

This Christmas she'll bring them all together

A Miracle on Hope Street



EMMA HEATHERINGTON

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**A Miracle on Hope Street:
The most heartwarming
Christmas romance of 2018!**

«HarperCollins»

Heatherington E.

A Miracle on Hope Street: The most heartwarming Christmas romance of 2018! / E. Heatherington — «HarperCollins»,

Remember the true meaning of Christmas with this heartfelt and beautiful novel from bestselling author Emma Heatherington. Can a single act of kindness change a life forever? To many people, Ruth Ryans has everything: the perfect job, a beautiful home and a loving family. But as Christmas approaches, Ruth feels lonelier than ever. Then Ruth meets Michael. A man who she showed kindness to during his darkest moment. That one single act, his miracle, helped change his life forever. Ruth decides to make this Christmas the most perfect one ever, opening up her home to those who need her help – the lonely, the lost and the ignored. Actions speak louder than words and Ruth Ryans' kindness will create little miracles for everyone ... including her own battered heart. Readers love this magical book: 'This heartwarming and emotional story highlights the magic of reaching out to those who otherwise would be alone' Stacy is Reading 'I utterly adore this book... one of the most inspirational stories I've read' Kate 'A warm read that will make you think and smile' Kathleen

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A Miracle on Hope Street

Emma Heatherington is from Donaghmore, Co Tyrone, where she lives with her children Jordyn, Jade, Dualta, Adam and baby Sonny James. She has penned more than thirty short films, plays and musicals as well as seven novels, two of which were written under the pseudonym Emma Louise Jordan.

Emma's novel, *The Legacy of Lucy Harte*, was an eBook bestseller in both the UK and US.

Emma loves spending time with her partner (the talented artist and singer/songwriter Jim McKee), all things Nashville, romantic comedy movies, singalong nights with friends and family, red wine, musical theatre, new pyjamas, fresh clean bedclothes, long bubble baths and cosy nights in by the fire.



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A Miracle on Hope Street

EMMA
HEATHERINGTON



For my daddy Hugh McCrory, probably the best daddy in the world

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A simple act of kindness

Can sometimes change the world

Chapter One

Ruth

Eight Days before Christmas – One Year Ago

‘I bet it was the husband. It’s always the husband in the end, isn’t it, Dad?’

My father looks like he’s actually considering my analysis of the TV detective show from his bedside armchair, and even though in the blank stillness of his mind he’s more than a million miles away, I know he’s still in there somewhere.

I just don’t know where.

I reach across and squeeze his hand, taking in the smell of his musky new aftershave, an early Christmas gift from his buddy Mabel who lives just down the corridor in Room 303. He gives me a vacant but twinkly-eyed smile in return.

‘I know, I know, you men aren’t all bad,’ I joke and my heart skips a beat as I look into his eyes and see for the first time in ages a glimmer of his darling personality that used to shine so brightly before this dreaded illness squeezed the life from inside him.

There are rare little times when I see a moment like this, a memory, a time when he is really my father again. I might hear it in his laughter or catch a knowing smile or feel it in the grasp of a hug or see it in the look in his eye, but such moments are becoming fewer and fewer, so I cling to them and savour them when they do surface.

Mostly now, it’s just me watching him go into an adult-like shell in a childhood like state, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute and it’s killing me to see him slowly disappear from the inside out.

‘It’s about time you found a partner of your own, I imagine him saying to me like he used to when I worried about him after he had the stroke that started all this sickness. ‘And never mind all this looking out for me, you hear? You’re a special girl, Ruth. Find a good man; a good life partner. Find someone to look out for you for a change.’

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ I whisper, pretending to have that very conversation with him right now, ‘but I don’t need anyone, so don’t you worry, Dad. I have you and Ally, not to mention her gorgeous boys, Owen and Ben. And you can’t stop me from looking out for you. It’s kind of what I do best these days.’

I can pretend all I want that I am having a proper conversation with him, but I know by the silence and the glaze in his eyes that he’s in his own very simple, hazy world; a world of mixed-up noise and colourful shapes bouncing from the television screen that flashes in this darkened room. I lift the bottle of new aftershave from his tight clutch, put the wrapping paper in the bin and then settle back into my own chair to savour every moment of this precious time with him.

