.' Realising how easily that could be misread, she spoke quickly, her words falling over each other trying to get out. 'I mean not like, *with* you with you, like, in *your* house with you, but you know, in the same place as you, until we decide we're ready to, like, live together and …' She was running out of steam as fear took over. 'And stuff,' she added.

'You're here? For good?'

She nodded, grateful he'd ignored that unrehearsed nonsense that had just flown out.

Lumi groaned. 'Oh my God, you two, this is so painful. Violet, do you love Rasmus?'

'Yes. I do,' she answered firmly, her eyes pinned on his, unmoving, her voice unwavering despite her fear.

'And, Rasmus, do you love Violet?'

'Yes,' he replied, without any hesitation or thought. 'From the moment I saw her in the lodge waving a wooden spoon at me.'

'Then please kiss each other.' He motioned for them to step closer and backed out of the way.

They were both smiling as Violet ran to him and stepped into his wide-open arms. He held her close and pressed her body into his as if they were both making sure this was real. Then he placed her back on the ground and his hand cupped the back of her head, gently drawing her in. As their lips met, a hungry, deep kiss sending shockwaves through her body, Violet melted against him. They lingered for an indecent amount of time and only parted when Lumi cleared his throat.

'Umm … This is a restaurant and people are trying to eat by the way.'

Rasmus stared deep into her eyes. 'So this booking?'

'It's me. I chose Rakkaus because it means love, doesn't it?'

'It does.' He grinned. 'I did think it was an odd surname, but I like it. And … you're sure of this place and this life and … and me?'

'I've never been more certain of anything in my life. I love you, Rasmus, and I want to spend my life here with you, painting, helping the community, being part of it.'

He brushed a curl from her face, tucking it behind her ear, then smiling as it bounced straight back out again. 'You know, I've spent the last week figuring out how I could come to England more often. How we could see each other. Make it work somehow.'

'You have?' She couldn't hide the surprise in her voice.

'I knew the moment you left I'd made a terrible mistake in letting you go and since then I've only realised it more and more. I've missed your laugh, your smile, the way you handle everything that's thrown at you, your kindness. And I should have told you how much you meant to me before you left and said those words we were both thinking on New Year's Eve. I

loved you then, and I should have told you, but I was scared it would seem too much, drive you away.'

Just knowing that he'd regretted their parting as much as she had was enough. Her instincts were right. She'd made the right choice.

'Welcome home, Violet,' Rasmus said after he'd kissed her again, a kiss that, unlike the last time, felt full of hope for what was to come. This was the beginning, not the end, and she couldn't stop smiling.

From the corner of her eye, the orange lamps lit the streets outside as snow began to fall. As the pavement grew white, the clouds heavier, the flurries faster, she finally felt contented. Her love for Rasmus, and this place, anchored her in a way she'd never felt before. She really was home. For the first time.

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Epilogue

Three months later

‘Come on, Rasmus,’ Violet said, opening the car door and leaping out even before he’d come to a complete stop.

‘Violet! You’ll hurt yourself. Slow down!’

She stared at the gorgeous little lodge that had been her home over Christmas and was now to be her home until … well, until she and Rasmus decided it was time to take the next step in their relationship, which, to be honest, she didn’t think would be too long. Definitely less than a year, which made this the perfect investment.

After she’d returned, news had travelled pretty fast around the community, and she’d been welcomed back with open arms. In a surprising twist no one saw coming, except for Ritva, apparently, when Olavi had heard she was looking for somewhere to stay, he had offered to sell her his lodge. He’d been looking at downsizing his assets as he was getting older and without family to help manage them, it was proving too much. He’d thought the developers were a good option, until the party, and when he’d heard Violet was back to stay, he’d arranged a meeting with her and offered her the lodge she’d loved so much. She’d said yes immediately with the idea that when she and Rasmus eventually moved in together she’d rent it out, like Rasmus did.

Only a week ago, the developers had suddenly announced the location was no longer of interest and they were looking at another in a different part of Lapland. While the town was overjoyed, she and Rasmus also promised to keep an eye out and help any other town that objected to their plans. For them, it wasn’t about it not being in their backyard, but about protecting the environment and they’d help whoever felt the same way.

Rasmus followed her inside the lodge, placing her easel and painting supplies down by his feet. Violet had a whole new bunch of paintings to put up around her new home and some that were with Ritva, ready for an

exhibition in her gallery. She was displaying a number of local artists, and the arts centre had also become interested in doing something even bigger. Violet still struggled to call herself an artist, though she was becoming more and more confident in her hobby the more she practised.

As she took in the lodge, everything looked the same except this time it didn't have a Christmas tree twinkling in the corner. She couldn't wait to light the fire and fill the place with warmth, and the orange glow would spill into the hazy blueish afternoon outside. There'd be more snow soon. She was beginning to pick up on the signs and tomorrow she and Rasmus planned to walk the untrampled paths and visit more out-of-the-way places she'd never seen before.

