

The
Little Shop
of
Afternoon
Delights



Zara Stoneley

**The Little Shop of Afternoon
Delights: 6 Book Romance Collection**

«HarperCollins»

Stoneley Z.

The Little Shop of Afternoon Delights: 6 Book Romance Collection /
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A six-book collection of delicious romance tales, which fans of Jenny Colgan and Jenny Oliver will love. Featuring Kathy Jay's brilliant novel WHAT IF HE'S THE ONE, Nikki Moore's unputdownable CRAZY, UNDERCOVER, LOVE, Jane Linfoot's superbly sexy THE RIGHT SIDE OF MR WRONG, Sue Fortin's deliciously sexy UNITED STATES OF LOVE, STABLE MATES by the brilliant Zara Stoneley and Sarah Lefebve's wonderfully crafted rom-com THE PARK BENCH TEST, this is a fun-filled, bite-sized collection of romantic delights!

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The Little Shop of Afternoon Delights

What If He's The One

Kathy Jay

Crazy, Undercover, Love

Nikki Moore

The Right Side of Mr Wrong

Jane Linfoot

United States of Love

Sue Fortin

Stable Mates

Zara Stoneley

The Park Bench Test

Sarah Lefebve



A Division of HarperCollinsPublishers www.harpercollins.co.uk

HarperImpulse an imprint of

HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd

77–85 Fulham Palace Road

Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by HarperImpulse 2014

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Ebook Edition © 2014 ISBN: 978-0-00-812598-1

Version 2014-11-20

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What If He's the One

KATHY JAY



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For Jake

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Prologue

Ten years ago in London

“Tinseltown, here we come!”

The male voice reverberated through Magenta Plumtree’s pounding head as she perched on the end of Alex Wells’ bed, rolling a scarlet silk stocking up to her thigh.

Nick Wells burst into his twin brother’s bedroom. “Get your act together, Bro. It’s Christmas Eve,” he yelled, then jumped out of his skin. “Well hello, Maggie! Looks like Santa filled Alex’s stocking a day early.”

Bleary-eyed, Maggie blinked at the blonde, brown-eyed version of the guy she’d woken up beside. Too hung over to blush she scanned the room for her other hold-up. She nodded at the boarded-up Victorian fireplace.

“There’s no way Santa’s going to make it down that chimney.”

Nick grinned. He looked her up and down. “I’d suggest that Alex give Santa a key, but there’s hardly any point.”

“Quite.” She shrugged. “Since the two of you are going to LA for the holidays.” She bit her lip and wondered idly if there’d be any room in Alex’s bag for a stowaway.

“And never comin’ back! If things go according to plan.” Nick rubbed his hands together, ostensibly because he was cold, but actually because he couldn’t contain his glee.

The idea of Alex never coming back to London smarted. “Whose plan?”

“Mine,” he said smugly.

“Don’t count on it. You haven’t even had the audition yet.” Nick’s shoulders tightened. He turned his back on Maggie, shuffled a few of his brother’s things about randomly on his desk, more messing than tidying, and turned back abruptly to face her. He opened his mouth to say something. No sound came out. He was holding something back.

Alex, wearing only boxers, marched into the room, a mug of instant coffee in each hand. Tall and fabulous, he watched Maggie scabble under the bed for her missing stocking with a suggestive twinkle in his bluer-than-blue eyes.

“Leaving so soon?”

“I’ve got a train to catch.” She rolled the second indecently expensive silk stocking up her left leg and set about locating her shoes. Dressed as a sexy Santa in broad daylight on Christmas Eve? At best she looked like a festive kiss-o-gram. At worst? Best not go there.

“Great party last night. You pulled a cracker.” Nick winked at his twin. “Where’s my coffee?”

“He can have mine.” Maggie took a mug from Alex’s hand and shoved it at him. A tiny bow wave of milky coffee sloshed onto the threadbare carpet. The hideous pattern camouflaged the spill. Maggie shrugged. She slipped her feet into her sparkly red heels. “Gotta go.”

