

# Mrs Nobody- excerpt

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# Chapter 1

**London, 2009**

There is nothing more satisfactory than making a list and checking it twice. Sitting in the back of the taxi on my way to the studio, I open my notebook. My latest list is growing faster than I can delete and all points needed to be allocated by yesterday. I should be looking at the questions the production team gave me, but this feels more important.

- 12 conifer trees. Contact Green Garden Design Company.
- 10 new signposts—decorated with red and green crystals.
- 8 kg bags of mincemeat. New Nigella recipe to try out.
- 5 gold chandeliers for foyer. Give to Nic to source.
- 4 seasonal waiting staff needed. Chase HR.
- 3 quotes for reindeer feed needed.
- 2 new ovens for the kitchen.

*All I need now is a partridge in a pear tree. I wonder if the production*

*team would like to hear this?*

My handbag beeps again. I close my notebook and search for my phone nestled at the bottom. I left home twenty-four hours ago and already have 226 emails, 56 text messages and 7 missed calls, most of them from Nic, who's been trying to contact me since this morning. Reading my emails makes me queasy, so I stare out of the window instead.

The taxi slows and I see people's faces up close, a strange mix of weariness and excitement. Not surprising, considering the time of year. There are more pensive looks than frivolous ones, weighed down by more than their shopping bags. It always makes me sad to see partners or parents frantically searching for that one illusive gift for that one special day, when it's the other 364 days of the year that are important. I suppose we never understand until it's too late.

"Sorry about the traffic, love." The cabbie's thick cockney accent fills the back of the taxi. "Always worse at Christmas. I hope you're not gonna be late."

"No, it's fine. I left myself plenty of time. And I need to make some calls, anyway."

I hold my phone up in the air and dial Nic's number. A familiar voice answers, desperate to talk about the new problems: the kennels need a proper clean, some of the village sleds are broken, the elves' post office costumes have not turned up and most of the new tree lights are not working.

*Nothing unusual then.* "Nic. Take a breath. It will all be fine." I can physically hear her take in a lung full of air and breathe out. "Speak to Krystoff about involving the guests in a Husky experience, to include the cleaning. Ring maintenance and ask for Fred. If you collect all the broken sleds, he will fix them by lunchtime and check the lights. Ask Lisa if she will drive to Rovaniemi to pick up the costumes. Now anything else?... I'm fine, stop worrying... I'm doing the right thing."

The cabbie pulls up outside a grey concrete building, which looks more like an old asylum hospital than a television studio.

“Perfect, thank you. How much do I owe?” I go through my purse, not recognising many of the notes now. A lot has changed since I was last here.

“It’s all taken care of. The studio has paid.” And then, as an afterthought, he says, “Are you famous, then?”

I laugh and catch him looking at me through the rear-view mirror.

“Excuse my asking, love, but the studios don’t normally pay out unless you’re famous.”

“Well, I’m not famous and you won’t know who I am. No one ever does. But that might be about to change.”

He scratches his head and looks more confused than ever, but I can’t explain now. I tell him this as I step out of the warm cab and into the first signs of a cold snap. I don’t bother fastening the gold buttons on my coat. Five degrees is positively balmy compared to home.

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The security guard at the studio door is most helpful. He looks confused at first, as most people are when they see me, but he behaves professionally and leads me to the reception area. The receptionist takes my coat and walks to the coat stand. I watch her feel the luxurious velvet and open the thick white fur collar, trying to see the manufacturer’s label inside which is not there.

“Made to order, dear, I’m afraid.” Poor thing turns as red as my coat. I really shouldn’t say anything. But then that’s always been my problem.

She hangs it up before saying, “Could you come with me, please?”

I follow behind, admiring her patent high-heeled shoes that click-clack down the corridor. I can’t remember the last time I wore any kind of heel. We reach a door that says ‘Make Up’ in gold capital letters. How lovely it would be if there were rooms like this in real life. Rooms where people could apologise for things they’ve said and done. A room

full of nice smells where you could talk, a room that left you feeling and looking better than when you walked in. Inside the room are four black leather chairs, each positioned in front of an oval mirror with spotlights either side.

