

*Anna Browne's*  
**CHRISTMAS**  
**PARTY**



*Miranda Dickinson*

# Anna Browne's Christmas Party

*by*

Miranda Dickinson

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## ONE

Food.

*Tick.*

A team of caterers were busy laying out gorgeous-looking platters across four white-cloth covered tables.

Bar.

*Tick.*

Trays of sparkling wine glasses were being polished by two bartenders and would soon be filled with warm, spicy mulled wine.

Decorations.

*Tick.*

Frosted white tendrils of ivy curled along window ledges and along the edges of tables. Garlands of sweet-scented eucalyptus and fir studded with winter white roses looped over two exquisite fireplaces at either end of the room, and delicate bowls of Christmas roses, red berries and frosted apples adorned every table. Tiny sparkling crystal and silver decorations were suspended on strings of pure white fairy lights over the whole room, creating the illusion of a twinkling, night sky. It was *perfect*. The guests were going to love it.

Music.

Hang on... Where *was* the music?

Anna Browne looked up from her list to survey the room. The space that had been cleared halfway down Hillford Hall's elegant stateroom for a makeshift stage was worryingly empty. The band had said they'd be arriving at three p.m, hadn't they? One look at her watch confirmed it was almost four-thirty. Where were they?

'Excuse me,' she called to a smartly dressed woman moving silver chairs around the tables where her guests would soon be seated.

The event planner smiled and hurried over. 'Everything okay?'

Anna forced herself to take a breath. Almost everything was, she told herself. This was the only thing missing. 'It's all wonderful, Erin. It's just – weren't the band supposed to be setting up by now?'



Erin checked her watch. ‘They are a little late,’ she frowned. ‘But I know them well and they’ll pull out all the stops when they get here. I heard traffic was bad out of Birmingham this afternoon. The day before Christmas Eve is always a bit of a nightmare.’ She smiled and placed a reassuring hand on Anna’s arm. ‘Trust me, they’ll be here. I’ll give their manager a call, find out what’s happening, okay?’

Anna nodded, returning Erin’s competent smile. ‘That would be good, thank you.’

The event planner already had her mobile pressed to her ear as she walked away.

‘Hi D’Wayne? It’s Erin from Hillford Hall. Are you on your way?’

Packing her nerves away, Anna wandered over to one of the enormous sash windows that overlooked the ground of the hall. It was the easiest party she’d organised, thanks to the friendly event planner and her brilliant team. Hillford Hall was everything she’d hoped it would be, too: a gorgeous red sandstone stately home on the edge of the Staffordshire border set in acres of beautifully landscaped parkland. A light dusting of snow that morning had completed the magical setting, each tiny flake frozen into perfect position under the darkening clear sky. The moon had already appeared in the deep winter blue, throwing long shadows from the ancient oaks and beech trees across the snow-covered lawns. Anna could see a trail of silver lanterns marking the path from the car park to the grand entrance of the hall, flickering white candlelight beckoning guests to enter the frosted splendour of the party.

Anna relaxed a little, smiling as she imagined her brother’s face when he saw the photographs she’d emailed him earlier. ‘You’re goin’ a bit upmarket, in’t you, An? Stately homes and Christmas soirees... Mum would have a fit!’

*Good job my mother isn’t invited tonight,* she thought, the memory of their final row still fresh. Perhaps there would come a time when she could be civil with Senara. But it hadn’t arrived yet.

‘Twenty minutes,’ Erin called, summoning Anna’s attention. ‘They’re held up in traffic.’

It would be cutting things fine, but with guests due to begin arriving at seven-thirty p.m. there was still time for the event band to set up and sound-check. Anna raised her hand in thanks and turned back to her list...



## TWO

'I just can't believe you're here!' Harriet Langton hugged her cousin for the fiftieth time since she'd picked her and her husband up at Birmingham Airport. 'Auntie Rosemary is so excited – I swear she's been stockpiling Yorkshire Tea and Cadbury's Mini Rolls for weeks.'

Rosie Duncan laughed and hugged her cousin back. 'Mum's talked of little else since we told her we were coming for Christmas.' She took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of Harri's tiny cottage on the edge of Stone Yardley. Cinnamon, recently baked gingerbread and brewing coffee mingled with lavender that hung in bunches tied with gingham ribbons from the white-painted cast iron bedframe in Harri's bedroom where the two cousins were getting ready. 'It's good to be home. I don't have time to think about England most of the year but when Christmas comes it always makes me a bit homesick.'

Harri's blue eyes widened. 'But you have Christmas in New York, every year, right on your doorstep! Stone Yardley can hardly compare to snow in Central Park, or shopping at Macy's, or skating at the Rockefeller Center. The High Street and Viv's kitchen shop's window display aren't a match for all of that.'

Rosie giggled. 'Are you kidding? We don't have the Stone Yardley W.I.'s annual festive knit-a-thon, or the festive Victorian shopping night – I miss all those things. And besides, it isn't about the place; it's about the people. I love Ed's family, but nothing can beat being with you lot.'

'Second Christmas in a row we've been together,' Harri grinned. 'Can you believe it's been a whole twelve months since we were all together on Long Island?'

'I know. Where has all that time gone?'

A burst of laughter from downstairs made Harri and Rosie share rolled-eyed looks. 'Ed and Alex are getting on, then.'

'Was that ever in any doubt? Ed's been keen to meet him again since you two first visited us. He's *very* keen on Alex's real ale recommendations.'

Harri laughed. 'Who knew our other halves would bond so well over Enville Ale? I did wonder if Ed would find this place a bit twee after your gorgeous apartment.'

'Ed's wanted to experience a true English village experience for years, but we've always been so busy at Christmas we couldn't consider it before. He's been like an excited kid for weeks about coming here. Besides, your cottage is lovely. Which do you think? Diamonds or amethyst drops?' Rosie held up two pairs of earrings and checked her reflection in Harri's bedroom mirror.

Harri finished pinning her auburn curls into a side-plait and sat beside Rosie on her bed. 'Diamonds. They'll look amazing against your hair. I am so happy you're here, Rosie. It reminds me of all the Christmases we had as kids. Do you remember playing that trick on James when we sewed his duvet to his mattress? He couldn't work out why he couldn't get his feet into bed! How old were we then?'

'We must have been about eleven, or twelve? We plagued him so much, didn't we? It drove Mum to distraction, I think.' Rosie smiled at her cousin. 'You look gorgeous in that dress, H. Emerald green is your colour.'

Harri blushed a little and pulled up the neckline of her strapless velvet dress. 'Alex likes it. You don't think it's a bit too – revealing?'

Rosie laughed. 'You are nuts, do you know that? You look wonderful. Perfect for Hillford Hall. I still can't believe we managed to get invites for the party. Mum was over the moon when I told her.'

'Auntie Rosemary loves the place. She's decorated the staterooms there for so many weddings over the years she practically knows every inch of it. I think she and Barnie might end up tripping up the aisle in one of them one day, you know.'

'He certainly seems to be winning and dining her,' Rosie replied, smiling at the recent revelation that her mother was dating her gentle-spoken delivery driver at Eadern Blooms. 'She tells me off when I ask about Barnie but she's smiling in a way I haven't seen for years. I want her to be happy.' She looked at the small alarm clock on Harri's bedside table, beside a faded framed postcard of the church of *Santa Maria della Salute* by the Grand Canal in Venice. 'It's almost seven o'clock. Shouldn't we be going?'

‘Oh blimey! We’d better get a wriggle on.’

‘Are you sure you don’t mind driving? I’m sure we could find a taxi even in Stone Yardley.’

Harri shook her head. ‘They’re like gold dust this close to Christmas. Besides, I want to enjoy tonight without getting tipsy. Honestly, it’s fine. Al and Ed will have hangovers enough for all of us if they have a successful evening at the pub.’

They collected their wraps and handbags and began to make their way down the creaking narrow staircase. In the cottage’s small living room, Alex and Ed were eating pizza and talking loudly, their conversation falling away when Harri and Rosie entered the room.

‘Wow,’ Ed said, blowing a wolf-whistle. ‘You English ladies know how to dress up.’

Alex snorted with laughter. ‘How cheesy are you, Mr Yank?’

‘What? I thought I was being suave and debonair.’

‘Nope, mate. Cheesy and just a little bit creepy. Girls, you look great. Wish we were coming with you.’

Ed feigned offence. ‘Ah, but *we* weren’t invited, Al.’