Alex pushed a hand through his dark, disheveled hair. “Don’t you have somewhere else to be?” He glowered at his brother.

Nick glanced at the alarm clock on Alex’s bedside table. “Heathrow airport in about an hour.” Everyone’s eyes landed on the unopened foil condom package next to the clock.

Alex shot Nick a get-lost-now look and handed him the second cup of coffee. “Go and boost your caffeine level somewhere else.”

Slurping coffee, Nick backed out into the hallway. “Alright, alright, I’m gone already. I can take a hint.” Alex glowered again and closed the door in his face.

Maggie scoured the messy room. “This place is a bombsite. What happened to my coat?”

“We lost it.” Alex pulled an apologetic face. “Actually, I think I persuaded you to give it to a homeless guy.”

Maggie groaned. “Thanks for that.” Her head still hurt. The previous night’s sequence of events was coming back to her. She didn’t mind about the coat. It was a much-too-big impulse buy. Like much of her eclectic wardrobe it had come from a vintage shop. She’d only worn it because it drowned her enough to cover up her Sexy Santa outfit. Anyway, she and Alex had had a cozy room to go back to, whilst the guy on the street faced a bitterly cold night in a shop doorway with nothing but a sleeping bag and a makeshift cardboard tent. Alex had given him directions to a shelter, but he’d refused to go because he had a little scruffy dog with him. “She’s all the family I have,” he’d said. “They won’t let me bring her in.” She hoped her extra-large winter coat had helped the two of them keep warm.

He picked his sweater up off the floor. “Borrow this.” She struggled into it. He dragged a preppy-ish scarf from under a pile of play scripts and clutter. He wrapped it around her neck, pausing to caress her nape.

His warm, firm touch put her into a reverie. It had been the weirdest night. Alex’s mood had been hyper. Hadn’t he stolen her antlers and performed a rendition of “Rudolph the Red- Nosed Reindeer” in the queue for the night bus? She vaguely remembered a “Jingle Bells” sing-along with the passengers on the top deck. Alex had been economical with the details even before they’d downed a festive quantity of alcohol, but something had happened with his dad.

From what Maggie could tell, he and Nick didn’t see much of their actor father, but he’d come out with some scathing remarks in a newspaper interview about disowning his sons because their mother wanted them to audition for an American television drama. “A vampire is the last part on earth I’d choose for myself!” and “I wouldn’t do *Mercy of the Vampires* if my life depended on it!” were the quotes from the “doyen of serious drama” that had upset Alex. The jibes said more about the legendary Drake Wells than his sons, and were most probably calculated to annoy his soap diva ex-wife, Maggie reckoned, but she could tell Alex was hurt. Having famous parents who were unabashed when it came to splashing their lives across the tabloids had to be hideous. No wonder he was stand-offish. So much so that when she’d first met him she’d thought he hadn’t liked her at first. She’d been wrong on that one. Oh. So. Wrong.

“So...” His lovely rumbly voice filled the awkward silence. “Christmas with Grandma. How is the old dragon?”

“She’d have your ...” She fired a twinkly look downwards. “...you-know-whats for Christmas-tree baubles if she knew about last night!”

“Um. Yeah. About last night ...” Alex felled her with a sexy smile. “Rain check?”

“Sure.” She pictured the “Tube journey of shame” that lay ahead. Technically, she didn’t actually have anything to be ashamed of. More’s the pity.

Alex pulled her close and forked his fingers into her hair. “Happy Christmas, Babe.” His lips touched hers lightly, then he gathered her into his hold and deepened the kiss as if he’d never let her go. Head in a spin, her heart cartwheeled. This was it! They were tipping over the edge from friends into ... What? She couldn’t be sure what all of this meant. She and Alex had become fast friends when she’d moved to London to study fashion. They’d known each other for about a year, been part of a big group of artsy, thespian students who hung out and went to the same parties. She’d kind of got close to him, as close as anyone could, given how aloof he could be. And, of course, she fancied him. Didn’t everyone? In all honesty she’d been a teeny bit in love with him since the moment she’d first set eyes on him. She’d reconciled the feelings she had for her friend to being just the stuff of crushes, and then, bam! Practically out of nowhere it had flared up last night. She’d accidentally-on-purpose missed the last Tube home, and all of a sudden she had butterflies in her stomach and her head and her heart were in a lovely befuddled muddle.