“Miranda will do your make-up. She’ll take years off you!” She shuts the door and I look at Miranda.

“If that’s the case, you must work with magic.” I laugh.

“No, I don’t, but I heard you do?”

I laugh again, more restrained, as I’m not sure what I can say at this point. I was told by the booker of the show that I had to keep this secret.

*Another secret. Not a problem. I’m used to keeping secrets.*

Half an hour later and Miranda has indeed worked her magic. I scrutinise her work. Gone are the dark circles and my eyes are more prominent than my wrinkles. My pale skin has a golden sheen, not too St Tropez, but enough to make me look like I’ve had a holiday, which is definitely not the case. I admire my reflection. I look good. I’m beginning to like this television idea. Maybe this interview wasn’t such a bad idea of mine? I’m distracted from my thoughts by a gentle request from the studio director to be on set in ten minutes. Jessica, another young girl from the production team, smiles and asks if I need anything before we go through the questions. I assure her I have gone through the questions.

“I’m sure you have,” replies Jessica, “but it helps to go through them again. In case you dry up.”

*Many things have dried up recently; my skin, my hair, my libido, but my ability to talk is not one of them.* Jessica doesn’t look like she would understand. Too young.

“We are ready for you on set now. Please be careful of the wires on the floor,” says one member of the camera crew and they usher me to the side, where I see the presenter Anna Grey sitting bolt upright on a dark blue sofa, her legs tucked to one side and pieces of paper in her hands.

“Don’t forget, you have one hour left to enter our competition to

win £10,000,” says Ms Grey, beaming at the camera. She swivels to face a different direction, a different camera. “And coming up, my next guest is the wife of one of the most famous men in the world. Who is she? All will be revealed after the break.”

I smooth down my hair and adjust my skirt. And then I feel it. The heat rising from my chest, up my throat and into my head. I try to swallow the flickering, but it turns into a flame, then a furnace.

*Please dear Lord, no. Not now. A flush is the last thing I need.*

Jessica is standing next to me, clipboard in hand. Perfect. Before she can say anything, I seize it and begin fanning my face and panting. She looks at me like I’m insane, which I must admit is happening more and more these days.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

*Early menopause is hell.* I want to tell her but just nod instead, the heat thankfully subsiding. A short one today. Jessica removes the clipboard from my clenched fists and points to where I should sit. Before I move, I wipe the back of my neck and the river of sweat running down my cleavage with my handkerchief.

After stepping over the multiple cables strewn across the floor, I sit on the velvet chair opposite Anna Grey. I can’t help staring. She is exquisite, beautiful features with killer cheekbones.

“How lovely to meet you?” Her eyes scan me up and down, and she smiles with approval. Then she notices me staring at her. “What? Do I have lipstick on my teeth?” She shouts: “Make up!”

“No!” I say over her high shrills. “I was admiring your face.” She looks a similar age, but without the crevice of wrinkles and furrowed brow. I must assume her life and the weather have not been as extreme as mine. She doesn’t say anything. I clear my throat. “How are you?”

“Right, I think we are nearly ready,” she says, ignoring me. “Jessica has gone through the questions with you?”

“Yes.”

*A one syllable answer is all you’re getting.*

Ms Grey launches into presenter’s speech, mistaking my shortness

for nervousness. “There’s nothing to worry about. I will lead you into each question and if I feel it needs expanding, I will ask you to tell us more. If you repeat an answer, I will cut in and change direction with a different question. Do you understand?”

I nod. This is her show. I understand people like her.

The lights dim, apart from the bright spotlights shining on our faces. I hear a voice counting down in the darkness, then an introductory jingle playing in the background.

“Welcome back,” says Ms Grey, smiling animatedly at the camera. Watching her, I now understand the term ‘making love to the camera’. “I am joined by Chrissie Connor. Not a name you would know, but you will know of her husband.”

Flashing her white teeth, she turns to me. “Chrissie. Can you tell us who you are?”

Memories of the show *Stars in their Eyes* flash before me. “Tonight, Mathew, I’m going to be...”

“Isn’t that the ultimate question?” It was a question I’d been asking myself a great deal recently. “Do any of us know who we really are?”