‘Shows what they know, eh?’

‘Poor baby,’ Rosie said, edging around the coffee table and a very disgruntled looking ginger cat to plant a kiss on Ed’s forehead. ‘Will you manage without us?’

‘I guess we’ll cope. Al’s going to school me in warm ale and British village gossip.’

‘He’s a trooper,’ Alex smiled.

Rosie saw something unspoken pass between Alex and Harri – and noticed that Harri didn’t give her fiancé a kiss. Something had felt off between the pair of them since they’d picked her and Ed up from the airport and she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was. Their shared home was a little cramped but cosy and even Harri’s grumpy cat Ron Howard seemed grudgingly fond of Alex. They smiled and joked and appeared to be happy, but Rosie couldn’t shift an irritating little mind-itch that something wasn’t quite right.



Harri was as chatty as ever as they drove through the country lanes from Stone Yardley to Hillford Hall and Rosie resolved to bide her time. Maybe in the elegant surroundings of the Christmas party she would have the chance to ask her cousin about it.

Stepping out of the car in the frozen night, Harri and Rosie stopped to gaze up at the wintry hall, its windows throwing warm light out of its icy windows across carefully maintained knot gardens edged with yew. Swags of Christmas garlands tied with sparkling gold ribbons had been draped across the large pillared entrance, a deep crimson carpet cloaking the end of the silver lantern-marked path and rising up the steps.

'It's like a fairytale,' Harri breathed, her breath forming silver moonlit clouds in the frosty air. She linked her arm through Rosie's. 'Ready to go in?'

Rosie smiled at her cousin, catching sight of the merest hint of sadness in her eyes. 'Absolutely.' *By the end of this evening, she vowed, I will find out what's really happening with Harri and Alex...*



### THREE

The guests were beginning to arrive now and Anna felt a swell of pride seeing their delight as they entered the wintry wonderland she had created in Hillford Hall's elegant stateroom. At last, she could discard the list that had been her constant companion during the past week and enjoy herself. Just as she'd planned, all the elements had come together at the right time, even if the band's late arrival had given her palpitations.

They were all set up on the makeshift stage halfway along the length of the room and while the first guests began to mingle around the perfectly decorated space they had set up background music through their PA system. The warm, irresistible tones of Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole and Bing Crosby soothed the atmosphere and brought a sense of timelessness to the party.

Anna smoothed her red dress and fastened simple aquamarine and silver drop earrings – a present from her elderly neighbour, Isadora. The old lady had been dubious when Anna had told her about the venue for the Christmas party last week.

'Do they *do* suitable glamour that far north? You may have to take a translator, dear. I fear you've been living in good society for too long...'

Anna smiled as she remembered her shock at Isadora's sweeping judgment of anywhere north of Watford Gap. Never let it be said her neighbour was shy when it came to expressing her opinions. She couldn't be more wrong, of course – and the wonderful event unfolding before her eyes was testament to that.

'Excuse me, Miss Browne?'

Anna turned to see the handsome drummer from The Pinstripes event band walking towards her, his smart black shirt and suit trousers far removed from the vintage rock t-shirt and well-worn jeans he had arrived wearing. No wonder she'd seen several of the single female guests giggling in his direction.

'Anna, please.'

The drummer gave a rueful smile. 'Sorry. I'm not normally one to stand on ceremony.' He held out his hand. 'I'm Charlie. I just wanted to know what time you'd like us to do the first set?'

'We're serving the buffet around nine, so around 8.30pm?'

Charlie grinned – and if Anna's heart hadn't already been taken, she could have quite easily joined his growing group of admirers in the room. 'Perfect. First set is more classic stuff anyway, so if the guests aren't ready to dance by then it'll be entertaining to listen to.'

'I hadn't really thought about when people would want to dance,' Anna said, thinking of the discarded list in the cloakroom next door.

'It usually has a direct correlation with how much alcohol they've been served,' Charlie replied, his eyes twinkling. 'Judging by that huge vat of mulled wine you have for them, I'd say a good proportion will be ready to bop as soon as we start.'

Anna laughed. 'Oh well, I'm glad I had that covered.'

'Job's a good 'un, then. I'll let the others know. Thanks, Anna.'

Charlie turned and walked back to where his colleagues were making final adjustments to the band layout. She noticed him share a joke with one of the singers, a pretty girl with dark blonde hair who seemed to command more of his attention than any of his other bandmates.

Being used to watching people, Anna was intrigued by the pronounced friendliness of their exchanges – they were certainly closer than the rest of the musicians, although the group as a whole appeared to be good friends. Anna couldn't imagine herself ever having the nerve to step in front of a band and sing, even though in her formative years she had adored singing.

The Pinstripes were every inch the professional outfit and Anna had been amazed at how they had sounded during their sound-check. All of them had arrived dressed so differently from one another, laden with cases and bags, stands and equipment, yet when Charlie had counted them in, the music they produced was better than anything Anna had heard in professional concerts.

It was wonderful to watch the professionals around her working so effortlessly to create the party she had envisaged when she had begun planning tonight's event. Everyone, from bar staff to waiters, catering staff to the band,

worked deftly to make the room so relaxed, efficient and welcoming – and the result were streams of excited, enthralled guests. This evening was most definitely going to be a success...



## FOUR

Halfway along the frost-covered path leading from the car park to the beautiful entrance of Hillford Hall, a diminutive woman – huddled within the folds of her best coat – stopped walking and turned back. She lifted a gloved hand to her brow and squinted past the bright candlelight of the row of lanterns marking the path to the winter gloom beyond, trying to make out an approaching figure and wishing she hadn't left her glasses at home this evening.

'Dudley! Is that you?' she hissed.

The man was being *insufferable* this evening! He'd insisted they leave early from their narrowboat in case the traffic was bad, only to bring them to the grounds of Hillford Hall a whole hour before the party was due to begin. He'd gone off happily wandering around the snow-covered grounds and she'd been about to call for a search party when he'd returned, the hems of his best suit trousers caked in muddy, snowy slush and the shoes she'd so carefully polished for him last night now as dull as canal water. It was a damn good job she loved Dudley Parker, she told herself, otherwise she might have been tempted to inadvertently 'lose' him in Hillford's landscaped boating lake...

'Hold your horses, our Magsie! I found a bit of rag in the car boot and my shoes have buffed up lovely!' Dudley Parker appeared in the shadows and crossed onto the candlelit path, that cheeky grin of his that had saved him from many a sticky situation before firmly in place again.

'A bit of rag? We're about to go into a stately home and you're buffing up your leather slip-ons with something you found in the car? You'll be the end of me, Dudley Parker!'

Dudley slipped a cheeky hand around his beloved wife's waist and planted a warm kiss on her cheek. 'That's as maybe, bab, but what a way to go, eh?'

Margaret Parker giggled despite herself and gave him a dig in his ribs – or at least, as close to his ribs as his thick coat and sweater beneath would allow her to get. 'You old charmer. Look at this place – have you ever seen anything so lovely?'

She gazed up at the blazing splendour of Hillford Hall, looking as if it had appeared from the set of one of her beloved television costume dramas. Tonight was a dream come true. When the gold-edged invitation had arrived, she had been overjoyed and she was still buzzing about it this evening. An elegant Christmas party in one of the country's most beautiful stately homes – and her and Dudley on the very exclusive guest list! It was a world away from her everyday life and she could hardly believe it was happening.

Mags lived a happy, comfortable life, with their narrowboat and the small café she owned in Kingsbury, and she would tell anyone that she wanted for nothing. But she and Dudley had made many sacrifices to have that life, one of which was the hurried registry office wedding when her brute of a first husband had finally granted her a divorce. Secretly, Mags had dreamt of an elegant, beautiful wedding in a grand house such as Hillford. She hoped for it now for her beloved niece, Romily, so completely happy with the man she had searched long and hard to find.

'Tonight, you'll be a *queen* here,' Dudley said, close to her ear. 'My beautiful Magsie, the belle of the ball!' Of course her secret wish hadn't been lost on him. He knew Mags better than anyone else on earth. 'Maybe we should get our Rom to help us hijack the party and renew our wedding vows.'

Mags gave a loud tut to hide how touched she was by his suggestion. 'Dudley Parker, we don't need to renew anything. I meant what I promised you then and I mean it now. It is a gorgeous place, though. And we'll get to see Romily singing with her friends, too.'