What if he’s The One?

She wished he didn’t have to go. He had to spend Christmas with his crazy, mixed-up mother in LA. The Hollywood drama queen with the checkered past was at the top of her game, and about to pull off the nepotistic coup of landing her twin sons leading roles in a new vampire drama. Hence

the furore with their disapproving father. Alex was stuck. She felt for him. Devoted to Nick and their mother, he'd walk through flames not to let either of them down. Even though he hated his father for publicly lambasting the family, he badly wanted to please him. Getting him to talk about it was impossible. Alex puzzled Maggie. He was positively taciturn about his dad. What she'd figured out was mostly guesswork.

Blow all that. She didn't want to think about it. She had faith in Alex. He wouldn't drop out of drama school. He wouldn't stay in LA. He wanted to be a serious actor. Maybe direct. That might be for the best, given how much he loathed the limelight. She pressed closer into his arms and got lost in his kiss. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to exist only in the moment, memorizing how good he felt, as if she was recording this perfect feeling to hold onto until he came back. A column of warmth and strong muscle, he tightened his hold on her melted body, and his lips crushed hers. Slowly, oh-so-deliciously slowly, they explored each other's mouths as though they had all the time in the world.

Nick hammered on the door. "I hate to break up the party, guys – but I don't want to miss my flight."

They broke from the delirious oblivion of each other. He rocked her world. His soft mouth and the rasp of his unshaven skin made her giddy. She remembered to breathe, and committed to memory his uniquely gorgeous scent of spicy guy.

Her impending Tube journey dragged her back to reality, as if she had lead feet instead of six-inch sequined heels. She had to go home and pack and get herself to Cornwall for what promised to be a traditional, but distinctly uneventful, Christmas break: just her and grandma, as per usual, same as every year in the ten or so since her mother had left.

"I don't want to go," she breathed in a whisper. "I wish we could just stay here for the holidays."

A low groan of frustration echoed from deep in Alex's throat. "Same." He brushed her lips in a final parting kiss. "Take these." He gave her his much-too-big gloves and she stuffed her hands into them.

Nick practically fell through the door as she opened it. "Bye Nick," she chirped, adding with a cheeky smile, "Good luck with the audition. You'd make a lovely vampire!"

She wanted to mean it. The opportunity meant everything to Nick, even if warring vampire brothers wasn't exactly Alex's cup of tea.

"Sayonara, Santa Girl." He sniggered at her fancy-dress costume. "I'd say thanks if I thought you meant it. Vamoose." He held the door wide open for her to make an exit. "Cheerio. Toodle-pip. Have a nice life."

Nick wanted her out of the picture and he wasn't making any effort to hide the fact. What did he think she might do? Abduct Alex and keep him prisoner in a beach cave so he couldn't go to LA for their big, life-changing audition. It was a tempting thought. She glared at Alex's younger twin and froze him out, pretended he had on an invisibility cloak and stood her ground.

She only had eyes for the dark-haired, blue-eyed twin. "Walk you to the Tube?" Alex offered.

Tongue jammed into her cheek, Maggie arched a brow and razed nearly-naked-Alex with a top-to-toe look. She shook her head. "I. Don't. Think. So." Despite her ridiculous appearance she was aiming for a sophisticated vibe, like she was terrifically cool with the fact that at some point in the previous twelve hours the world had tilted on its axis and they had become something that was a whole heap of fabuliciousness more than friends. Only her composure cracked and she bubbled over with a fit of the giggles. "Arrivederci. I'll see myself out."

"I'm glad you see the funny side." His drawl echoed in the stairwell. "I'll call you in Cornwall."

"Be warned." She managed to sound nonchalant, even though her heart was racing, "The signal's rubbish down there. Most of my grandmother's texts get lost in cyber space for days on end."