Ms Grey’s face drops, just like my Aunt Joyce when she had a stroke. She clears her throat and asks again, “Yes, that is a much larger question that we won’t be able to answer on today’s programme.”

*I note the emphasis on ‘won’t’.*

“But please tell us who you are?”

As she leans in, demanding an answer, I smell her perfume. Cedar and spruce. An earthy, woody smell. Home. I take a deep breath. “Well, there were lots of names for my husband. Kris Kringle, Santa Claus, Father Christmas, sometimes St Nick, but that is definitely taking a name too far.”

A few of the backstage crew laugh. Ms Grey doesn’t.

“But I don’t have any names. I am just the wife of Father Christmas.”

Ms Grey does her best, astonished look, although I think it would have been more effective if she’d been told Harrods were doing a half-price sale. “Father Christmas? The real Father Christmas. Not the



imitation ones we see in department stores, but the one who lives at the North Pole?”

I furrow my brow, not sure what she means.

She leans over her papers. “We have younger viewers who might not understand,” she whispers.

*Of course, those Santas.* The overweight, older men wearing red costumes and white, dirty polyester beards that have never seen a washing machine for fear of falling apart.

“Yes, but it’s Lapland, not the North Pole.”

She glares at me.

“Better transport systems,” I explain apologetically.

Some of the crew giggle. Ms Grey does not.

*This is not going well.*

“And how long have you been, Mrs Christmas?”

“I’ve been married... for fourteen years, and was Mrs Christmas for six of those.” I smile.

Ms Grey doesn’t smile.

*You think it’s a gimmick. A whimsical half hour slot to fill in between the real people you interview. I wonder if you’ll be convinced by the time I finish.*

“The entire world knows of Father Christmas but his wife...” She contemplates for a few seconds. “I know nothing about her.”

“That’s not unusual. We never hear about the wives of famous men. How many women have been responsible for their husband’s greatness but never acknowledged? Maybe *War and Peace* would not have been one of the finest works of literature if Mrs Tolstoy hadn’t copied and edited it seven times by candlelight from Mr Tolstoy’s written notes. Maybe Mr George Washington would not have been President of the United States without Mrs Washington’s wealth. And maybe we would have lost World War Two if Mrs Churchill hadn’t been her husband’s closest confidante. These women helped change the course of history, yet we don’t even know their first names.”

Ms Grey looks me in the eye for the first time since we started this

interview.

*You're interested now.*

“So,” she says with a long pause, emphasising it is time. Time to talk. Time to tell the story. “How does your story begin?”

*The beginning. When was that? I suppose it must be when I met Daniel.*

# Chapter 2

## Majorca, Spain 1990

It was the first time I'd ever been abroad. Before this, there had been holidays in caravan parks with grandparents. Playing cards, with Nan dressed in her underwear, for most of the day and sleepless nights due to Granddad's snoring, but this was different.

Now I was standing under a neon sign next to my best friends, with the scent of aftershave, beer, and vomit wafting in the warm air. The place was amazing, and it came alive at night.

"Let's go in here," shouted Lisa, five tickets in her hand from the ticket seller with the colourful, braided hair.

We walked down the red carpet of 'Chaplin's' nightclub. As the door opened, I don't know what hit me first: the music at 500 decibels or the heat. It was electric. Crowds of gyrating bodies, pushing against one another, moving in time with the pulsing music like a can of worms writhing in and out of each other, blind to their surroundings.

Paula pushed to the front of the bar and ordered. The rest of us squeezed into a tight corner near the toilet, not the most pleasant but a space at least. Four vodka mules later, I felt amazing. I felt confident, making eye contact with boys, instead of staring at the floor.

"What is wrong with these leggings?" Rebecca shouted over the loud

thumping bass, turning her head round to see her bottom, like a puppy chasing its tail. "It's my knickers. It must be my knickers. Chris, is it my knickers? Chris, you're not even looking?"