'I know. I'm proper chuffed about that. Come on then, Magsie, let's show this elegant lot a bit of Warwickshire class!'





## FIVE

'I swear, if D'Wayne tries to make a set change one more time I'll swing for him,' Jack grumbled, as The Pinstripes sat around a large mahogany dining table in a room they'd been given as a dressing room.

Given that the most they could usually hope for was a broom cupboard or a staff toilet to get changed in, this was opulence in the extreme. There was even a huge crystal chandelier suspended over the table - in all the many gigs the band had notched up over the years, this was a first.

Wren Malloy grinned at the band's keyboard player and hoped it would be enough. The thing was, she agreed with Jack. D'Wayne, her boyfriend and the band's dubiously talented manager, had been a *nightmare* lately. But his attitude towards The Pinstripes had been the least of her worries... Ignoring the hardening knot in her stomach, she attempted to be oil on troubled waters.

'I've told him we know what we're doing. I think he's just nervous about the showcase he's booked us on next month. He really wants us to get some American gigs and if the contact with that hotel chain is impressed, it could be serious money.'

'He should be more concerned with making sure we get to it in one piece,' Tom replied, checking the new string on his electric guitar. 'Knowing D'Wayne he'll have us turn up a month late for the showcase.'

'Tom...'

'I don't know why you take his side, Wren. I mean, I know you're shagging him, but that doesn't mean you have to betray your mates when he's wrong.'

'At least we don't have to do *that*,' Jack quipped, pulling a face.

'Euwww, *imagine* if that was in the contract...'

'Kill me now!'

Wren glared at Jack, who once again was enjoying his tag-team attack on her boyfriend with Tom. Even Charlie was smirking like a rude schoolboy. Did male musicians *ever* grow up?

'Guys, would you give Wren a rest?' Romily Parker stepped into the fray, as she had so many times before - and Wren loved her for it. Her friend had been

her greatest ally and even though she knew Rom wasn't exactly D'Wayne's biggest fan at the moment her best friend's support meant the world. 'Jack, if you have an issue with D'Wayne, take it up with him. He can't change the set anyway. That's our domain and always has been. We'll do what we rehearsed. What's he going to do, storm the stage and take away our music?'

'Ah, the voice of reason prevails once more,' Charlie winked at Rom, as Jack and Tom mimed being sick.

Wren still wondered what had happened between Rom and Charlie. For a long time she'd been utterly convinced her best friends were destined to get together, but everything had changed when a certain handsome furniture maker from Stratford-upon-Avon had walked into her life. They certainly seemed loved up now and she had never seen Rom happier. If only she could feel the same way in her own relationship...

'Hey, don't let them wind you up,' Romily said, handing her a bottle of water. 'They're just being their usual annoying selves.'

'Good job I have you here to help me bring sanity back to the band,' Wren smiled. 'Is Will coming tonight?'

The mention of Romily's other half made her instantly glow. 'He said he'd try to come later. He's teaching a woodwork class first.'

'How did you ever come to date a non-musician?' Wren laughed. 'I can't imagine what you two talk about... Ugh, wait, you're going to tell me you don't have time for much talking, aren't you?'

Romily blushed. 'Wren! As if I'd say something so crude.'

'Mm-hmm. I know your game, Miss Loved-Up Parker.'

'You should. You're loved-up, too. Aren't you?'

Wren felt her heart quicken. 'Guys, talking of the set, we need to go through the order before we go on. Have you all got your folders?'

She could feel her friend's gaze heavy on her as she busied herself with the pre-gig ritual. Maybe she would talk to Rom later this evening, if they found five minutes alone. Or maybe it could wait – until she could work out what was going on in her head.

A fleeting memory of a screwed-up letter shoved into her coat pocket glanced across her mind, making her feel sick.

*No! Don't think about that now!*

Banishing the thought to the furthest reaches of her mind, she pinned her brightest smile over any other emotion her face might betray and threw herself into action...



## SIX

'Pleased with everything?' Erin smiled, as she handed Anna a fresh glass of mulled wine.

'I am. I think our guests are, too.'

The room was filling up now, with more guests arriving by the minute, and Anna couldn't hide her smile as each new group reacted to the scene that met them as they walked in.

Ben had joked earlier that week that she should reconsider her career choice, her plans for the magical Christmas party being so impressive. Anna had laughed this off, while being more than a little flattered.

She wished Ben could have been here, but twenty-four-hour rolling news waited for nobody. He was driving up tomorrow to spend Christmas with her at the gorgeous Hillford Hall, a treat they'd promised each other after a hard couple of months working in their respective careers. Anna knew he would adore the room she had already checked into that morning, but to have him here with her tonight would have made the whole thing completely perfect.

'It's a wonderful party,' Erin said. 'My boss Phil was blown away when he popped in a while ago. Are most of your guests here now?'

'There are still some key people to come,' Anna said, scanning the faces of the new arrivals for one person in particular. 'It's still early, though.'

'Oh absolutely. We've had parties half-empty until almost midnight before.' Erin grinned, keeping a professional check on everything in the room as she did so. 'I think the band are ready for their first set. Relax, Anna. Enjoy your party.'

As The Pinstripes moved into position, the singers adjusting in-ear monitors and the handsome drummer making final tweaks to his cymbal stands, Anna took a sip of warm, spicy wine. Ben might not be here, but she was – and she was determined to enjoy the fruits of her labours...



## SEVEN

'I don't think this is the right way. The sat-nav just said to make a U-turn.'

'*A-a-angel*, why would you trust your life to an electronic box?'

'Er, because it knows the route and we don't?'

Woody Jensen shook his head. 'Oh *you* of little faith. Trust me, babe, I've been here before.'

In the passenger seat of the battered old Range Rover, Elsie Maynard sighed and wished for the thousandth time she's driven instead. 'When, Woody?'

'Back end of '84. Wild stay we had, TVs chucked out of the sash windows and everything.'

'You're telling me Hellfinger stayed at Hillford Hall?'

'Indeed I am.'

Elsie had heard enough of Woody's dodgy rock'n'roll stories to remain unconvinced. 'Was it even a hotel back then?'

'Yeah. Our manager's mate Vince owned it. We were the first guests. Stayed twice, actually, though the second time we were all good lads in bed with our cocoa by ten. That was before Knebworth, mind. We were on our best behaviour by then.' He winked at Elsie. '*Allegedly*.'

Elsie hunkered down in the seat. 'I take it you didn't *drive* here, then?'

'Nah. First time was in the van, second time in our tour bus. Stop worrying, girl! Uncle Woody'll get you there, no sweat.'

Elsie remembered her best friend Cher's reaction when she'd admitted Woody was nominated driver for the long journey up from Brighton to Staffordshire. It had taken Cher a full five minutes to regain enough breath to speak after laughing so loud she'd startled the customers in *Sundae & Cher* ice cream café. 'Are you mad? I mean, you know I adore the man, Els, but I don't trust him to drive me to Sainsbury's!'

'He offered. And he's done so much for The Sundaes lately I thought it would be rude to refuse.'

Cher had rolled her eyes heavenwards at that. 'It's kind of his job as co-director of the choir. If anything, he owes you.'

‘That’s why he offered to drive. To give me a rest.’

‘A rest? Have you been in my boyfriend’s car for any length of time lately?’

‘I’m sure it will be fine,’ Elsie had replied, keen to defend her kooky friend.

‘It was kind of him to offer.’

Cher had pinned a loose length of hair back into her beehive up-do and laughed again. ‘Kind is one thing: Woody’s driving is something else. Take my advice, darlin’: pack a map.’

Elsie thought of the road atlas she’d secretly bought from a service station on the way up, now stuffed beneath her seat. Would now be a good time to reveal it? Certainly the country road along which they were speeding now had precious little in the way of road signs and looked suspiciously familiar to one they had driven down half an hour ago. The party would have started already and she needed to be there.

It had been a chance meeting at *Sundae & Cher* that had led to this party coming about – and even now she was amazed at how quickly everything had happened. The softly spoken Cornish woman and her brash American friend had come in on quite possibly the worst day in late September, when thick banks of sea mist skulked stubbornly over the seafront and stole the light from Brighton’s famous streets.

As perfect days for ice cream went, it hadn’t been the most promising – in fact Anna and her friend had been the only customers in the ice cream café to actually choose ice cream, while everyone around them took refuge in extra-large salted caramel hot chocolates and generous wedges of Cher’s renowned cherry crumble pie.