Outside on the London street snow had started to fall, coating everything in a thin layer of white, like frosting on a Christmas cake. Maggie shivered. Tottering to the Underground station, she fumbled her toasty fingers out of Alex's gloves and texted him. "GBFN."

A second later his reply pinged onto her phone. Her heart jumped. She missed everything about him already – his strong arms, the touch of his big hands. Suddenly she felt bizarrely isolated. She stopped stock-still on the busy street, a lone eccentric figure in red silk, sequins and oversized knitwear. A skinny black cat with white paws had been watching her from its perch on top of a rubbish bin. It jumped down and twisted itself against her legs. Purring loudly, it circled her, almost knocking her off balance. "Give me a break, Puss-in-Boots," she muttered through chattering teeth. "It's hard enough to walk in these stupid shoes as it is. Black cats are supposed to bring good luck," she scolded chirpily. "I'll not be feeling very lucky if you trip me up and I break my ankle!"

A sharp tap on the shoulder made her jump. She spun round to find Nick smiling down at her, holding a shoe box. "You can't go home in those things," he said, nodding at her feet, and whipping the lid off the box with a flourish. "Ta-dah ... " He held out a pair of brand-new boots. "... I'm the health-and-safety guy."

"I can't take those."

"You can and you will," he joked. "They're a present."

"For someone else," she insisted.

"Yeah, but your need is greater." He shrugged. "I can get something else."

Steadying herself on his shoulder she swapped her heels for the flat, sheepskin boots. They were about a size too big but she wasn't complaining.

"Thanks, Nick."

"No problem."

He turned and fled. She bit her lip and checked the screen on her phone.

I'll call you when I get back. :-) Promise. Alex XXX

She hoped he'd be okay. He hated his parents lashing out at each other in the press. Publicity usually sent him retreating behind a wall of steely silence. Last night had been different. His barriers had come down like never before. If only she could rewind the clock and not fall asleep in his bed. What a twit!

She'd giddily tumbled into bed with Alex, a hot tangle of limbs, breath, skin. The rasp of a zip, feeling her sexy Santa dress fall to the floor, stayed fresh in her mind, even if the rest was hazy. She'd blown her budget on stockings and high heels, but not having anticipated revealing her undies to anyone, let alone Alex, they'd been on the ever-so-slightly unsightly side of things, grey from too many laundry days. Frankly her lingerie – if it qualified to be called that – had seen better days. She cringed, remembering the pause for condoms, uncertainty setting in. Having fruitlessly turned his room upside down, Alex had gone off to see if he could cadge one off a house mate. In a house shared by four guys, a stash had eventually been found. But by then, hit by a wave of embarrassment and beaten by the alcohol, she'd started drifting off to sleep. He'd held her, her hair tangled with his, her head in the curve of his neck, and they'd fallen asleep in each other's arms, waking in the cold grey dawn to the realization that in a drunken frenzy they'd almost gone too far.

Except he'd kissed her again and now she was on cloud nine.

Flakes of snow swirled around her. She was having a snow-globe moment. Inside her own little bubble Nick's words hit home. "Have a nice life." Alex didn't realize it yet, but as sure as lucky black cats didn't wear white boots, the Wells twins were leaving London for good.

They wouldn't be coming back from LA.

She'd fallen asleep and blown the only chance she'd ever have of making love to the gorgeous guy she'd been really more than a little bit in love with since the moment she'd first looked flirtily into his seductive eyes, and said, "My name's Magenta, but my friends call me Maggie."

Chapter One

Oh my giddy aunt! He's actually on the flight!

What had possessed her when she'd accepted this last-minute styling job? Apart from itchy feet and the promise of a healthy paycheck, there was the decidedly unhealthy curiosity she still harbored over the big what-might-have-been-and-wasn't-meant-to-be factor.

Secretly, she'd always kicked herself that she hadn't had sex with Hot Vampire Guy when she had the chance. Frankly, she should be over all that. And she was. Really, she was.

