

Christmas
at
Lilac Cottage







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ZAFFRE



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To the wonderful bloggers who constantly tweet, retweet, blog, review, share, shout, gush and generally get very overexcited for me. You guys are amazing and I couldn't do it without you. I love you all. I hope one day we can all meet in a room where there's lots of cake and I can come round and hug you all personally. Until that day, this book is for you.







Chapter 1

The timer went off on the oven and Penny quickly dropped her sketch book and grabbed her oven gloves. Opening the oven door released a waft of gorgeous, rich fruity smells into the kitchen, making Penny smile with excitement. The mince pies looked golden, crisp and perfectly done. She quickly transferred them to a wire rack to cool and gave the warm mulled wine a quick stir as it simmered on the hob.

She looked around at the green-leafed garlands that covered the fireplace and the white fairy lights that twinkled from in between the leaves, the lights that lined the windows also lending a sparkling glow to the room in the dullness of the late winter afternoon. She knew that next door, in the annexe, looked equally inviting now that she had spent hours decorating it in suitable festive attire ready for the new arrivals.

Everything was perfect and Penny couldn't wait to meet them.

Henry and Daisy Travis had been referred to her by the agency in charge of finding tenants for her annexe. Although Penny would have preferred a single woman like her, the young couple came with great references and no children.

Not that she had an issue with children; she loved them. She had even thought at one point in her life that she might have some of her own but that had passed her by. She just wanted to make friends with people who were at the same point in their life as she was.





One by one all her friends had got married and had children, and each time a new child in the town was born it seemed to add weight to her solitary existence. Everyone had someone to love and look after. Penny had a fat, lazy dog called Bernard. The loneliness inside her had grown recently to an almost tangible thing. Whenever people asked if she ever felt isolated up on the hill on her own, she always batted it away with a cheery smile and talk of how she never had time to feel that way with her job. And while it was true that her job as the town's only ice carver did keep her very busy, she knew she took on a lot of work to try to distract herself from how utterly alone she really felt.

She had always lived in Lilac Cottage and she could never imagine living anywhere else. The view over the town of White Cliff Bay and the rugged white coastline that lent the town its name was stunning; she could look at it for hours and never grow tired of it. But the hustle and bustle of the town was a good ten minutes' drive from where she lived and, although she loved the remoteness of her home, she was starting to hate it too.

Renting the annexe out would be a good way to make some new friends and, even though they would still lead separate lives, Penny hoped they would be able to chat from time to time.

Penny checked her watch again, a nervous excitement pulsing through her. She had cooked lasagne for them and she hoped they could spend the night chatting over wine and a good meal and really get to know each other.

It was going to be perfect and she couldn't wait to start this next chapter of her life.





Henry slammed his hands on the steering wheel as another red light forced him to stop. In a town that was probably no more than a few miles long they seemed to have traffic lights on every corner and every single one of them had been red so far.

This had to be the worst moving day ever. The expression of you get what you pay for couldn't be more true today. As the annexe he was moving into was fully furnished, he only needed a small van to bring his other belongings. He'd stupidly hired the cheapest company to move his stuff and now the van was sitting in White Cliff Beach in the furthest reaches of Yorkshire instead of White Cliff Bay in rural Devon.

And what was with the people in the town? They asked so many questions. Stopping for petrol in the town's only petrol station, stopping at a supermarket, and then a café for lunch with Daisy, he had been accosted by about thirty different people who wanted his whole life story. Daisy was lovely and sweet and would chat to anyone and everyone, the complete opposite to him; he just wanted to tell everyone to sod off and leave them alone.

Daisy was staying with his sister tonight, which was a good job too as he was in a foul mood. All he wanted now was to get to this house, unpack the few things he had brought with him and fall asleep in front of the TV or over a good book.

He just hoped that Penny Meadows, his landlady, wasn't a talker. Living up on the hilltops all by herself and completely cut off from the town, he presumed she was some kind of hermit and liked to keep herself to herself. That suited him fine. He didn't want to make friends, he didn't want to chat to anyone. He just wanted to be left alone.





He turned onto the long driveway leading up to what he hoped was Lilac Cottage. He had got lost three times trying to find the blasted place and when he stopped to ask directions, people seemed to close ranks and send him the opposite way, as if they were trying to keep the place hidden. As he drove over the crest of the hill he saw it. The house was a pale purple colour. He had presumed the name Lilac Cottage would come from nearby lilac trees, not the actual colour of the house. It looked like somewhere Barbie might live. With the lights twinkling happily in a multitude of colours from every tree, bush and fence surrounding the home, it just added to the sickeningly cutesy feel. Daisy would love it. He glared at the lights as if they were causing him great offence. Bloody Christmas. Humbug.