Elsie had congratulated their British Bulldog spirit – promptly finding out that only one of the pair was British, which had fuelled their conversation. The other customers had slowly run out of excuses to stay in the warm café and one by one reluctantly headed back out into the cold, damp day, leaving Elsie and Cher talking to Anna and Tish for a good hour. It transpired that the pair were taking a well-earned day off from their London lives and, as a result, were determined to enjoy every minute of it, no matter what.

As they’d talked, Anna had spotted a poster for Elsie’s choir’s latest concert, raising funds for families of people battling cancer, and mentioned that



she'd lost a good friend to cancer when they were both sixteen and at college in Cornwall. The mention of the C-word instantly took Elsie back to a time when it had ruled and dictated her life. The memories were never far away – even today, when she considered she was moving on with her life. She'd told Anna about a trust she had been helped by following her loss – and the idea of the fundraising Christmas Ball had been born. Anna knew several people who had been robbed of loved ones by the terrible disease and wanted to do something to help. They'd exchanged contact details – and if Elsie were really honest, she never really expected to hear from Anna Browne again.

But Elsie had been wrong.

Anna Browne was, quite possibly, one of the most determined and kindest people Elsie had ever met. She was also, by all accounts, an organisational wonder – bringing together the whole event in a matter of weeks. It was the main reason why Elsie wanted to be at Hillford Hall as soon as she could be – not blundering around the pitch-black country roads of the rural Staffordshire borders watching time slip away. Even the sat-nav she'd insisted upon bringing had given up saying anything and was now displaying a single purple road in a sea of grey screen, as if sulkily staring out of the window, offended at not being listened to.

'Woody.'

'Yeah, babe?'

'I have a map. Under my seat.'

He glanced at her, his brows knotted and his pierced bottom lip protruding just a little bit more than normal. 'I see.'

'You're amazing for driving us to the Hall. Honestly, I really appreciate it. But – it's getting late and I *need* to be there. We both do. I hear the hotel manager Phil was a bit of a huge Hellfinger fan back in the day – he can't wait to meet you.' She peered through the gloom at the ageing former rock star to see if he was upset. 'How about we pull over and just check to make sure where we are, hmm?'

Woody gave a loud snort, but did as he was told.

'Torin would have trusted me,' he grumbled.

Elsie was already flipping through the pages of the atlas trying to find the road they were on. 'Torin said I needed an intervention for letting you drive.'

‘Philistine.’

‘Hmm.’ The tangle of A- and B-roads on the map page gradually began to make sense until Elsie realised where they were. ‘Hang on – I see what we’ve done. We’re actually not far from the Hall. If we double-back and then take a right at the crossroads we just passed I reckon we’ll be there in a few minutes.’

‘Cool.’ Woody stared blankly at the leather bangles and silver rings on his wrists and fingers.

Elsie felt a rush of affection for her companion. He might be a little off-the-wall, convinced of his own mystical capabilities and annoyingly overconfident in his own ability, but he had a good heart and meant a great deal to her. She reached over to squeeze the worn arm of Woody’s beloved black leather jacket. ‘Thank you. For being here.’

‘Yeah, well, I’m a natural philanthropist, see? It’s in my *blood*, babe. Can’t *not* do the right thing. Some might call it a curse, but it’s a cross I have to bear.’

Elsie planted a kiss on his cheek. ‘Come on. I hear it’s a free bar. Perfect for rewarding thirsty wise men.’

Woody sniffed and revved the engine. ‘Well, when you put it *that* way... Hang onto your heels, angel, the Roadster’s about to fly!’



## EIGHT

'Elsie! You made it!' Anna hurried across the stateroom to gather Elsie Maynard into a huge hug.

'I was starting to think we'd never get here,' Elsie grimaced, casting a glance at her companion's pained expression and quickly changing tack. 'But Woody saved the day.'

'Just call me Zorro,' Woody grinned, planting a kiss on Anna's hand.

'Look at this place!' Elsie said, her eyes bright as she took in every detail of the room. 'You've done an incredible job.'

'Thank you. It's come together really well.'

Anna watched her guests mingling, laughing, chatting, making new acquaintances and celebrating old friendships. For weeks during the planning of this party they had been simply names on a list, with little to suggest what they might have in common, or how well they would gel in a shared environment. Ben had joked that it was like organising a wedding reception, where you were the only glue that held everyone together.

'No matter how well you know everyone there will always be that worrying risk that they might all hate each other when you're not in the room.'

'Oh, thanks for that. I feel so much better now,' she'd replied, pretending to take offence. 'I'll make sure the local police have their riot squad on hand, just in case.'

'Anna Browne, you think of everything...'

The memory of Ben's cheeky smile warmed Anna's heart as she stood with Elsie and Woody, watching The Pinstripes band working their way through their first set. An older couple were already on the dance floor, the man twirling his wife to *Lovely Day*, much to the delight of their fellow guests. It was so wonderful to see a couple still so much in love and Anna knew enough about them to know what their love had cost them.

Was she the glue that held everyone together? She was probably the only person in the room who understood why each of her guests were special, but that made Anna feel even more privileged to have been able to bring such an

incredible group of individuals together. Some she knew by acquaintance, others she had known for a long time, but one thing united them: each person had amazing personal stories.

Her grandmother used to tell Anna and her brother Ruari when they were little to pay attention to the stories people told.

‘A hundred-thousand stories pass you by every day as you walk down the street,’ she’d say. ‘Often the most ordinary-looking individuals carry the most exciting stories.’

Anna considered the countless stories in the room tonight, the experiences, loves and losses that each guest carried with them; and gazed down at her beautiful red dress, evidence of her own real-life adventure.

‘Great band, *angel.*’ Woody was nodding appreciatively as he watched The Pinstripes. ‘So together and tight. Reminds me of a support band Hellfinger had in Tokyo, ’86...’

Anna smiled as Woody launched into one of his incredible reminiscences. Tonight was a night of stories: hidden, known, shared and yet to be discovered...



## NINE

'Magsie Parker, you dance like a dream,' grinned Dudley as he twirled his wife gently underneath their joined hands.

'We're the only pair on the dance floor,' Mags replied, blushing as she saw the group of guests watching approvingly. 'You could have waited until more people were dancing.'

'Not when I'm with the woman of my dreams,' her husband said, chuckling as he pulled her close. 'I want the world to watch us.' He grinned over Mags' shoulder at the lead singer of the band who gave him a huge smile and blew a kiss. 'Our Rom's singing up a storm tonight.'

Mags gave a little wave at her niece, feeling a swell of pride. 'She's a star. They all are. And to think that motley crew of scruffy teenagers who used to hang out on the roof of *Our Pol* in their summer holidays could make music that beautiful.'

The memory was as warming as the sight of them now. Romily and her friends laughing and singing on the roof of Mags and Dudley's beloved narrowboat home, their voices and humour a gift to her as her baking was to them.

'I reckon that's your doing, Magsie,' Dudley said.

'Now, how do you work that out?'

'Well, all those Saturday afternoons they spent nattering on our narrowboat, eating your cakes. I'd say your baking was responsible for making them chase their dreams.'

'Dudley Parker, you daft beggar! My baking has nothing to do with that. They're a talented bunch.'

'I'm telling you, your cakes are magic, bab. They change the way people think about themselves. You look at those customers at the café. Right bunch of misfits they were before they tasted your baking. And now look at them! We've had weddings, job changes and even a round the world cruise that started out as a conversation over your Lemon Drizzle. It was your cakes that got them talking.'

'Dudley?'

'Yes, bab?'

'Shut up and dance.'

'Right you are.'





## TEN

The last song of the band's first set ended and the room was filled with warm applause. Battling a sudden attack of nervous butterflies, Anna approached the microphone, cue card in hand.

'Um, hello everyone. Thank you so much for being here this evening. As you know, we're raising money for a brilliant charity that does so much to help people with cancer and their families. Many of you here tonight have been personally touched by this dreadful disease or know someone who has watched a loved one battle with it.' Anna's gaze inevitably drifted to Elsie, who was nodding in agreement; and Harri Langton to her right, who had lost both parents to cancer. 'I would like to introduce my friend, Nell Sullivan, who has come all the way from San Francisco to be here. Could we give her a round of applause, please?'

The guests did as they were asked, parting as a smiling young woman hurried over to Anna.

'Hey, gorgeous,' she said, kissing Anna's cheek.

'Are you ready?'