Magenta Plumtree, fashion-stylist-on-a-mission, boarded the flight from London Heathrow to Boston clutching her cabin baggage so tight that her knuckles turned white. A British magazine had hired her to fly out and style twin celebrities, Alex and Nick Wells, in two fashion shoots scheduled to coincide with the promo for the final series of their top-of-the-ratings television show, *Mercy of the Vampires*. It was all very last-minute and a bit of a shock.

The flight attendant, a blonde bombshell with a candy-pink pout, checked her boarding card.

"You've been upgraded to Business."

To her right, bursting at the seams, Economy buzzed with passengers stowing carry-ons.

"I have? How come?" She almost high-fived Blondie. She'd lucked in. For once. Delighted to be moving up in the world, she turned left.

Yay.

Then again. Not so yay. Of course there was a drawback. The empty seat was smack-bang next to super-sexy vampire actor Alex Wells. In this position many women would have imagined they'd died and gone to heaven. Not so Magenta. She winced. She'd braced herself for working with him in Boston. She hadn't planned on travelling with him, or being bowled over by his fabulousness. These days he was just another celebrity clothes hanger. It was her job to pick him out some knock-out fashion items. Unusually for her she was lost for words.

He flicked her an arrogant glance up and down from behind dark glasses.

"Hey."

She reeled. One rumble was enough to make her heart drop into her freebie, perk-of-the-job designer boots. "Hey." Her terse echo masked intense, self-conscious attraction. With a perfunctory smile, she sat down and snapped on her seatbelt.

Big comfy seat. Masses of leg room. Nice.

They ignored each other through the spiel about life jackets and no smoking in the toilets. She picked up the emergency-procedure leaflet and gave it the benefit of her undivided attention for longer than was strictly necessary.

After take-off a star-struck flight attendant batted her eyelashes at Alex with a dose of not-so-professional allure. "Complimentary champagne, Sir?"

He removed his sunglasses. "Don't mind if I do," he quipped, infamous Wellsian charm much in evidence. How did he manage to pull off that cool twinkle? He turned his penetrating gaze on Magenta. "Join me?"

"No thanks." She declined the bubbly, and the flight attendant substituted champagne with orange juice.

Alex's eyebrows shot up. "What happened to your party-girl tendencies?"

She tried him with a couple of lame excuses. "I'm detoxing. Anyhow, alcohol and jetlag don't mix."

He was having none of it. "Go on. Be a devil. You used to be fun," he joked. "A. Lot. Of. Fun." She hadn't seen him for donkey's years and here he was, large as life, all flirty and fabulous. She gritted her teeth. She wasn't about to tell him the truth, so she needed another excuse for not

drinking. She could hardly claim to be a recovering alcoholic. That would be insensitive given his mother's history of stints in rehab.

"I've just finished a course of antibiotics and, anyway, I'm counting calories." She tipped her head to one side, exuding fake nonchalance.

Alex sipped from his flute. "No champagne for you, huh? That's tough." He checked that the flight attendant was out of earshot and whispered so she wouldn't hear. "It's not properly chilled. It pretty much tastes like fizzy bath water – if that's any consolation, Maggie."

The mini champagne bottle looked perfectly chilled. Was this Alex being considerate? She didn't know what she'd expected from the man who'd walked away without saying goodbye, but it definitely wasn't quips about tepid champagne.

His incendiary eyes ignited a touch paper of acute embarrassment topped off with a sprinkling of nostalgia. Her heartbeat skipped, like an awkwardly timed hiccup. She laughed, jittery. His voice was all actorly. Posh – sort of. Not marbles – more velvety, like rich, dark, melted chocolate. So much for having got over the effect he'd had on her in their student days.

He sounded kind of mid-Atlantic, half-Brit, half-American. De-lish. And altogether too smooth. What was it about that soft rumble? He made the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand to attention.

"No one's called me Maggie since ..." She stopped abruptly. *Um. You did. Way back when.* "... It's Magenta now."

"Magenta Plumtree – fashion stylist to the stars." Did she detect a hint of cynicism?