No. I wasn't looking. I was staring, mouth open, at the boy crossing the dance floor. Rebecca dug me in the ribs to get my attention, but it didn't work. I was busy trying to act casual, but nerves overwhelmed me, and my eyes found the floor. A pair of psychedelic trainers walked into my peripheral view. Very striking. As were the red socks that poked out the top. My eyes continued moving upwards, taking in the skinny blue Levi's and tight white t-shirt until I reached a pair of hazel eyes. He smiled. I melted. It was all very 'Jackie' magazine photo story perfect. Dark-haired, sun kissed skin. A perfect Spanish boy.

"Hi. Can I buy you a drink?" he said, in a clipped Northern accent.

*Not Spanish. Shame. What did he say again? Concentrate Chrissie. "Vodka and lemonade, please?" Sounds more sophisticated than a vodka mule.*

He turned and walked to the bar, which was now three people deep. It would take him at least ten minutes to get a drink.

*I should have gone with him, so we could carry on talking.*

*The music is so loud he wouldn't hear you.*

*Maybe that would be a good thing.*

Here I go again. Internally arguing. My devil and angel sat conspicuously on my shoulders. The girls' whoops stopped me from going any further down the rabbit hole.

"He's lovely," said Lisa, staring in his direction but primarily at his bottom.

"Well done you," cooed Nerys. "He seems nice."

"She doesn't need nice," shouted Paula over the music. "She needs a good shag."

The girls gathered round, deciding now I had a bite, I would need help reeling in the catch and each of them had a piece of advice.

"Remember to lick your lips when he's talking to you," said Paula. "They like that."

“And keep looking around you as though you’re not listening. Keep him keen,” said Lisa.

“And push your boobs out,” said Rebecca demonstrating with her own ample chest. “You might even want to graze them against him.”

“Flick your hair back and laugh when he says something funny,” said Nerys.

Although I wasn’t sure that any of this was good advice, I needed all the help I could get. I would have liked to clarify the running order of all these tips, but he was back, drinks in hand, looking very pleased with himself.

“There you go. Gin and tonic.”

“Oh!” I looked down at the glass. I could never drink gin.

“Everything okay?” he asked, watching my every move.

*I don’t like gin.*

*Don’t make him walk away.*

*But I don’t like gin.*

*But you like him, so just drink it.*

“Yes,” I answered, swallowing the contents in one go. He smiled, pleased with my reaction, and told me what he’d been up to.

He was funny. Really funny and I liked listening to him. Then I remembered what the girls said. I laughed and flicked my hair back. Unfortunately, it caught him in the eye. I couldn’t apologise enough. I was so embarrassed.

With one eye closed, he asked, “How long are you here for?”

“A few more hours yet, I hope.”

He looks puzzled.

*He meant here in Majorca, not in the bar. You’re such an idiot.*

I tried to lick my lips but my tongue got stuck on my cherry lipstick so I pushed my boobs out, hoping he wouldn’t notice the gunk I was now trying to get off my teeth. It seemed to do the trick. But he kept on staring, which felt rude.

“What have you got down there?”

“Cheeky,” I said in my sexiest voice, which somehow sounded like a

cross between Dolly Parton and Danny la Rue.

“It’s just you seem to have something stuck.” He pointed at my cleavage.

I glanced down to see the toilet paper I used to pad out my bra, creeping its way upward and over the top of my cleavage.

*I’m such an idiot. How do I get out of this?*

“Er, us girls need to keep some tissue in case they run out in the toilets. You men wouldn’t know what that’s like.”

*It will do. It’s better than the truth. I need a distraction. Make him think I’m not interested.*

I looked around me.

“Are you looking for someone?”

*No. I just want to nestle my face in your chest.*

“What are you looking at?” He sounded annoyed.

“Er, nothing.”

*I can’t tell him. Bloody Paula ! He won’t even look at me now. You should never have listened to the girls.*

His face was so close to mine, I could smell his soapy aftershave. I tried to give him a seductive look, but it was more Dracula than Madonna.

*This is hopeless. I’m hopeless.* I didn’t know what to do, so I grabbed his face and kissed him. At first it surprised him, but then he leaned in and, with his left hand, put his fingers around my neck and drew me to him. He was good at this. We continued, oblivious to the music and the chants from my friends jeering in the background. He stopped for a minute and looked into my eyes. Then he kissed the top of my lip, the side of my mouth, and down my neck. With my eyes still closed, my head raised automatically as if on autopilot, and he made his way round my neck with soft, fluttery kisses.