Nell nodded. 'Absolutely. Video is cued and ready to go.' She took the microphone from Anna. 'Good evening...'

Anna moved back into the crowd, smiling as a handsome, dark-haired man put his arm around her shoulder.

'Great party, Anna,' he whispered.

'I'm so glad you two could make it, Max.'

'Are you kidding? We had to be here,' Max Rossi grinned. 'This party's practically by royal appointment. I hope the video works. Some of the art collective put it together for us last week.'

'It'll be brilliant,' Anna assured him.

'You should see the outtakes,' he grinned. 'Our elderly neighbours stole the show.'

Right on cue, an old couple appeared on the screen.

'Is this thing on?'

‘Stop yanking it, Saul Alfaro! The boy knows what he’s doing.’

‘I never in my whole life thought I’d have one of these little microphones like the newscasters on TV. *Testing, testing...*’ The party guests laughed as the old man leaned over his tie microphone and spoke loudly into it.

The video flashed and the couple were now seated in what appeared to be a very beige living room.

‘I lost my brother to cancer,’ the old man said. ‘And then my niece found a lump. She’s doin’ good now, but we were all so scared for her for so long.’

‘My mother, God rest her soul. And two of my cousins,’ the old lady added. ‘Too many of my friends, also. You’d think if they can put a man on the moon they could cure this disease already. There has to be a way to stop it.’

The video cut to an American diner, where a woman of uncertain years dressed in a tight-fitting leopard-print top and jeans, a white apron tied around her waist, was serving coffee and plates of enormous cinnamon toast slices to her customers.

‘I’m Annie,’ she told the camera. ‘And cancer is a bitch. My sister’s husband survived it. But I have plenty of friends who didn’t. It’s an evil disease and it respects nobody.’

A view of the San Francisco Bay flicked onto the screen, Nell appearing in shot walking alongside the water with another woman who looked as if she might be her sister. ‘Here in America I’ve seen the great work cancer charities are doing to support cancer sufferers and their families, with counselling, respite care and help after a loved one has been lost. That’s why I’m proud to support Anna’s fundraiser at Hillford Hall tonight. I ask you to please consider giving generously and thanks for watching.’

The film ended and Nell smiled at the gathered guests. ‘We just wanted to show you all that cancer touches everyone, all over the world. This wonderful party tonight has been put together by our lovely friend Anna Browne and I think you’ll agree she’s done a phenomenal job.’

The room erupted in warm applause, causing Anna’s cheeks to redden.

‘So please, enjoy the night, give what you can and thanks so much for being here.’

Anna embraced Nell when she re-joined them. ‘That was fantastic. Thank you.’

‘Hey, you guys should come visit us soon,’ Max said. ‘You’d love it.’

‘I might just do that. So, how are you enjoying your stay in the UK?’

Nell smiled. ‘It’s so good to get away for a few days. We’ve been so busy lately and I missed home so much. It’s great to be back, catching up with old friends – and staying in a gorgeous stately home isn’t too bad, either.’

‘She thinks she’s in Downton Abbey,’ Max said, wrapping his arms around Nell. ‘I reckon she’ll be installing a servant bell in our apartment when we get home.’

Nell beamed up at him. ‘We might need one, soon. Although we won’t be the ones shouting orders.’

Anna gasped as Nell patted her stomach. ‘No! You’re not...?’

Nell and Max giggled together.

Anna squealed and threw her arms around them both. ‘Oh wow! I’m so happy for you! When?’

‘Due April 5<sup>th</sup>,’ Max said, kissing Nell’s head. ‘It was a bit of a shock, but we’re getting used to the idea now. Eva, on the other hand, is beyond excited. She’s convinced she’s going to get twin sisters.’

‘Oh, wow...’

‘We’re hoping she’ll be happy with just one,’ Nell chuckled. ‘You’ll have to come out and see us when the little one’s here.’

‘I will! Definitely.’

Stories, Grandma Morwenna said, were everywhere, jumping out at you when you least expected them. Real life was more remarkable than anything you could dream up in the pages of a book. As Anna hugged her friends again she couldn’t help thinking her grandmother was right...



## ELEVEN

‘That’s our last song for this set. We’re The Pinstripes and we’ll be back with you after a little break,’ Romily smiled, as her band prepared to leave the stage. ‘I have it on good authority that the buffet is now being served, so please enjoy your food and we’ll see you soon...’

The background music faded up and The Pinstripes left their instruments to filter out into the room. Anna left Nell and Max to catch the band before they headed back to their dressing room.

‘Thank you so much,’ she said, as Romily, Wren, Tom, Jack and Charlie joined her. ‘That was fantastic.’

Romily shook her hand. ‘Glad you enjoyed it. Next set will be in about forty minutes or so, if that’s okay?’

‘Perfect. Please make sure you all have something to eat. I think the caterers have outdone themselves with the buffet – we’ve practically had to reinforce the tables.’

‘Already heading that way,’ Tom grinned. ‘We make it our aim to get to the table before anybody else in the room.’

Jack nudged his shoulder. ‘Talking of which, early birds are getting the worms...’

Anna glanced across the room to where a queue was already forming. ‘Don’t let me keep you, then.’

‘Cheers!’ Jack, Tom and Charlie hurried across the dance floor to claim their spot in the line.

Romily raised her eyes heavenwards. ‘Every gig it’s the same.’

‘Well, I’ll leave you to it. If you need anything in your dressing room – water or extra drinks – just let me know.’

‘We will, Anna. Thank you.’

As Anna moved back to her guests, she noticed Romily grab Wren’s hand and lead her out of the stateroom...



## TWELVE

'Be careful – it's very icy.'

'My dear, I am more than capable of walking on frosty ground. I have had significantly more years' experience of it than both of you combined.'

'All the same, Dorothy, I'd feel bad if you were to slip. Take my arm – to humour me if nothing else.'

Grandma Dot's frown immediately softened and she beamed up at her handsome escort. 'Well, Dr Steinmann, when you ask so nicely, how can I possibly refuse?'

Bea James grinned as she followed her grandmother and Jake up the lantern-lit path towards Hillford Hall's magical entrance. It was an impossibly English scene: a serene winterscape with an elegant Georgian red sandstone mansion at its warm heart. She'd become so used to winters in New York that she'd all but forgotten how beautiful December could be back home.

*Home.* It was a confusing word for Bea these days.

Home was Brooklyn, with her bookshop, Hudson River Books, and her apartment; her neighbour's crazy cat and her friends who meant the world to her. And Jake – the biggest surprise New York had given her.

She was thrilled that Rosie and Ed were here, too – a meeting of her two lives represented by the people she knew in the room.

Grandma Dot had been only too happy to come to the event at Hillford Hall this evening, remembering dances she and her late husband had attended here in their youth and longing to see inside the mansion again.

Jake, like his brother Ed, was just blown away by the *Englishness* of everything: the pretty little villages, the beautiful Staffordshire border countryside and now a stately home that could have come straight from the pages of a classic novel.

For Bea, it was nice to be back in England – for the time being. A home she remembered from the beginning of her life, that she was rediscovering now on her temporary return.

This was going to be her first Christmas here since she'd left the UK to emigrate to America in her late teens. Her parents were overjoyed to have her back and she knew that as soon as she saw the old Christmas decorations and settled back into the James family festive traditions she would love every minute.

But the Bea James who had returned this Christmas was a world away from the Bea James who had left just before Christmas many years before – and she was very aware of it tonight. The fact was, she felt more American than British these days. It both surprised her and made her a little sad. She'd spent so many years dreaming of living and working in New York before she'd moved there and now she wondered how much of her formative years she had spent thinking about that instead of enjoying being in the country of her birth.

'This place is amazing,' Jake said, helping Grandma Dot out of her coat and handing it to the cloakroom attendant.

'It used to be the local pick-up joint,' Grandma Dot said, clearly thrilled at the surprise her statement caused Jake. 'A bit of a lovers' den, if you will.'

'Oh really?'

'Mm-hmm. Don't believe the lie those old films tell you about how chaste we all were. The stories these grounds could tell you about the shenanigans we got up to at Hillford would render you speechless! I myself have *rather* fond memories of that boating lake...'

'Dorothy! I'm shocked!'

Grandma Dot smirked like a naughty child and patted his arm. 'Good. You should be. Shall we go in, darlings?'

Bea planted a kiss on her grandmother's cheek. 'I think we should before you bring any more startling revelations.'