A silver Range Rover pulled up on Penny's drive and she nearly cheered with excitement. She ran to the front door to greet her new tenants, but then held back for a few seconds. Yanking the door open before they'd even turned off the engine might seem a bit over-enthusiastic. She didn't want to come across as too keen. She counted to ten, quickly, then opened the door. The man standing on her doorstep with light snowflakes swirling around him was. . . beautiful. He was so tall she had to crane her neck to look him in the eyes, slate-grey angry eyes hidden underneath long, dark eyelashes. He was muscular too. He had dark, stubbly hair and a deep frown that was marring his otherwise gorgeous features.

'I'm Henry Travis.'

Penny supposed she should say something but annoyingly any coherent words seemed to elude her. His frown deepened





some more at her inadequate silence and she finally found her voice.

‘Penny Meadows, pleased to meet you. Come in, I’ll show you your new home.’

She ushered him in but, as she looked out, Daisy was nowhere in sight. Maybe she was coming later. She closed the door and stepped back into her front room, which seemed so much smaller all of a sudden now Henry was filling it with his enormous size. She tried to get past him to lead him into the kitchen but he was too big to squeeze past. He stared down at her with confusion as she tried to slide through the tiny gap and then finally he stepped to one side.

She walked into the kitchen, feeling awkward and clumsy in his presence.

‘This is the connecting door,’ Penny said lamely, showing him the obviously connecting door. Next she’d be saying things like, ‘This is the door handle and this is the sofa.’

‘But we have our own separate front door, don’t we?’ Henry said.

‘Of course, but this will always be open so feel free to pop in any time.’

Henry’s scowl deepened so much she could barely see his eyes. He stepped through the door, banging his head on the low door frame. He swore softly as he rubbed it.

‘Oh god, I’m so sorry. I didn’t realise it was that low.’

He glared at her as he stepped into his lounge. ‘Jeez, it’s tiny.’

Penny had always thought it was cute and cosy, but with his massive build the place looked like a doll house.

‘Erm. . . through there is your kitchen and your front door, which leads out onto the back garden. So I suppose technically it’s your back door.’ She giggled, nervously, mentally





slapping her forehead with how stupid she sounded. ‘Upstairs are the two bedrooms and the bathroom.’ Penny winced at how small the bathroom was going to be for Henry. He’d have to bend almost double to fit his head under the sloped roof of the shower.

He took two giant steps and ducked into the kitchen, shaking his head incredulously, probably at the size of it.

He looked back at Penny and must have seen the desperate hope in her eyes as his features softened slightly. ‘It’s lovely, and it’s only for a few months so I’m sure I can remember to duck when I walk between the rooms until we find somewhere bet. . . bigger.’

Penny’s face fell. ‘You’re not staying?’

Henry shook his head. ‘We have our name down for a house in the town. Rob at the agency said he thinks he will have somewhere by March or April at the latest. Did he not tell you this was short term?’

Penny swallowed down the disappointment and shook her head. She had been trying for months to rent out the annexe without any success and in the end left it in the hands of the agency, and even they had struggled to fill it. Now it seemed that, in a few months, Henry and Daisy would be gone, leaving Penny all alone again.

She forced a smile on her face, determined to make those months count. ‘So I’ve put a bed in the second bedroom but if you wish to use it as a study or something else, then I can easily remove it.’

Henry looked at her as if she was stupid. ‘No, we’ll obviously be needing the second bed.’

Penny blinked. Maybe they had separate bedrooms. She knew lots of couples who slept apart for one reason or another.





She could never imagine sleeping apart from her husband, but then she didn't have one of those, so who was she to judge?

'That's fine. I, erm. . . made some mince pies and some mulled wine if you wanted to have something to eat before you unpack.'

'No, I'd rather just get everything in before it gets dark. Most of my stuff won't arrive until tomorrow – the bloody removal people got lost and ended up in a different part of the country.'

'Oh, how frustrating for you,' Penny said. Maybe that explained the almost permanent frown. 'Well, I can help you bring things in from the car and I've made a lasagne for later, so if you didn't fancy cooking, you and Daisy are more than welcome to come round later to share it with me.'