He stopped. “I don’t even know your name.”

My cheeks were flushed. Being spontaneous was hot. “It’s Chrissie.”

“As in ‘Brinkley’, the supermodel. You two could be sisters.”

It was cheesy, but I liked he was trying so hard. He was still just a boy

trying to impress a girl.

“I’m Daniel.”

“Nice to meet you, Daniel.” And it genuinely was.

Half an hour later, after a lot more kissing, Lisa interrupted us. “Paula has thrown up and Rebecca needs her bed, so we’re going. You can stay though.” She smiled at Daniel and winked at me.

I looked at Rebecca and Nerys dragging Paula by the arms, struggling to get her upright. Then I looked at Daniel. “It’s okay. I’ll help.”

Disappointment was painted all over Daniel’s face. “I thought we could go somewhere else. Somewhere quieter?”

*He looks so sad.*

*You’re going home tomorrow.*

*But I want him to like me.*

*You’re going home tomorrow.*

“I’m sorry, Daniel, I —“

“That’s fine. I get it. Have a nice life.” He walked off.

I was taken aback by his reaction. It was so ... childish. But what did it matter? I’d never see him again.

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But I did see him again, about a year later, in my local pub. I was sitting at a table with the girls on an ordinary Friday night after work. I didn’t recognise him at first as he had his back to me. But there was something about those broad shoulders, stretched into a tight-fitting blue shirt. He stood talking to a girl. When he angled his body to get a better position, he saw me. I smiled. He didn’t.

*He can’t see me.*

*He can see you.*

*It’s dark in here.*

*He can see you.*

He turned and glanced at me before he bent over this girl and kissed

her. I knew I shouldn't be watching, but I couldn't take my eyes off them. He kissed her lips, her cheeks, her forehead, then her neck. Just like he did with me. It was as if he was doing it on purpose, trying to make me jealous.

*What an idiot! I'm never jealous. I wasn't even jealous when Simon le Bon married Yasmin and he was plastered all over my bedroom wall.*

I tore my eyes away and looked around at the groups of men dressed in shirts and ties, enjoying the end of week drinks, knowing there was no work tomorrow.

It was my turn to get the drinks, so I walked to the bar and a group of men who were standing to the left of this humiliating show. I smiled at one guy who seemed keen to talk to me.

A laugh with a hair flick, as he talked about his dull job. Not funny, but Daniel didn't know that. Move in closer with cleavage visible due to undoing of buttons on shirt, no toilet paper on show this time. Licking lips but the whole time staring at Daniel. *You're being weird.*

The bloke I was with didn't care and tried to kiss me. *Crap! This wasn't what I wanted. What do I do now?* Just then I felt my hand being grabbed, and I was pulled through into the arms of Daniel.

"What are you doing here?" We both said at the same time.

Daniel stared at me so intently, my legs felt like jelly.

"I was saving you from making a big mistake." It looked like he was smirking.

"I don't need saving." I shook his hand off mine.

"You did. He was going to kiss you, and he's not your type."

"How do you know?"

He laughed. "I thought you needed my help." He scratched behind his left ear before folding his arms across his chest.

"I didn't," I whispered, so quietly even lip readers would have struggled to work it out.

He didn't say anything. I couldn't say anything.

"As you said, you don't need me."

*How old is he? Ten.*



He was silent. Sulking.

*I'm glad you're here. I want to keep talking to you.* I couldn't open my mouth.

"Do you want me to go?"

*No.* "Do what you like."

So, he left. Pushing past the groups of lads, he disappeared into the belly of the bar.

*Why didn't I tell him to stay? I'm so stupid.*

*No, he's stupid because he didn't realise that you wanted him to stay.*

"What the hell!" said Lisa, struggling to carry the drinks in her hands. "I thought you were going to get it on, but instead, you stood there arguing like a married couple. What is with you two?"

I couldn't explain it. I hadn't seen him for a year, yet he made me feel so many emotions. He was childish and demanding, confident and self-assured and I couldn't get enough. He was like a drug I had to have.