She looked up at the elegant staircase rising before them, each step cloaked in thickly piled china blue carpet held in place with shiny brass stair rods that sparkled in the light of the hundreds of fairy-lights curled around the polished mahogany banisters.

The entire space seemed to twinkle and gleam, hinting at what awaited them at the party. Tonight was going to be special, she knew, not only for the company she'd longed to enjoy but the experience of spending time in such a beautiful, grand house. And sharing it with the man she loved and the



grandmother she adored made the whole night as perfect as it could possibly be...



## THIRTEEN

'Right. Out with it.' Romily folded her arms and fixed Wren with her stare.

Wren looked decidedly uncomfortable. 'I have no idea what you mean.'

'Yes, you do. You've been on edge for weeks, Wren. What's going on?'

'Nothing.'

'Try again.'

Wren flopped down with exasperation on a chair in their opulent dressing room. 'Honestly, Rom. I'm fine.'

'No, you're not. And neither is D'Wayne. I haven't said anything because I thought you might tell me in your own time. But you're not yourself and I can't watch you being like that without asking why.'

'Really, there's nothing to tell.'

Rom kicked off her heels and pulled up a chair opposite Wren. It bothered her that Wren could be so down and not want to discuss it. This behaviour was troubling from the woman who normally wore her heart on her sleeve and wanted to talk about everything – every aspect of the situation and every possible outcome – for hours into the night. 'I don't believe you.'

'I'm really hungry. The buffet's out and the boys will have cleared it like a plague of locusts if we don't get out there soon. I had to come straight from work here this afternoon – I'm starving.'

Rom had heard all the excuses before and she was determined not to budge. 'So I'll text Charlie and ask him to grab a plate for you.' She reached over to her bag on the table and pulled out her phone. The tactic worked because Wren let out a dramatic groan.

'Okay, okay. If I tell you will you *promise* to butt out?'

Rom considered the bargain. How could she tell if she'd be able to leave Wren alone once she knew what was happening? What if her best friend needed her help? But she'd looked so sad for weeks, as if the light that usually radiated out from her had been permanently dimmed. That couldn't continue.

'All right, I promise. Tell me...'

## FOURTEEN

Dudley Parker's eyes were practically on sticks as he surveyed the sumptuous buffet. The tables seemed endless, packed with plates of delicious food. His stomach grumbled contentedly as he waited, plate and cutlery in hand.

'I feel like a kid in a sweet shop,' he whispered to his wife. 'I've come over all emotional thinking what I'm going to pick.'

'Try a bit of everything then. But don't go too mad. Remember what the doctor said.'

'*Pah*. Dr Thornton's a proper killjoy. Telling me to eat healthy, when he's the size of a truck! There should be some law against it.'

Mags rolled her eyes. 'He's doing his job, Dudley. And your cholesterol's scary at the moment. I don't want you carking out on me.'

'Spoken like a true romantic,' he chuckled, kissing her cheek. 'I'll be sensible, don't you worry. I need to keep healthy so I can undo all my good work with your cakes!'

Further along the queue, Rosie and Harri waited. Rosie was acutely aware of the strange quietness over her cousin – and as the line ahead didn't appear to be moving, she decided to seize the moment.

'Are you okay, H?'

Harri smiled at her, a tiny betrayal of suspicion in her eyes. 'Of course I am. Why do you ask?'

'Oh, no reason.' Reconsidering her answer, Rosie shook her head. 'No, actually, there *is* a reason. Something's not right with you and Alex.' She caught Harri's sigh and hurried on. 'No, listen. I'm not prying, but I noticed it when you met us at the airport and it's been bugging me ever since. You don't have to tell me what it is. I just wanted you to know that I can see you're not happy and I'm here if you want talk.'

Harri's blue eyes filled with tears. 'I should have known you'd spot it. We had a row. A bad one. On the drive over to pick you and Ed up at the airport. You know me and Al, we're no strangers to arguments. But this one felt – and *feels* – different.'

‘What happened?’

‘It’s all so – *unnecessary*. And I wouldn’t mind, but it wasn’t my fault. He overheard me talking with his mum and completely misunderstood. He’s been on edge a bit lately with planning the second coffee shop and I know he’s strung out and tired. But it was like he bundled up all that frustration and chucked it straight at me. The worst of it was, I didn’t even realise he’d heard our conversation until it all came out in the car. I’m angry that he didn’t just ask me about it. I mean, he knows what Viv’s like.’

Rosie gave a wry grin. ‘*Everyone* knows what Viv’s like.’

‘Exactly. But instead of stopping for one second and just asking me about it before flying off the handle he took offence and assumed the worst.’

The queue shuffled a few steps closer to the buffet table.

‘Can I ask what it was about?’

Harri let out a long sigh. ‘Children.’

‘Ah.’

‘Exactly. I don’t know, Rosie, things were really good between us and even with all the craziness around Wātea 2, I thought me and Al were so strong. But honestly, since you’ve been here, I don’t know any more.’

‘Harri, Alex adores you. It’s plain as day.’

‘Maybe. He isn’t being very adoring at the moment.’

‘Have you talked to him since the argument? Told him how hurt you’re feeling?’

The look Rosie’s suggestion was met by told her everything she needed to know. Harri shook her shoulders as if shrugging off a wet coat. ‘Anyway, there’s nothing I can do about it tonight, so let’s just forget it and enjoy ourselves, okay?’

‘Okay. But you know I’m here whenever you want to...’

‘I know. Ooh, look, the queue’s moved again. Come on, let’s eat.’

With a heavy heart, Rosie followed.



## FIFTEEN

The dining room-turned dressing room was ominously silent as Romily waited for an answer from her best friend.

Wren had pulled her thick black jumper from her bag that she had arrived in and had wrapped it over her knees like a blanket. She appeared even smaller than usual, dwarfed by the elegant chair in which she sat and the chunky cable-knit of her sweater. Her fingers fiddled with a silver hipflask that regularly made an appearance at gigs, but today she wasn't using a tiny amount to give her vocal chords a little extra warmth before performing; instead she was knocking back considerable amounts.

'Go steady with that, Wren. You don't want to wreck your voice.'

Wren stared impassively at the hipflask in her hands and lowered it.

'Yeah. Good point.'

'So, come on then. What's going on?'

'D'Wayne and I split up.'

Romily's eyes widened. 'Oh no! When?'

'A month ago.'

'A *month*...? Why didn't you tell me?'

'We had a lot of gigs. D'Wayne's still our manager and I didn't want to make things awkward for everyone.'

Romily let the news sink in. How had nobody in The Pinstripes seen what was happening? The jokes had continued, Wren batting each one away with trademark dryness as she'd always done: but now she knew the truth, Romily couldn't believe all of the band had been so blissfully unaware of what was really happening. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Don't be. I thought we were compatible. I was wrong. It happens.'

'No, I mean, I'm sorry for not asking sooner. For not noticing.'

Wren unscrewed the hipflask cap and took another sip. 'I wouldn't worry if I were you. I didn't have a clue what was going on until the day we broke up.'

'Oh hun. What happened?'

'*Sherise* happened.'

'Who?'

'Oh you know, Sherise Walters? The mother of D'Wayne's child?'

'What?'

Wren reached down into the pocket of her coat, which had been hung over the back of the chair next to hers and pulled out a crumpled white envelope. 'I found this in his car. It wasn't hidden: I cleared some stuff off the passenger seat to be able to sit down and the letter was on the top of it all. It's from her solicitor, demanding money to be paid monthly to Sherise for the care and wellbeing of *their son*.'

'How old is this son?' Romily asked, hoping against hope that it might be an older child from a previous relationship.

'You see that? That face you're wearing? That was me when I first read it. Hoping it was just something from his past that he'd somehow omitted to tell me. I could've coped with that, you know? We all have skeletons in our cupboards. I assumed we'd been together long enough for anything like that not to be a deal-breaker. But D'Wayne Junior is *four months* old. And we've been together four years. Now, maths was never my strong point, but even I can work out that particular sum.'

'Oh Wren...'

Wren rubbed angrily at a tear with the sleeve of her jumper. 'No, I'm fine. At least, I will be. The worst thing is, it wasn't a surprise. Something had been off with him for a while. He'd hurry out of the room to take phone calls, which wasn't like him. You know D'Wayne, he's normally be glued to his phone in full sight of everyone, day and night. He was funny about me answering his home phone, too. He'd go off the deep end at me for picking up a telesales call, but never explain why he was so opposed to me taking calls. Who does that?'