'Daisy is staying with my sister tonight.'

'Well, you can still come over. . .' Penny trailed off. Was it inappropriate to share dinner with another woman's husband? It was just dinner but the cosy night in with her new neighbours was suddenly turning into something a bit more intimate now it was just the two of them. Henry obviously thought so too as his eyebrows had shot up at her suggestion. 'Or I can plate some up and bring it here for you to have on your own.' There was something even sadder about that, both of them sitting in their separate kitchens eating by themselves.

'I need to get unpacked tonight. Get it all out the way before all Daisy's rubbish gets here. She could fill this whole annexe with all her junk so I better get my stuff put away first. I'll probably just get a pizza and eat it whilst I work.'

Penny felt her shoulders slump in defeat, though she kept the bright smile plastered on her face. 'Well, let me help you with all your boxes.'

'I'd really rather. . .'





‘It won’t take too long with the two of us at it and as it’s starting to snow now, maybe the quicker we get it in the better.’

Henry reluctantly nodded. She followed him out to the car and couldn’t help her eyes wandering down to his bum before she tore them away. What was wrong with her? He was married.

She was disappointed that he hadn’t even glanced at the incredible view yet, the sun covering the waves with garlands of scarlet and gold. He opened the boot and grabbed a box, passing it to her. With the easy way he handled the box, she wasn’t expecting it to be so heavy, but the weight snatched the box out of her fingers and it tumbled to the floor, sending a pile of books over the gravel driveway.

‘Oh god, I’m so sorry. I didn’t realise it was so heavy.’

He stared at her incredulously. Penny sank to the floor and started scooping the books back up into the box, noticing wonderful delights from Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, James Lee Burke, classics from Dickens and Thomas Hardy intermingled with Tolkien, Dan Brown and Iain Banks. She loved a man who liked to read.

Henry sighed, softly. ‘Here, I’ll get these, you take this. It’s pillows so it should be a bit lighter for you.’

Penny took the box, unable to miss the sarcasm in Henry’s words. This wasn’t going well at all. She walked back into her house and into his lounge. She wondered where would be best to put the box that would be out of his way, but everywhere was going to be in his way – he filled the whole room. As it was pillows, she thought she could just put them upstairs for him. She turned and walked straight into him as he ducked into the room. She bounced off him, hit a plant on the shelf behind



her and watched in horror as it fell to the floor, sending dirt cascading all over the cream carpet.

He rolled his eyes and sighed, heavily.

‘Oh crap, I’ll get my Hoover, I’ll clean it up.’

‘Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I think it’s best if I just unpack myself. This place is small enough without the two of us banging into each other.’

‘Of course, sorry, I’m not really helping, am I? Let me just clean this up for you and—’

‘Just leave it.’ Henry was clearly trying to stay calm when he was well and truly pissed off.

Penny nodded, stepping back out into her own kitchen. ‘Well, feel free to cut through my house, it will probably be quicker—’

‘I think I’ll just use my own front door, start as we mean to go on.’

Disappointment slammed into her at that obvious statement of segregation.

‘Shall I run through a few things with you, how the oven works and—’

‘I’m sure I can work it out and I know where to find you if I get stuck.’ He forced a smile onto his face. ‘Thanks for your help, I’ll see you around some time.’

He closed the door between them and Penny stood staring at his shadow in the frosted glass.

She rolled his words around her head. ‘I’ll see you around *some time*.’

She swallowed, sadly. Of course it was stupid of her to expect they might use the connecting door as their front door, that they would let themselves in through her kitchen and they’d chat over a cup of tea or dinner on a daily basis. They would have



their own lives to lead. They had rented a property and that was it. Making friends with her was clearly not on the top of their to-do list, especially as they were planning on moving out soon.

She watched Henry look around the room and then he moved away. She heard the sound of furniture being dragged across the floor. The huge shadow of the bookcase was pulled in front of the door, blocking out all the light from the window, and then it stopped, resting against the door. He clearly had no intention of ever using the connecting door, now or in the future. He had made a blockade to keep her out permanently. Penny felt the tears that sprang to her eyes at this gesture and she dashed them away angrily. She had been rejected.





Chapter 2

Penny zipped up her jacket and walked into the cool room that was attached to the kitchen. The heating was on very low in here and she felt the cold envelop her straight away, but in her warm clothes she didn't feel it too much on her body. It was only her face and hands that felt it.