As we sat at our table I tried to listen to the girls' conversations, but I couldn't concentrate. *What was he doing here? Did he work here now? Had he been here the whole time, and I'd never noticed?* Every time I saw a glimpse of a blue shirt or heard a laugh, I looked up, thinking it was him. I went to the toilet so often in my quest to see him that Rebecca asked if I had cystitis. It was all too much.

"I'm going," I announced over the cacophony of voices. The girls pleaded for me to stay, but it was no use. I needed to escape so I could stop thinking about him. I stepped outside, the cool air a welcome release.

"Where are you going?"

I didn't need to turn around. His scent tickled more than my nose.

"I'm going home."

The next thing I knew, he was holding my neck again and kissing me full on the mouth, his tongue exploring, tickling my tongue. I felt it again. The fluttering rising from my groin heating through my body like lava flowing up and out of the volcano.

He stopped and looked at me, still holding my neck in between his

hands. “The thing is, I can’t get you out of my head.”

*I feel the same.*

I didn’t know what was going to happen, but I knew one thing. This boy was going to change my life.

## Chapter 3

**London, 1993**

Being five years older than me, Daniel was more worldly wise. I had little experience of life and relationships, but he was patient and kind and helped me discover things about myself I never knew. We had a similar sense of humour and always agreed on which number the contestant should choose on *Blind Date*. We loved Bohemian Rhapsody, were grateful the Gulf War had ended and continued to debate whether a Jaffa Cake was a cake or a biscuit.

We talked about everything. Our dreams, our future, our fears, our past. I moaned about my awful life with my controlling and condescending mother, and Daniel told me how his parents had died in a car accident when he was sixteen, leaving him orphaned. He had no siblings and no extended family. But he had worked hard, gone to university and now had a great job in a private finance department.

I was a secretary and I loved it. My job wasn't as glamorous, but I loved organising people and stationary cupboards. And I was good at it. I wasn't academic and never encouraged to see what I might achieve. Know your place. My mother's favourite words. She believed a woman's place was in the home. I was happy to go along with it when I was living at home but being with Daniel made me feel more

independent and I realised I wanted more. Daniel was much more confident than me, and he encouraged me to ask for a pay rise, which I got, much to my surprise. His support made me feel valued in a way I'd never known before, and I couldn't get enough of him.

When I first told mum I'd met someone, she knew this was different. No boyfriend had ever met my parents before, and she insisted on him coming round to the house. On his first visit, as he got out of the car, she gave her appraisal while looking out the window.

"He hasn't cleaned his shoes, shame... He could have worn a jacket... He has nice hair though. I like a man with a good head of hair." She looked over at my dad, sat in his armchair, the light from the window bouncing off his bald head.

Mum was right. He had the most gorgeous hair. Boy band hair. Thick and wavy, slightly longer at the front than the back.

After the appropriate time had elapsed, Mum opened the door and held her arms out towards him, smiling as if he was her prodigal long-lost son. He obliged and acted the role brilliantly, ignoring me while he focused on winning my parents' approval, charming them the way only Daniel could. He didn't need to worry. They always loved him. My family was dysfunctional, but I had one and Daniel surprisingly wanted to be a part of it.

About a year later, we decided to move in together. The practicalities were straight forward. Telling my mother wasn't.

"Mark my words, you two will be married before we know it," said Mum. We were sitting on the sofa in the lounge, Daniel and I squeezed together like conjoined twins, with mum at the other end and dad in his armchair.

"Sit up straight, Chrissie. You have a spine for a reason."

*I knew this was a bad idea.*

"I don't approve of you living in sin. You should get married. It's the proper thing to do." Her Catholic Irish roots were deeply ingrained.

"Mum," I said, a little too loud. My cheeks were burning. Although Daniel was becoming more used to her behaviour I was still embar-

rassed. Daniel noticed, scratched behind his ear, and looked to my dad for assistance.