"I wouldn't go quite that far." A lump formed in her throat. "Until now, that is."

He snared her gaze. The moment lasted a second too long. Even after all this time, she could lose herself in his dreamy eyes.

"You're still just plain Maggie to me." His delectable drawl gave her tingles. The orange juice sloshed. She set it down on the tray table, eyes fixed on it as if she'd just found a fly floating in there. Avoiding Alex's roguish face, she studied her blue nails, the only soupçon of color in her meticulously monochrome appearance. She pinched the skin on the back of her hand, though a little bit harder than she intended. "Ouch."

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Checking you're not a nightmare."

He frowned and pinched the back of his own hand. "Well, what do you know? Neither are you."

A bubble of emotion burst. He compelled her to smile despite her inclination to send him frosty, couldn't-care-less-about-you vibes.

You're ridiculously dreamy actually!

The Wells twins' celebrity status was stratospheric. They had the bad-boy reputations to go with it. Less inclined to publicly flaunt his love life than his scandal-prone brother, Alex maintained an air of mystery. Even so, he'd been the subject of his fair share of gossip over the years.

"So. Long time, no see. How the hell are you?"

She must be hearing things. He'd said "long time, no see". Despite her annoyance at his cheek, sparks of their once-upon-a-time chemistry flickered. "I'm good. Grr-reat. You?"

"Fine. Busy. Doing promo for the final series of *Vampires*. She took another hit of his blue eyes and spine-tingly voice, barely listening to the actual words he was saying. "And working on a new project in London."

Fidgety, she picked up her drink, took a sip and waited for the next question.

"What about you, Maggie? What are you up to these days? Not married or anything?"

Right on cue. More cheek!

"Nope. Not married."

Maggie met his magnetic stare full on. She sizzled. She had to tough this out. She couldn't in all honesty add "Or anything", but she certainly wasn't about to share her personal life with him. The

eyes that wowed women all over the planet from the safety of their TV screens slid to her left hand. No wedding ring.

Flipping flippity flip.

Why couldn't they be on a posh new plane? Then he'd have his own personal first-class pod to chillax in? Instead of spoiling her upgrade.

"How do you like your upgrade? Shame about the champagne. I hope you don't mind, Maggie, but I took the liberty of having you moved to Business. It's been a long time, I thought it might be good to meet, clear the air, ahead of working together."

Maggie gulped, only just managing not to splutter juice all down her front.

"You upgraded me?" she squeaked. *How dare he interfere with her travel arrangements?* "There was really no need. I'll reimburse you."

He downed his champagne. His eyes scintillated. "It's a tight schedule. I thought you'd be more comfortable in Business. And I get the pleasure of your company. We can have a catch-up."

Awkward!

"A catch-up? It's been ten years, Alex. How long have you got?"

He glanced at his watch and laughed. "About seven hours."

Even after a decade, he unnerved her with a sense that he could see inside her soul with those penetrating blue irises.

Outrageous.

That was silly. Deluded. It was the TV-star effect. Guys like Alex shouldn't be allowed in confined spaces – like airplanes. Much too distracting. Flight attendants should be issued with Hot Man Alert signs. By law, or something.

Keep calm and carry on.

Her professional preparedness for the prospect of working with him after all these years had taken on an unexpected turn now that she was sitting next to him. Polite chit-chat she could do. The last thing she wanted was to start spilling out an over-share of personal details as if they'd never lost touch.

"There's not much to tell. I know transatlantic travel is boring, but I'm not the in-flight entertainment."

Okay, so long ago in a forgotten land, Alex had been her friend ... And they'd fallen into bed together – that one time. She winced. That was before he went off and became famous and dropped her like a hot potato. She fumed. If they were on a bus, she'd hop off at the next stop. Seeing him like this had catapulted her back in time, and she was suddenly a tad out of her depth.

"Go on. Indulge me. Tell me all about it. How did my old mate Maggie become fashion guru Magenta Plumtree?" Alex's mid-Atlantic voice hypnotized her, weakening her wariness.

His old mate! Really?