She looked around her newly converted room; it was so much nicer and roomier to work in here than it was before. The room was large, with the ice-block-making machines up one end that made the metre-long blocks of ice, and there was a large space in the middle for her to work. The floor and walls were tiled to maintain the coolness of the room and for easy cleaning.

She opened up one of the block machines: the water was oscillating slowly inside to keep the ice pure and clear. The water was partly frozen at the bottom, the perfect time to add some of the decorations her clients had asked for. This particular one wanted fairy lights, interwoven with snowflakes. She placed the glittery snowflakes in a rough pattern in the middle of the block and weaved the fairy lights in between them, weighing them down so they didn't float to the top of the water and taping the cable for the lights to the side. It looked magical and she knew it would look even more so once the piece was finished.

The walk-in freezer was up the other end and she opened the door. Several blocks stood along the back wall, waiting patiently





to be turned from large ice cubes into masterpieces. Along the side were about ten sculptures that were finished and ready to go out.

She had been carving ice for about ten years and she never tired of seeing the finished pieces, never failed to feel proud of turning a block of ice into something beautiful. She even enjoyed creating her most commonly requested piece, the swan, which almost every wedding party asked for.

She grabbed one of the ice blocks, which was resting on a wheeled platform, and pulled it out into the cool room, closing the freezer door behind her. She snapped the brakes on the wheels and looked at her blank canvas.

This one was going to be a Christmas tree. She had already stuck the template on a few hours before, now she was going to carve it. She pulled on her gloves, slid her safety goggles over her eyes and picked up the die grinder to trace the outlines of the template. The thin drill bit on the end was the perfect tool to sketch out the design. She pressed very lightly because the main detail would come later.

She could lose herself for hours in here, spending time perfecting each curve, swirl, feather or leaf. When she was in here, the only thing that filled her mind was carving, chiseling, scraping, sawing and creating something intricate and beautiful. That was why she loved it so much, because there was no time to think about how the whole town of White Cliff Bay seemed to be moving forwards with their lives while Penny's life had stagnated, frozen in time. There was no time to focus on her loneliness, or the heartbreaking feeling that her loneliness was probably going to last a lifetime. She could get lost in a sculpture for hours and never have to think about





these things. It was only when she stepped out of the cocoon of her cool room to warm up that the real world invaded her thoughts.

Having finished marking out the lines of the template, she picked up the chainsaw and started lopping off the big pieces she wouldn't need. She wouldn't think about Henry and his slate-grey eyes and she wouldn't think about how her loneliness had seemed to have inexplicably doubled since he had pushed the bookcase in front of the connecting door.



Henry hovered at Penny's back door, unsure whether to knock or not. As he raised his hand to tap on the door, Penny stepped out from some room off the kitchen. She was wearing black waterproof trousers and a black jacket, which clung to all her wonderful curves, making her look sexy as hell. She looked like she was about to get on a motorbike and drive off into the sunset. She pulled off a pair of workman's boots and unzipped the jacket. He quickly looked away in case she was naked underneath. After a few seconds he chanced a very brief look back and was relieved to see she was wearing a tiny vest and, as the waterproof bottoms came off, he could see she was wearing black leggings underneath too. She hung the clothes up in a closet and pulled on a huge, oversized hoodie, obscuring that sexy body from view. Her conker brown hair that had cascaded in curls down her back earlier was pulled up in a messy ponytail. She looked dishevelled and messy and utterly adorable. Her green eyes looked sad and he wondered whether he'd put that look there or whether she always carried it with her.





He looked down at the white roses he was carrying and wondered whether it was too much. He didn't want her to attach any romantic motives to the gesture.

Penny suddenly spotted him and he waved. She didn't wave back; the cheery persona she had presented earlier had vanished, the sparkle in her green eyes had gone out. She visibly sighed and then came to open the door

Tiny flakes of snow swirled around them, settling on her eyelashes and in her hair. There was something about her that he felt drawn to. She was beautiful, there was no denying that, but there was much more to it than that.

Henry held out the roses. 'I wanted to apologise for my behaviour earlier. As moving days go, this had to be the worst. Even before I got here, everything that could go wrong did go wrong. I was grumpy and tired and I'm sorry. I was wondering whether that offer of lasagne and mince pies was still open.'

Penny stared at him in confusion. 'I, erm. . .' She looked around as if an excuse would suddenly present itself. She didn't want him there and he felt like an utter arse. He had a lot of making up to do. As she clearly couldn't think of somewhere important that she had to be, she nodded reluctantly and stepped back to let him in.