'Does he know you saw the letter?'

'He should do. He was sitting in the driver's seat when I found it.'

Romily stared at her friend. 'That's terrible! What did he say?'

'He tried to tell me the letter had been delivered to him by mistake. I mean, that would probably work as a plausible excuse for ninety-nine per cent of the country, but not him. I'm no expert, but I would hazard a guess that D'Wayne

and D'Wayne Junior are probably the only two D'Waynes in the country. So I told him we were over. And we are. That's it.'

Romily blew out a long, low whistle and began to pace the floor, Wren's revelation heavy in the air between them. She was torn between seeking out the band's manager and telling him exactly what she thought of him and protecting her friend by honouring the secret. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Nothing. It's done, Rom.'

'It might be between you and D'Wayne, but I don't want him to manage us any more. And I'm pretty sure the others will feel the same when they find out.'

Wren's eyes narrowed. 'They aren't going to find out. I mean it, Rom. I'm still getting my head around what's happened – I really don't want everyone else wading in right now.'

'But at some point...'

'At some point it's going to come out, I know. Just not tonight, okay? I just want to enjoy the gig and this lovely venue and turn my head off for a couple of hours.'

'Guys – what are you doing?'

Romily and Wren turned to see Tom standing in the doorway, an overflowing paper plate of buffet food in one hand. 'We're just...' Romily began, glancing at Wren, who glared back at her. 'We'll be there in a bit.'

If Romily had told Tom she was growing an extra arm he couldn't have looked more bewildered. But when food was as important as it was to The Pinstripes' lead guitarist, this wasn't surprising. 'I'd come now if I were you. Those guests are like *gannets*. If you don't grab food soon all that'll be left is dust.' He stuffed a mini quiche into his mouth and gave a crumb-spilling grin before heading back to the call of free food.

'Right, let's get back.' Wren peeled the sweater off her knees, put her heels back on and grabbed a mirror from the pile of makeup on the table to check her hair.

Not sure what else to say, Romily picked up her shoes. All of a sudden, she wasn't hungry. How was she going to keep this a secret from the rest of the band – and, specifically, Charlie? 'Honey, are you sure you're okay to carry on?'

Wren snapped the compact mirror shut, the sharp sound echoing like a warning shot around the elegant room. ‘Yes. Can we leave it now?’ Her frown smoothed a little. ‘We’ll talk about it soon, I promise. Let’s just get Christmas out the way first, okay?’

Romily knew no more would be said tonight, but the news sat uneasily within her as she followed Wren back to Hillford Hall’s stateroom...





## SIXTEEN

'So, Miss James, d'ya fancy a dance?' Jake Steinmann grinned at Bea, giving a bow he hoped was sufficiently like the one he'd seen Prince Charming giving Cinderella in a Disney movie he could just about remember from his childhood.

He'd never pictured himself a romantic hero before, but tonight – in this place – he wanted to be. For Bea. She looked so beautiful tonight and the soft light that surrounded her made her luminous.

'I'd love to, Mr Steinmann.' She took his hand and let him lead her onto the dance floor as the band began to play *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*.

'You look amazing,' he said.

'I know.'

Jake smiled. A year into their relationship and he already could guess what she would say before she said it. He loved that. Even after seven years with Jessica he hadn't always been sure of what she was thinking. He loved that Bea's sense of humour was always there, no matter what she faced. It mirrored that of his own family, particularly his older brother Ed. Humour, Ed always said, was your best weapon against the bad stuff in life. As long as you could laugh about something, you had hope. Bea subscribed to this theory, too and she was fast bringing Jake around to her way of thinking.

'What are you thinking about?'

He looked down to see Bea smiling up at him, a slight wrinkle forming on the bridge of her nose the way it always did when she was amused by something. 'You, me, this awesome house. But mostly you.'

'Oh well, that's good,' she beamed, snuggling her head against his chest as they moved together across the dance floor. 'Remember the last time we danced like this?'

'Remember it? It's seared onto my psyche. You broke my heart.'

Bea pulled back. 'I did not.'

'Oh, so the "I-like-you-but-I'm-going-to-marry-somebody-else" line was just small talk, was it?'

'As I recall, you had revelations of your own.'

He had to concede on that one. 'Good point. You looked so sad and lost back then I felt my heart being pulled to pieces.'

'Aw. You never told me that before.'

'I never wanted to before. Maybe Grandma Dot's right: maybe there's something about this house that brings out the romantic in people.'

Bea hugged him as the song came to an end. 'I love you.'

'Even when I'm being a slushy fool?'

'Even then.' She took his hand and began to leave the dance floor, but he held back. 'What's the matter?'

This *could* be the perfect moment: Bea in her home country, looking fabulous in the heart of a grand stately home, being watched by her beloved grandmother, surrounded by twinkling lights with all the promise of Christmas to come... He'd considered it on the flight across the Pond from New York, but was it too soon? Last Christmas she'd chosen someone else and he thought he'd lost her forever. Back then he'd prayed for the situation to change, for the impossible to be made possible – and it had happened. Surely that was a sign, wasn't it?

But what if this wasn't the night to ask her? What if she hated the ring hiding in his pocket, or the spontaneous question in a room of mostly strangers?

'Jake?'

The moment passed. 'Sorry. Jet-lag. I need a drink, do you?'

He knew she was watching him, with that quizzical expression of hers, as they walked back to their table where Grandma Dot was waiting. It would have been wrong to ask the question he'd longed to without thinking it through.

Wouldn't it?



## SEVENTEEN

'Hey Anna, we're heading off.' Max Rossi bent down to plant a kiss on Anna's cheek. 'I need to get this lady to bed.'

Nell grinned and hugged Anna. 'Sorry to be a party pooper. I need to rest.'

'You have the best excuse for leaving early,' Anna smiled. 'But you're staying here tonight, aren't you? So I'll see you in the morning?'

'Sure, Nell will be casting her critical eye over Hillford's breakfast menu.'

'Max! I won't at all. I'll be loving someone else cooking breakfast instead of me. I can't remember the last time that happened. Anna, this evening has been phenomenal. And your friends are so wonderful. Elsie and Harri particularly. I think we're going to be having a lot of new friends visit us in San Francisco next year. See you in the morning.'

'Sleep well.'

Anna watched her friends walk hand-in-hand out of the stateroom. It was getting late and the guests were slowly beginning to leave.

Outside it was snowing again, the flakes falling thicker and faster as the evening progressed. Already the silver lanterns had gained caps of glowing snow and the red carpet was being transformed into a pristine white one.

Guests who at first moved to the windows to admire the perfect winter's night scene quickly rethought their plans to stay until the end of the party, concerned for the thickness of the snow forming outside. One by one, they approached Anna, thanking her for a beautiful party and apologising for their earlier-than-usual departures.

By the time The Pinstripes had sung their final song, the stateroom was less than half full. But Anna was happy. All of her plans had come to fruition and she had created the Christmas party she'd seen in her mind. It was magical, perfectly Christmassy and although the donations were still being counted, had raised a sizeable sum for the cancer charity Elsie had nominated.

She said goodbye to another group of guests and sank into a chair by an empty table, absent-mindedly picking up a handful of silver snowflake-shaped sequins from the winter white tablecloth.

'Am I late?'

Anna twisted to see the owner of the voice she already recognised. 'Ben!'

Ben McAra chuckled as Anna threw her arms around him. His coat was cold and smelled of cinnamon spice and freshly fallen snow and she wanted to breathe him in forever.

'Well, hello Anna Browne!'

'What are you doing here? I thought you were working late in the newsroom?'

'I called in a few favours,' he grinned. 'I wanted to surprise you.'

'Well, you did that.'

'Good job I did, too. The roads will be impassable if this snow keeps up.' He lifted his eyes to scan the room. 'Wow, Anna. You've outdone yourself here. If you aren't careful they'll be offering you a job.'

'They did, actually,' Anna smiled, remembering the shocked hotel manager's reaction when he'd seen the completed room earlier.

'You're kidding?'

'Nope. The manager asked for my CV. He might well ask again tomorrow. It's a compliment, but I'm not tempted. This was fun: if I had to do it to pay the bills it would lose its appeal. Can I get you a drink?'

'I think I'll just go to the room, if you don't mind? That journey was a beast. I need a shower, a tea and whatever goodies I can raid from the buffet.' Ben eyed the still-laid tables hungrily.