"I have my dippy mother to thank for the la-di-da name. The rest, I guess, is down to a lot of good luck and hard work."

"Not to mention an instinct for style and a flair for all things fashion. Don't be modest. You're good and you know it."

"The truth is I sort of fell into it. I've loved fashion since I was a little girl. I guess I like playing dress-up."

"Good for you for doing what you love."

He was more heart-stoppingly attractive than he'd ever been, but there was an aura of distance about him. Was this his celebrity bubble? She couldn't make up her mind if she was annoyed with him for quizzing her, or pleased that he still thought of her as having been a friend. She was intrigued by him, that was for sure.

"I like helping people express their sense of style – whether it's a special event or a makeover." She was off. "I love it all. I like putting together looks that are bang on trend, or quirky ones that are

a bit of a mash-up, the way we're doing for these shoots with you and Nick. I love catwalk shows, fashion weeks, shoes – oh my lucky stars – how I love shoes.” She dipped her glance towards her beloved designer boots, wiggled her toes and clicked her feet together in the mode of *The Wizard of Oz*'s red-shoed Dorothy. “Then there's the shopping – need I say more? I get to go wild in great cities. New York. London. Paris. I pick up accessories. I find little boutiques off the beaten track. Just last week I found a vintage shop to die for in Montmartre. It's the best!” He watched her intently. Was he actually interested? He'd always been kind of unreadable. Her heart hammered. The more her pulse raced, the faster she bubbled. “I've worked with designers and big high-street chains. I don't have a preference. I can't get enough of it all.” She forced herself to draw breath. “Sorry.” She sensed the spread of a blush rising up her neck and setting her face ablaze. “I'll get down off my soap box now. I suppose you could say I'm incredibly shallow.”

“I wouldn't say that.” She couldn't believe that he wasn't completely indifferent, like he'd spotted a vaguely intriguing but ultimately forgettable relic on a between-takes boredom- busting visit to the studio prop store. “There's nothing wrong with making people feel good about themselves.”

The heat in Maggie's face began to subside. She'd pulled her hair back into a ponytail for travelling. On autopilot she undid and re-fixed it. “I guess I'm just a free spirit. Fashion styling suits me. I like working freelance.” She hated that she felt such a strong need to justify her lifestyle. If things went according to plan, she'd have to stop travelling, settle down and try something different. She'd already started putting out feelers, thinking about new directions. “If you must know, I'm planning to make some changes. I've been a bit of a rolling stone since uni. I did this and that for the first few months, then I got hired as a temporary Girl Friday for a designer at London Fashion Week. I worked my socks off for her and she gave me recommendations. Before I knew it I was building a reputation as a stylist. And voilà.”

“What kind of changes?”

He'd zapped her cool, if she'd ever had any. Although she'd taken this styling job because she'd felt compelled to find out about the man Alex had become, it hadn't occurred to her for one moment that he'd want to know about her. He was fabulously good-looking and then some. These days she'd have been happy to put it all down to air-brushing. Seeing him in the flesh reminded her it was so not. He was off-the-charts gorgeous.

“Oh, you know,” she said evasively, brushing her hand through the air as if she could sweep her words away. “I want to settle down. Find something a bit more permanent.”

Fidgety, she pretended to pluck a non-existent piece of fluff off the sleeve of her black designer sweater.

Miles above the Atlantic Ocean, there were hours to go. How was she going to damp down the disastrous fireworks that she thought had died long ago? With any luck it was down to sky-high hormones, and the plan she was hell bent on not sharing with him. She hadn't told anyone yet. Not even Layla, her lovely BFF since age zilch. She hadn't wanted people to try and dissuade her from her decision.

“Your meal, sir.” Alex accepted his tray from the flight attendant turned swoony bimbo.

Maggie identified with her wholeheartedly. Being on the flight with Alex was too surreal – more like riding a rollercoaster. She'd expected to meet him at the shoot and adopt an air of professional distance. Instead the memory of tumbling into bed with him wouldn't get out of her head. It mortified her.