He handed her the roses and she took them.

'I see you moved the bookshelf,' Penny said, trying and failing to keep her voice casual as if she didn't care. He had hurt her with that too.

'I can move it back, I just. . . I'll move it back.'

'No, it's fine, it's your home, do what you want.' She shrugged.

He hadn't even thought what Penny would think about him blocking the door – of course she would be upset by that.





‘Listen, the last place we lived, we not only locked all the doors and windows at night, but we locked the bedroom doors too and I slept with a baseball bat under my bed. We moved here because it’s a better area, it’s better for Daisy. It’s just going to take a bit of getting used to that everyone is so friendly and helpful. I’m sorry if I upset you. I’ll move it back tonight.’

Penny stared down at the flowers and softened. ‘I’ll put these in some water and make us some dinner.’

Henry breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Would you like a glass of mulled wine while you wait?’ She filled a vase with water and plonked the roses in some haphazard arrangement.

‘Yes please, it smells wonderful,’ Henry said, sitting down at the large dining table. He watched her as she moved around the kitchen. There was something so captivating about her, he couldn’t take his eyes off her.

‘It’s my own recipe, I just sort of threw some ingredients together.’ Penny lit the hob under the saucepan and gave it a stir. ‘It’s sort of a Sangria and mulled wine mix. Red wine, rum, brandy, fruit juice, fruit, some spices.’

‘Sounds very potent.’

Penny laughed and he liked that he could see the warmth and spark back in her eyes.

‘Yeah, it might be. I haven’t tried it. At least neither of us are driving.’

A giant, deep red, shaggy beast ambled into the kitchen, sniffing at the lasagne that was warming in the oven. Henry laughed; he had never seen anything so ridiculous-looking in his entire life.





‘Wow, what breed is he?’

Penny laughed. ‘I don’t think even he knows. Half red setter, half English sheepdog, half Newfoundland maybe.’

‘That’s a lot of halves.’

‘I know. He thinks he’s a tiny lap-sized dog too, always climbs on my lap for a cuddle and then squashes me to death. He must weigh seven stone. Seriously, he could give pony rides to small children.’

‘He looks like a Muppet.’

‘Don’t say that, you’ll upset him, but yes, I know. The vet says he has never seen any dog so red before and with his shaggy fur he does look as if he’s just walked off *Sesame Street*. Henry, meet Bernard. Bernard, this is Henry, our new neighbour.’

Bernard came and sniffed him with a vague interest. Clearly Henry met with Bernard’s approval as he sat on Henry’s feet, demanding to be stroked. Henry stroked his head and rubbed his chest. He looked up to see Penny smiling at him and then she quickly looked away.

He watched as she poured two large glasses of the mulled wine concoction and brought them to the table. She passed Henry his glass.

‘Should we make a toast?’ she asked.

‘How about. . . to new beginnings.’

She stared at him and then smiled, chinking her glass against his.



His grey eyes were so intense, like he was studying her, searching for answers to some unanswered question. He took a sip without taking his eyes off hers and she noticed straight away that he didn’t have a wedding ring.





‘Thank you for decorating next door for Christmas, by the way. Daisy will love it.’

‘My pleasure. I didn’t get you a tree. I guessed that you and Daisy would want to get one together.’

‘She’d like that, thank you.’ Henry smiled and Penny felt her heart leap. She had never been the sort of girl to fall in love with a smile before, but there was something about his smile that filled his whole face. He was married, she had to remember that.

She focussed her attention on Bernard for a moment so she wouldn’t have to look at the smile.

‘So what brings you to White Cliff Bay?’ Penny asked, taking a sip of the wine.

‘Work mainly. I have a job at the White Cliff Bay Furniture Company, starting after Christmas.’

Her eyes widened. ‘As a carpenter?’

He nodded. That at least explained the lack of a wedding ring; he worked with tools like she did, and wearing jewellery could cause injury.

‘Wow, they are so selective about who they take on,’ Penny said. ‘I hear they have something like five hundred applicants every time they advertise. Isn’t there some crazy interview process?’

‘Yes, it kind of felt like *The Generation Game* with all these tasks that we had to do. We were shown once how to do a process and then had to replicate it within a certain time with the utmost quality and care. It was a whole day thing with the woodwork skills demonstration in the morning and a panel of seven interviewers grilling me for over two hours in the afternoon. I came out feeling like I had run a marathon.’