“Did you see the Rover’s match yesterday?” said Dad, his answer to any religious comment. “I don’t think it was a penalty. Harries had crossed—“

“Now is not the time to be talking about inconsequential things like football. We have more important things to discuss. Like how we are going to explain that our daughter delights in deriding her parents by living with her boyfriend?” She made the sign of the cross, an act to ward off the demons that must now possess my soul.

Dad rolled his eyes at Daniel and me. I stifled a giggle. Mum stared at Dad.

“I saw that, Robert. It’s not helpful. Just like you.” She turned her attention to Daniel. “I will pray for you both. I’m sure the rest of the congregation would too, but I don’t want them knowing that my daughter disobeys her parents and her faith.”

*Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.* I clenched Daniel’s hand so hard he winced.

“Mary.” Daniel’s calm and confident voice got her attention. “You know we don’t want to do anything that upsets you or him.” He looked up at the ceiling, addressing God directly. “It’s just that for now, Chrissie and I are happy to get to know one another before making the truly enormous and reverent act of marriage. With one in three marriages ending in divorce, we want to make sure we are not one of those statistics.”

The word *divorce* made mum cross herself three times.

He continued, my mother in the palm of his hands. “And if God is love and we love one another, then surely we are honouring him in our union.”

I had to give it to Daniel. He was very good at talking someone round, making them see his argument and them agreeing it was the right one.

Mum smiled and reached out to stroke Daniel’s hand. He could do no wrong in her eyes. Unlike me. I always seemed to upset her,

no matter what I did. I was an easy child and compliant, but I never felt I did the right thing or acted the right way with mum. Mum was complicated, dad always said.

“So, for now, we are not getting married. We want to live together first. We think we will be happy doing it this way.”

“Of course. I understand.” She patted his hand in complete agreement.

He was great with people and had a way with words I admired. My shyness made it difficult to say what I really thought or wanted. I let others make decisions. Looking back, I could see I'd always done this. The nervous child, happy to stay in the background and let others shine. I didn't have anything to say. Nothing of importance. I was happy, a young girl starting life with a man she loved, and life was great. But a year later, he got a new job. And that's when everything changed.

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I knew Daniel was excited about something as soon as he came into the room.

“And where is my lovely wife?” His voice louder than the pop music playing on the radio. He had a massive bouquet of my favourite white lilies, which he thrust into my arms before wrapping his arms around me, squeezing me tight like an accordion and planting a massive kiss on my lips which made a sucking noise as he came up for air.

“You're in a good mood.” I laid the flowers on the kitchen worktop. The silver foil wrapping bounced light onto Daniel's face, like a spotlight on the quiz show *Mastermind*.

“I've got a new job, Chrissie.” The room went dark.

“And your specialist subject is?”

“My new job,” he answered.

“Okay, you have two minutes to answer questions about your new job. What job is it?”

“Executive assistant.”

“Correct. What does executive assistant mean?”

“I am basically the right-hand man to the boss.”

“Correct. Does that mean if your boss is ill, you take his place?”

“No. That’s the deputy.”

“Correct. So, what is your role?”

“I’m there to answer all the bosses’ emails and correspondence, write his board notes, attend board meetings and organise anything he needs.”

“Correct. So, you’re basically his secretary?”

Daniel huffs. “No. I’m an executive assistant. He has a secretary for all the other stuff.”

“Correct. It sounds like you’re his secretary.”

“Well, I’m not. You don’t understand.”

“Correct. Is it more money?”

“Yes, it’s more money, but it’s more about the opportunities.”

“Correct. So, when do you start this job?”

“Three months’ time.”

“Three months?”

“Correct.”

“And where is the job?”

Daniel paused. “Lapland.”

“Lapland?”

“Correct.”

“Is that an actual place?”

“Correct.”

I was confused now. “But isn’t Lapland miles away?”

“Correct.”

“We won’t be able to see our family and friends?”

“Correct. Well, no, not correct. You’ll still be able to see them, but not as often.”

“Where will we live? What will I do?”

Just then the phone rang, and he went to answer it.

“I’ve started, so I’ll finish!” I demanded, wanting him, needing him to explain.

He stared. “Pass. I don’t know all the answers yet, but we will work it out.”