As for work, everything was going brilliantly. Working from Lapland hadn't really changed anything and her team were delighted she was putting herself first. She had a few trips planned to meet clients and Archie was coming with her, but every time she went away she couldn't wait to return home again. It was such a strange feeling. She still loved visiting new places, and occasionally she would wonder what it was like to live and work there, but they never pulled her in like they had before. Her love of other cultures was as strong as ever, but it was Levi and Lapland, and the snow and icy wilderness, that filled her mind and heart and always made her eager to get back. That, and Rasmus of course. The man she was totally and utterly in love with.

'Welcome to your new home,' Rasmus said, kissing her gently and pulling her into him. 'Or should that be old home?'

'It can be either, I suppose. As long as I'm here with you anywhere is home.'

'Good answer.'

She pressed herself against him, kissing him again until they parted, breathless. 'We should probably get set up because—'

But before she could finish the sentence cars arrived outside and voices grew louder. Rasmus unwound his arms but left a hand on her waist as pretty much the whole town arrived, barging past them into the lodge.

'I brought wine,' said Monika, Essi and Niina following behind waving even more bottles. They pushed Rasmus aside and wrapped Violet in a hug.

'I brought snacks,' said Lumi, unloading trays of food and laying them out on the kitchen island.

Ritva followed, smiling. ‘I brought myself, which is more than enough at my age.’

Rasmus let Violet go and kissed his grandmother gently on the cheek. ‘It absolutely is. You look well, *Mummo*.’

‘I feel well. Better than I have in years.’

Soon the kitchen was filled with people, noise, chatter and laughter and, just as she’d been welcomed to the town, Violet was welcomed into her new home by the people and man who’d brought her there to stay.

A cough at the door made them all turn and Violet smiled as Olavi came in with flowers and a card. ‘I, umm … just wanted to welcome you back to the lodge and wish you every happiness here.’

Violet stepped forwards and took the gifts. It had taken the town a while to forgive him, but now everyone knew why he’d been thinking of selling in the first place, they were helping him as much as they could and everyone was making the effort to move on.

‘Thank you, Olavi. That’s really kind of you. Please, do join us.’ She motioned to the busy kitchen.

‘I don’t want to intrude.’

Ritva stepped forwards. ‘You’ve been intruding your whole life, Olavi, just come and pour me a glass of wine.’ She grabbed his arm so she could use it for support and soon everyone had welcomed him into the throng, showing that the past was the past.

Violet smiled at the peace offering. It wasn’t quite what she would have said but it was typical Ritva.

‘It’s going to get busy in here.’ Rasmus took her hand, kissing her knuckles. His warm breath tickled her ear as he whispered, ‘We will celebrate your first night in your new home later.’

She turned to see fire in his eyes and one started low in her belly. She loved this place and the people – her community – who had come out to welcome her properly to her new home. But now, with Rasmus looking at her like that, she was secretly counting down the hours until they all left. Her own desire brought heat to her cheeks and she bit her lip.

‘I can’t wait,’ she whispered back.

‘I love you, Violet.’

‘I love you too,’ she managed to say before she was hauled away by Monika and her friends and pulled into the crowd as they began playing music, the party only just beginning.

She really was home.

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I'm writing these acknowledgements during a heatwave, which is mad considering this book is all set in a gorgeous snowy, icy place!