‘They only take on the very best so you clearly did something to impress them. It will be a huge feather in your cap if you ever decide to move on. Everyone knows how prestigious the company is.’

Henry took a big swig of the wine. ‘We don’t intend to move on. I hope to stay in White Cliff Bay for some time.’

The way he said that, staring right at her, sent shivers down her spine. Was he flirting with her? She shook that silly thought out of her head, taking a big gulp of the wine. It was spicy and fruity and, as Henry said, very potent.

She tried to tear her eyes away from Henry’s gaze but struggled to do so. She quickly turned away from the table to dish up the lasagne.

‘Have you always been a carpenter?’

‘Yes, I love it. There is something wonderful about creating something beautiful with your own hands. I’ve made and sold my own furniture but I’ve also made wooden jewellery and statues too. That’s more of a hobby, though, but it’s something I like to do in my spare time. I know I asked the agency about this, but they said you would be happy for me to use the shed as a sort of workshop?’

Penny nodded. ‘Yes, it’s huge and I only really use a small part of it. Feel free. I would love to see some of your jewellery and statues. My job is quite similar.’

‘What is it you do, Penny?’

‘I’m an ice carver.’

‘Oh, that’s cool. And do you get enough work in that line of business?’

She placed the plate of lasagne down in front of him and sat down to eat hers. ‘Do I get enough to pay for this place, you mean?’





Henry's eyes widened slightly. 'Sorry, that came across as very nosy, didn't it? Ignore me. I hate it when people ask me about my work and my money. It's absolutely none of my business.'

'The house belonged to my parents, I grew up here, but they emigrated to Italy several years ago and left the house to me and my brother. He lives in the next town and I bought him out of his half of the house. I'm the only ice carver for miles and there are weddings every weekend, business functions, parties. I have to turn down many jobs because I just don't have enough time to do them. It pays very well.'

Henry looked surprised but she'd got used to those comments by now; no one took her job very seriously and certainly didn't believe that she could support herself on it.

'And, erm. . . is there a Mr Meadows?'

Penny stabbed a piece of pasta with her fork. Why did people assume that she needed a man to keep her happy? She was perfectly fine on her own.

'I'm presuming by the way you are murdering that piece of lasagne that I've stepped on a sore nerve there. My apologies.'

Penny smiled as she looked at the massacred piece of lasagne.

'I only asked because that hoodie looks way too big to belong to you,' Henry said.

'I just like big jumpers or hoodies. They're comfortable. There isn't a Mr Meadows, there never has been. Everyone in the town says I should be married with babies by now so it gets a bit wearing. I. . . I've had my heart broken in the past and I guess I'm wary of falling in love again.'

She stared at her dinner in horror. Why did she feel the need to divulge that to him? She barely knew the man. How much wine had she drunk to loosen her tongue that much? It wasn't





even true. She wasn't not with someone because she was scared of falling in love again, she was just happier on her own. It was easier this way. She took the last sip of wine in her glass and went to the stove to pour herself some more.

'So you'll have to go to the Christmas Eve ball now you're a resident of White Cliff Bay,' Penny said, desperately trying to change the subject. 'Daisy will love it, there's music and fine food and dancing, and there's also a big ice carving competition there this year.'

'I'm not sure a ball is really my sort of thing. I'm too big to dance gracefully.'

'Everyone goes, you have to go. It'll be a great way for you to meet people and I'm sure Daisy will be upset if you don't take her.'

Henry still seemed undecided.

'It's for charity, you sort of have to go.'

He smiled at her again and she cursed herself for reacting like a silly schoolgirl with a crush.

'Well, if it's for charity then I can't say no, can I?'

Penny grinned and shook her head. Noticing he had finished his lasagne, she stood up and took his plate to the sink. 'Shall we go into the front room? It's a bit cosier.'

What was she doing? She didn't need to get cosier with this beautiful man, with this beautiful *married* man. But Henry was already standing up and moving in there, taking his new best friend Bernard with him.

She watched him go. She could do this, be in the same room with a man she was insanely attracted to without launching herself at him. A giggle burst from her throat at this thought. She had never launched herself at anyone in her entire life; it was





unlikely she was going to start now. She was rubbish when it came to approaching men or even talking to them. Henry was easy to talk to. Although she was attracted to him, being married meant he was safe and she had spoken more to him tonight than she had to almost any man recently. She would just enjoy his company tonight and hopefully tomorrow she could pick up in the same place with his wife too.