Daniel answered the phone as I washed the plates in the sink, trying to make sense of it. *Lapland? I thought it was made up. Where is it? And what do you do in Lapland?* All I knew was that it was cold. And there was nothing there except snow. *Do people actually live in Lapland?*

This wasn’t like Daniel. He wouldn’t move somewhere without knowing all the details. Daniel thought things through. He took his time with important decisions. He was considered, measured, reasonable. When we first moved in together, he made a spreadsheet of our income and likely expenditures. He discussed making savings. Did we really need the branded cereal when shops’ own brand chocolate puffs were just the same? Cycling to work would save us pounds, financially and physically. No gym membership for us.

*Maybe he’s worried about money?*

*He hasn’t mentioned it.*

*Have I been spending too much?*

*It seems a long way to go for a job.*

I dried my hands and looked up into the living room across the way. Daniel had finished on the phone and was now looking at his computer, elbows on the table, his hands supporting his head, rubbing the scar behind his left ear. He always did this when he was thinking or worrying.

“Look at how beautiful it is,” he said, turning the screen to face me as I entered the room.

I had to admit he was right. The snow looked so white and plump, like a new feather duvet. And there were Christmas trees everywhere. It reminded me of the pine tree Dad bought every year and wedged into the corner of our small lounge. The branches poked you whenever you tried to squeeze past, and its needles, caught upright in the pile carpet, stabbed your feet so you looked like you were walking on a bed of hot



coals.

Daniel turned and saw me smiling. "I know this move will be the best thing we've ever done."

I stopped smiling. "Er, no. I wasn't smiling because of that."

"Imagine us curled up in front of a log fire eating marshmallows," he went on.

I sat down next to him. "Can you get marshmallows there?"

"Of course you can, silly," he said confidently. "I assume you can. You must be able to. It's the same as here. It's not outer space."

"Daniel, I've been thinking and I..."

Daniel swiveled round in his chair to face me. "I know this seems sudden, but just imagine us in another country, in a bigger house..."

"I don't need a bigger house," I whispered. My heart was pounding. "I think you have been worried that I want more than I do, and I don't."

Daniel turned back to the computer.

"I'm happy here with you. I love you and I love our life."

He didn't say anything, so I continued to talk to the back of his head. "Please, can we just carry on as we are?" I leaned over and kissed him on his cheek.

"I have to take this job."

*What? Did I not explain clearly enough?*

"Chrissie, this is an enormous opportunity for me, and I'd be a fool not to take it."

*For you, and 'you'd' be a fool. There's no talk of me in there.* "But it's not what I want."

"Maybe not now, but you'll change your mind."

"I'm not sure I will."

"Chrissie, I want a job I'm passionate about."

"But can't you have that here?"

"No." He stared at me as if trying to see inside my head. "I've tried. I've tried to do what you want, live where you want, but I need to do this."

*Live where I want? Do what I want? Did I decide that?* Daniel never

said anything. Until now. Tears were pooling in my eyes.

“Wouldn’t you like a new adventure?”

*No. I’m happy here.* The tears, like an overfilled bath, found their way down the side of my face.

Daniel took me in his arms. “Please don’t cry. I want you to be happy.”

“What about my job?”

He kissed my forehead. “I don’t know, but I do know you don’t need to worry. I’ll be working so you can just enjoy yourself. Take up a new hobby? You’re always saying you’d like to be more spontaneous.”

This was not what I had in mind. I was thinking more of booking a last-minute mini break or trying the Chinese takeaway near the University. Moving to Lapland was life changing, not spontaneous.

“Have I ever made you do anything for me?”

I tried to think of something, anything, but couldn’t.

He edged me slightly away from him but kept hold of both my hands. “I have to take this job, and I want you to come with me. I love you, but I have to do this.”

His hazel eyes were serious. This was serious. But I had a choice, I told myself. I didn’t have to go with him. It would be hard, but I could live without him, find someone new. I tried to picture it. Imagine my life without Daniel. I sighed. Who was I trying to kid? Living without Daniel would be like living on Mars. I wouldn’t be able to breathe.

“Oh, and this is important, Chrissie,” he said. “You can’t tell anyone, but the person I’m working for is Father Christmas.”