'Help yourself. I think most people are getting ready to go home now. I'll say the official thank you and as soon as we've cleared everything I'll join you.' She shook her head, the surprise of his being here still making her tingle. 'Thank you. For driving up tonight. I was missing you.'

Ben wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her to him. 'I'd better go to our room then, so you can miss me some more...'



## EIGHTEEN

Rosie reluctantly took a final look at the wintry setting of the party and linked her arm through Harri's as they turned to walk into a real-life snow scene. 'Do we have to go? It was such a gorgeous party.'

'It was. But we probably need to rescue your husband from my fiancé's comprehensive love of real ales.'

'Probably a good idea.'

Harri shivered as they stepped out into the snow, giggling when her heels disappeared in the thick white layer cloaking the path. 'Looks like we should have brought boots!'

She and Rosie clung to one another, wobbling and sliding along the candlelit path. Large snowflakes landed on their shoulders and heads, ice-cold kisses melting on their cheeks.

'Are you going to be able to drive home in this?' Rosie asked, letting out a shriek as her foot slipped and Harri just managed to stop both of them falling.

Given how difficult walking was proving, Harri felt a sudden anxiety grip her. 'I'm going to give it a go. Just out of interest, how *are* you at pushing cars?'

'Now's as good a time as any to learn,' Rosie laughed – stopping abruptly, her grip tightening on Harri's arm.

Harri followed the direction of her cousin's stare to see a dark figure in their path a few feet away. Where had they come from? And with the stillness of the night, how had they done so without making a sound? Harri could see silver-white puffs of breath rising from the shadowy figure. Whoever it was didn't move and neither did Rosie or Harri: a High Noon standoff in the snow.

'Let's go round them,' Harri muttered. If they stepped beyond the row of lanterns there would be just enough room to get past the stubborn figure. But she felt her heart beating faster. What if the stranger blocked their path?

Slowly, the figure lifted its hands to the hood covering its head, then suddenly yelled and doubled over, a spray of snow cresting over his back like a frozen wave. Harri and Rosie shrieked in surprise, instinctively hugging each other.

And then, the hooded figure began to laugh. He pulled himself back upright and looked behind him.

‘That was a cheap shot, dude.’

Harri forgot her fright in an instant. ‘*Alex?* What are you doing here?’

Alex removed the hood of his winter jacket and grinned at Harri. ‘Making the most of the snow.’ Another snowball shattered against his back and Alex bent down to bundle a return missile together.

Rosie shook her head, relief sounding in her voice. ‘Ed Steinmann, you big kid.’

From the snowy shadows Ed emerged, breathless with laughter and perhaps more alcohol than he’d consumed for a while. ‘Gotta make the most of the white stuff, Rosie!’ He gave a yelp as Alex’s snowball ricocheted off his arm. Harri stared at the drunken pair, wondering how they had travelled to Hillford Hall and – more importantly – *why* they had come. ‘I’m guessing you need a lift home?’ she called over their shouts and laughter.

‘Actually, we’re *your* ride home, ladies,’ Alex spread his arms wide, wobbling a little as a snowball whizzed past his ear.

‘*Please* tell me you didn’t drive here, not in the state you’re in?’

‘Relax, H. We met Stu from the farm at the pub and he offered to bring us out to get you. The road home’s pretty much impassable unless you have a four-by-four. Stu wasn’t drinking and he has his Land Rover.’

‘Oh.’ It sounded a plausible reason, but Harri couldn’t escape a feeling of something darker, an impending storm cloud neither could avoid. She’d thought of little else tonight, the evening’s party providing much-needed light relief but not enough to fully allay her fears. And now Alex was here, at some considerable effort, when it would have been far easier to stay in the cosy confines of the village pub or welcoming warmth of Two Trees Cottage, just a happy stumble away.

Ed appeared at Alex’s side, red-cheeked and happy. They exchanged a look and Ed reached out to his wife. ‘You look cold. Let’s head over to the car park, okay?’

Realising she was being left alone with Alex, Harri’s heart sank. What had they been talking about at the pub? She was pretty certain now that their main

motivation for coming to meet her and Rosie had nothing to do with the weather. When Ed and Rosie were out of sight, she faced Alex alone in the swirling snow.

'H, can we talk?' His smile had vanished. He wore it so often his face appeared alien without it.

'Can't we do this at home? I'm not exactly dressed for outdoor conversation.' The feeling had gone completely from her toes and the icy water seeping into her ankles and calves threatened to freeze those, too.

'There's a bench, back there,' Alex indicated over his shoulder. 'We can sit and talk. Just for five minutes. Please?'

*Oh wow, now this is serious...*

Fearing the worst, Harri picked her way over the snowy path to follow Alex, her feet tiny when she stepped in his large footprints.

Not far from where the lantern-lit path curved away to the car park was an old cherry tree, with a bench resting against its trunk. Strings of multi-coloured fairy lights had been woven through its bare branches, casting a rainbow of colours across the snow-covered ground. It could have been the most perfect setting had it not been for the growing sense of dread Harri felt, twisting her stomach like the gnarled brittle branches above her head as she sat down beside Alex.

She remembered the last time she had seen him looking at her the way he was now - back in the porch of her cottage on the most embarrassing night of her life. Back then, he'd told her he loved her, but what if tonight he took it all back?

'Al, I know things haven't been right with us recently, but...'

'Let me say this, okay?'

*This is it. The moment he walks away from me...*

Harri had dreaded this since their fight and now she could see it playing out before her eyes. She nodded, silently willing him not to say the words she feared hearing.

'I told Ed tonight about what happened with us. I said it's challenged everything I thought I understood about me and you. I know you've felt it too, H, and we can't ignore what happened. I *hate* fighting with you.'

'I don't enjoy it either.'

'Ed insisted we come out here to meet you and Rosie. He gave me a lecture on the importance of being straight with someone that you...' he hesitated, '...*care* about.'

*Care about?* This was worse than Harri thought. Now Alex couldn't even say he loved her.

'So be straight with me,' she said, deciding to meet whatever was coming head on. 'Because I've tried so hard to explain what you overheard. Your mum made a throwaway line about grandchildren and I was just humouring her. I thought if I sounded like I was agreeing with her she'd drop it and move on. I wasn't saying I wanted kids, or that I was with you because I expected children from our relationship. I would never say that. And I'd certainly never say that to her if we hadn't spoken about it.'

'I thought you had.'

'Yes, I know that's what you thought. But that makes me sad because it shows how little you know me, Al, even after all this time.'

'That's what I wanted to say tonight, right now, before we go back and Christmas starts and we don't have a moment to be on our own. I was angry with you – but that was my mistake, not yours. I hate that it made us step away from each other but I felt like I suddenly didn't know you. And that scared me because this – *us* – is really the only thing I understand.'

Harri looked up at the rainbow lights, their tiny brave beacons blurring in the steam from her breath and burgeoning tears in her eyes. 'Me too. I just wish this *thing* would go away. We were happy before it showed up. Weren't we?'

'Yes.'

She turned her gaze on him. 'Then you *have* to trust me, Al. You have to believe that you will always be the first to hear anything about our relationship - and that the very last person in the world I would discuss us with is your mother.'

'I do. I'm sorry.' He stared up at the snowflakes tumbling from the night sky. 'I'm such an idiot. Ed told me I was.' He reached for her hand. 'The kids thing spooked me. I'm just not ready for that yet...'

The snow creaked beneath Harri's frozen shoes as she twisted towards him, feeling warmth and strength as she took his hand. 'I'm not either. I don't



think I'm ruling it out entirely but right now, I like us. We have more to do, and see, and be, before we even think about that.'

In the twinkling light beneath the cherry tree lanterns, Alex's gaze held hers. 'I love you, Harri.'

Tension between them melted like the snowflakes landing on her cheek and Harri let Alex pull her towards him. 'Then can we stop this?'

He nodded, kissing the tears from her eyes.

And suddenly, the winter night was magical again, soft flakes falling in silent splendour, covering the tracks where party guests had walked, making everything appear new. It was as if the night sparkled with possibility, sprinkled like tiny crystals of moonlight across the silent park.

From a window high in Hillford Hall, Anna Browne saw the kissing couple on the bench beneath the snow-heavy cherry tree boughs, and smiled. Tonight was a night to be happy, she decided, a time to hope for better things and to dream of the impossible. And as snowflakes fell past the window, she closed her eyes and let herself be swept up by the magic of the night.

 **THE END** 