She plated up two mince pies and followed him. She stopped when she saw him on all fours in front of the fireplace trying to light the fire. Good lord, his arse was a sight to behold. She couldn't help but stare at it as he wiggled it around setting twigs and papers in between the bigger logs.

Bernard seemed transfixed by his arse too and she quickly grabbed his collar before he decided that humping Henry was a good idea. She had almost forgotten that Bernard liked to hump most of the guests who came to the house. She didn't get too many visitors up here, but poor Jill, her cleaning lady, had been humped several times over the years, especially when she got on all fours to dust or clean. Bernard thought the whole thing was clearly a game and the more his victims tried to wiggle or escape, the more Bernard clung on for dear life, like he was riding a bucking bronco.

'Bed!' Penny said, pointing to Bernard's basket. Bernard seemed to sigh theatrically at having his fun thwarted. 'Bed, now.' Bernard slunk off with disappointment and climbed into his basket.

'Erm, that's a very nice offer, but we've only just met,' Henry said and then laughed as he watched her flush.

She sat down on the sofa and to her surprise he sat down next to her. There were three other chairs that he could have





sat in but he chose to sit next to her. She wanted to get up and move away from him but that would appear rude. His smell was intoxicating, sweet but spicy, like cinnamon, zest and cloves. He smelt of Christmas, of the pomanders she used to make with her parents when she was younger and hang over the fire. She wanted to press her nose to his neck and breathe him in.

He didn't say anything, he just stared at her like a starved man would stare at steak.

He suddenly leant forwards and brushed his finger across her cheek. Electricity sparked through her at the softest of touches and she leapt back away from him.

Henry's eyes widened in horror. 'I'm so sorry, I'm not normally this creepy, I promise. I don't normally go round touching strange women. You had sauce on your cheek, I was just wiping it off. With hindsight I probably should have just told you.' He stared down at his wine. 'What did you put in this thing? It's gone straight to my head.'

Penny tried to find her voice, to try to say something to put him at ease, but she could still feel his touch on her cheek. Had it really been that long since she was touched by a man that her body reacted this insanely over a simple graze of her cheek?

She cleared her throat. 'I didn't think it was creepy.'

'You didn't?'

'A bit inappropriate, maybe, but not creepy.'

'Very inappropriate, I'm sorry.'

Silence descended and sparks seemed to crackle between them like the flames in the fireplace.

Penny passed him a mince pie, suddenly feeling nervous around him for the first time that night. He took it and bit into





it, obviously still embarrassed by his overly tactile moment earlier.

‘Mmm, this is delicious. I’m so rubbish at making mince pies, I just can’t seem to get them right.’ He took another bite and moaned softly with pleasure. ‘So tell me more about this ball – will I have to wear a suit?’

She was relieved to move the topic back onto safer ground, although the sudden vision of Henry in a suit was doing nothing to stop these inappropriate thoughts from swirling around her head.

‘Erm, yes, everyone gets dressed up in their best clothes.’

Henry pulled a face.

‘I’m sure you’ll look very sexy in a suit.’ Good lord, what *had* she put in the mulled wine, some kind of truth serum? His eyebrows shot up, the mince pie frozen halfway to his mouth. ‘I’m sorry, I’m rubbish around men, I really am. I’m trying to say things to you that I’d say to my girlfriends: “Oh, you’d look beautiful in that dress, those shoes look so good on you.” Please don’t take it the wrong way, I’m not chatting you up.’

He resumed eating his pie and Penny was surprised to see what looked like a brief flash of disappointment cross his face, but then it was gone.

She took a sip of the wine.

‘What charity is it for?’

‘It changes every year. This year we’re raising money for research into miscarriages, stillbirths and premature babies.’

‘That sounds like a very worthy cause. My sister, Anna, miscarried. I know how utterly heartbreaking it can be. She just had her second child, but I don’t think the pain of it ever really goes away.’





She stared at him, a huge lump forming in her throat. He understood. He stared right back, narrowing his eyes slightly. When he spoke his voice was soft. 'I'm guessing you've lost a baby too.'

She swallowed. 'You're very astute. It was a long time ago, eight years, in fact. I was only twenty-one.' It had been a long time since she had spoken about it too but he seemed to command so much honesty from her. 'You're very easy to talk to. I never talk about this with anyone. Chris and I had only been going out for three or four months but I just knew that he was my happy-ever-after, that we were going to be together forever. Then I fell pregnant. He didn't want to keep it, he wanted to travel the world, not be tied down by a baby. But there was no way I could get rid of it; from the moment that I found out, I loved that baby with everything I had. I was nearly four months when I lost it. Chris was so relieved, he practically cheered when I told him. I couldn't stop crying, for the baby, for his reaction to it. He left me a few days later. I was heartbroken.'