He'd gone to LA. And he'd never called. She'd forgotten him – kind of not. The problem was that his alter ego loomed everywhere. Hot Vampire Guy, as Layla called him, adorned the walls of Tube stations. His eyes blazed from the sides of red, double-decker London buses. Co-workers at coffee breaks bandied his name around. Alex had been replaced by Jago. And Jago was not a man who went unnoticed.

She was more than a smidge curious about getting a call out of the blue asking her to style Alex and Nick. It was extremely short notice and very unusual. The editor was about to put the magazine to bed when she got the green light for these photo shoots, so the pressure was on to get it right. Maggie was beginning to think that she should have said no. Still, she planned to tack an extra day onto her stay in Boston and go on a whale-watch. It was something she'd always wanted to do. Added to that, her bank balance was healthy enough, but she was in no position to turn down work; especially well-paid editorial work for a top magazine.

The funny timing coincided with a new phase in her life. Some kind of karma? Alex had gone off to a new life and hadn't contacted her. It wasn't so much the one-night-flop, although she could have kicked herself about that. It was the silence that hurt. She'd called him half a dozen times, but he hadn't answered his phone or followed up the message she'd finally left with Nick. Basically, she hadn't mattered enough for him to say goodbye. She'd been dumped. So she did what she always did. She glossed over it, put on a smile, and moved on. After all, being left behind was Magenta Plumtree's normal.

She was proud of her life, excited for the future. She needed to keep that in her head, up front and center. She'd power through the awkwardness and focus on her work.

"Your meal." The flight attendant made to set a tray down in front of Maggie. As she did so the knife, fork, and spoon wrapped in a linen napkin wobbled and dropped off. Alex held out one large hand and caught it in mid-air. Sleeve rolled back, tanned arm dusted with dusky hairs, an understated platinum watch sat on his wrist. He passed the cutlery to Maggie. Their fingers brushed. Attraction danced in her veins and shimmied to the tips of her fingers and toes. She trembled, discombobulated beyond belief.

"It's really good to see you, Maggie."

He challenged her with his wicked eyes. If only just sitting beside him didn't take her breath away. Blast his blatant sex appeal. Everything about his body language screamed an invitation to play. He made her want to smile in spite of herself.

"You too." She lowered her eyes only to find herself making a study of his muscular thighs in dark denim. He exuded masculine vitality from every single pore. "I'm looking forward to working with you," she blurted, adding a second too late "and Nick."

Alex turned back and gave her one of his rare smiles. He was devastating when he did that. Not that people got to see him smile much. He was way too cool. She'd done an internet search to check out the looks that they used on the show. She'd unearthed infinite pages of Alex channeling his vampire character Jago – all dark and compelling and smileless. His smile was infectious. Maybe that's why he didn't do smile-for-the-camera. Perhaps he'd spent ten years perfecting an image of supreme indifference to save women from themselves. On the receiving end of Alex's wicked, wide smile she might as well be weightless, as if she'd boarded a rocket for Mars and flown off into space. All rationale eliminated, she had mush for a brain.

Wound-up, spaceship Maggie returned from outer orbit. Alex Wells had been on planet La La Land for ten years. She'd be crazy to wonder if they could go back to square one – on any level, never mind the events of that last night. He wanted to get up to speed. Make sure she had enough experience for the styling job. She'd worked with celebrities, even a handful of really big names, but mostly she got hired by a well-heeled social elite, who desperately wanted to look like A-listers. She'd be fooling herself if she imagined Alex, with his "old mates" interrogation and his upgrade, was interested in her beyond the end of this week. He was all fake charm and chumminess because he wanted her to make him look good. She wondered how he handled the publicity, given that he'd loathed being its focus before he got famous.

"Come on. Out with it, Maggie. Spill the beans. What have you got in the pipeline?"

She tensed and bit down on her bottom lip, aching to tell him to mind his own business and literally clamping her mouth shut. Alex did not need to know about her recent visit to a private fertility clinic.

“I can’t say,” she said evasively. “Nothing’s finalized yet. But I can tell you that if it works out, it’s going to totally change my life.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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