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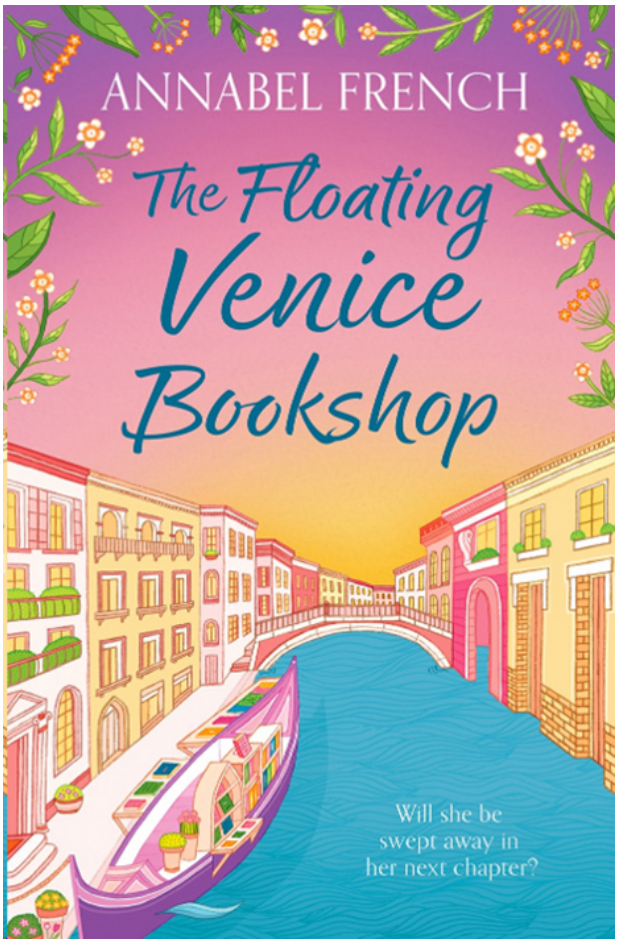
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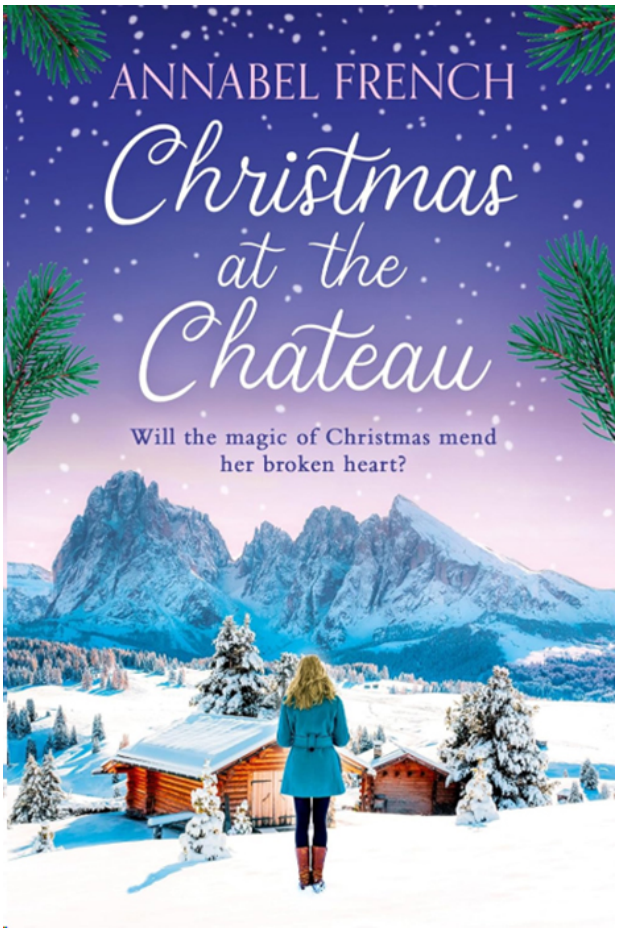
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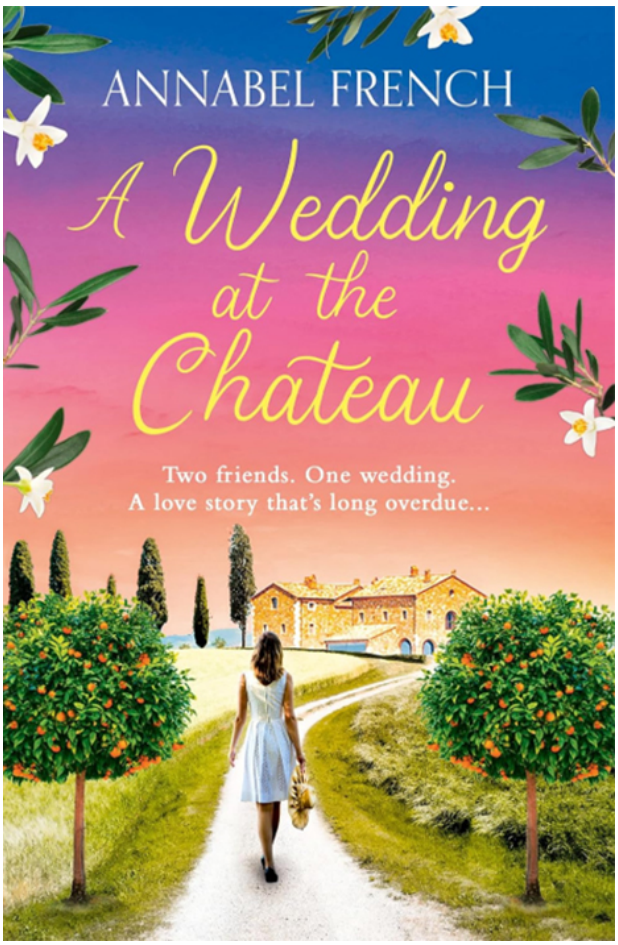
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Annabel French is a bestselling author of several contemporary romantic fiction stories for HarperCollins, including her chateau series. Based in southeast England with her husband and teenage children, when she's not writing, she can be found running around after her three-legged rescue dog, Skips. She's a member of the Romantic Novelists' Association because she firmly believes romance is the best genre in the world and nothing beats a good love story!

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