'I'm so sorry.'

'It's fine. Well, it's not, but it was a very long time ago. And looking back now, I'm so glad we never stayed together. He was wrong for me in every way. I cannot even begin to imagine raising a child with him. He was an arse. So maybe in some horrible way it was for the best.'

'I went through a similar thing myself when I was sixteen, got my girlfriend pregnant. She was horrified, kept saying that she wanted an abortion, that the baby would ruin her life. I couldn't bear the thought of that – this was my child and I couldn't believe that she hated this baby so much when it hadn't even been born. Thankfully her parents were Catholic and wouldn't let her have





an abortion but they blamed me entirely and I wasn't allowed anywhere near her. They moved away and said the baby was going to be put up for adoption. I was absolutely gutted. I suppose I should have been relieved, a drunken fumble that turned into a pregnancy. I was sixteen years old with my whole life in front of me and her parents were giving me a way out, but I never saw it like that. I never saw my girlfriend again. Last I heard she ran away to Australia not long after the baby was born.'

Penny stared at him in horror. Was it worse that Penny had lost her baby or that Henry had a baby somewhere that he wasn't allowed to see? 'What happened to your baby?'

Just then Bernard leapt up from his position at the window and started barking furiously at something unseen outside.

Henry quickly moved to the front door as if he was ready to take on the world. She giggled at his over-protectiveness as he flung the door open and Bernard ran out into the night.

'It's just rabbits, Bernard hates them.'

She followed Henry to the door as he stood on the doorstep with his fists clenched, scanning the darkness for any threat. Bernard was sniffing around the rabbit holes, clawing at the grass with his big paws, with the obvious hope that one day one of the rabbits would run straight out the hole and into his mouth.

Seeing that there was no one waiting outside ready to kill them, Henry turned back and banged into her, nearly sending her flying. His hands shot out and grabbed her arms. She looked up at him, silhouetted against the night sky, tiny flakes of snow fluttering around him like icing sugar, his sweet, spicy scent washing over her as he was standing so close. She had bared her soul to this man tonight and, for the first time in a very long





time, she wanted nothing more than to reach up and kiss him. Weirdly enough he looked like he wanted the same thing, as his eyes darkened with desire and then scanned down to her lips. What the hell? He was married. It was bad enough that she was having inappropriate thoughts about a married man; it was absolutely not OK for him to be having those same thoughts about her.

She took a definite step back. 'Well, it's getting late and I have to be up early tomorrow so maybe you should go.'

He stared down at her with confusion and she knew she had been sending some very mixed messages that night.

'Yes, of course. I'll let you get to bed,' he said, softly.

'And I look forward to meeting Daisy tomorrow,' Penny said, waiting for the guilt to cross his face at the mention of his wife. But there was no remorse there at all. He just nodded, walked through her kitchen and out the back door, not giving her a single backward glance.

She breathed in the cool night air, determined to clear her mind, then called Bernard in. He ran in, shook wet snowflakes all over her and then launched himself at the sofa where they had been sitting just moments before. She sighed and went into the kitchen.

How unfair was it that the first man in years that she'd had any kind of feelings for was beautiful, intriguing, intelligent, worked with his hands, kind and. . . married?

She was better off alone – that had been her mantra for the last eight years and she was sticking to it.

She jolted at a sudden noise from next door and she watched as the bookshelf was pushed away from the connecting door. He'd done that for her and she wanted to hug him and shake





him in equal measure. He was married and it seemed he needed reminding of that even more than she did.

Daisy would be back tomorrow; hopefully that would stop any of that chemistry that was sparking between them.



Henry turned the downstairs light off and wandered upstairs to bed. There was something so attractive about Penny. Even wearing that oversized hoodie over black leggings and her hair pulled up in a messy ponytail, she looked adorable. She was fascinating too; he could have chatted to her all night. But she didn't seem to know what she wanted. Flirting with him one moment and completely back-peddalling the next. He didn't need another complicated woman in his life; Daisy was his entire world. But as he lay down in bed, it was Penny's smile and those intense green-gold eyes that he thought of before he drifted off to sleep.