‘You smell really nice,’ I tell him. You smell just like—’

And then I stop because my voice just can’t let out the words. I want to tell him what I’m thinking but I can’t. I want to tell him how his aftershave reminds me of happier times, of safety, of security, of those carefree days before it all went so horribly wrong for us; when our family of three was a family of four. When it was me, Dad, my sister Ally and our mother before it all ended.

‘I always remember your aftershave, Dad. It brings back good memories,’ is as much as I can whisper eventually. ‘How kind of Mabel to remember your favourite just in time for Christmas? I hope she isn’t too cross that we’ve opened it already.’

Dad never did wait until the Christmas Day to open his presents, so I carried on his tradition today, opening the carefully wrapped gift for him and then gave him a generous spray of the cologne. Not that he knows if it’s Christmas or if it’s spring or summer or autumn or winter. But it’s definitely very much winter outside. It’s dropping down dark on the other side of the window and I sit back and

relax in the bliss of it all – just me, my dad, the smell of new cologne, Christmas around the corner and some good old Poirot on the telly.

‘This is nice,’ I mutter, but he doesn’t respond of course. Instead, he just smiles and stares at the screen and that’s quite enough for me right now.

We are both totally fixated once again with what is going on in the old-school detective TV show on the small telly in my father’s tiny bedroom, my hand now automatically reaching in and out of a supersize bag of crisps to find my mouth which subsequently chews and crunches and the feeling of contentment I had before the aftershave smell brought me back in time returns and I relax again.

It’s my favourite time of the day on my favourite day of the week and I have thirty whole minutes left before I go back into the rat race of my other life which consists of everything from deadlines at my desk in my home office, to hair and makeup appointments and fake smiling for the cameras, plus everything else that being a ‘celebrity agony aunt’ for the city’s biggest newspaper brings, so I wrap my new fuzzy cardigan around me a little tighter, then reach up and pull the curtains, taking just a moment to notice the dark, crisp December afternoon that lies on the other side of the world from where I am right now.

I reflect on how I somehow lead a double life in many ways. There’s the public Ruth Ryans, the well-known half-Italian, half-Irish thirty-something agony aunt for *Today* newspaper’s weekly magazine, who is invited to every event in town with a new man for every season on her arm and a new outfit to boot. A curvy and cuddly brunette, average size in height, warm in the face and just pleasant enough on the eye to be relatable to every man, woman and sometimes child who put pen to paper to tell me their biggest fears and problems in this big bad world with a guaranteed reply to everyone who takes the time.

Then there’s the private Ruth Ryans – the quiet, single one of the family, the one who never settled down despite being proposed to twice, the caring one, the soft one, the one who everyone loves to see for a laugh and the craic and then watch on in wonder from afar when she’s gone – the one who takes after her deep-thinking father with her wise words and advice; the one who likes to hide behind the persona that made her a household name; and the one who never, ever mentions the mother who left forever without warning one Sunday all those years ago.

I delete the thought of my mother, Elena, immediately, just as I’ve trained my mind to do so if she dares to make an appearance in my head and I focus on the present which is my father; the one who never, ever left us and who deserves every moment of my attention. I’ve learned, as the years rolled by, to live in the present, even though it’s desperately hard to let go of the past.

Focus, Ruth. Focus on the here and now. The great job in the public eye, the home to die for that has so much potential, the father you adore, the sister you idolise, the opportunities you frequent, the places you go, the people you meet, the independence, the empowerment. Focus.

The places I go. . . I used to travel the world, but now my world is here in this dark little room my father calls home or in the empty and silent rooms of the place we all used to call home. I decorated this cosy room in the nursing home to reflect the beautiful house on the tree-lined Beech Row that he worked so hard for my sister and I to grow up in, despite his pain at being left on his own to raise us. The house that I now live in alone, watching it grow stiller and stiller around me, suffocating me, not only with the memories that my father worked so hard to create, but with flashbacks of childhood memories that are separated into life before her and life after her like a line that is drawn down through everything I do and everything I am.

I’ve tried to awaken my dad’s full senses in this room with family photos of days gone by, moments of great pride captured in press clippings from his lengthy career as a highly regarded university lecturer, memories of my graduation day when he grinned nonstop from ear to ear, pictures from my sister Ally’s wedding as he walked her proudly down the aisle, snaps of my little nephews on the many stages of their young lives and posters of Dad’s favourite movies such as *Gone With the Wind* and *Casablanca*. His banjo hangs on the wall and an old flute that he once played with

such pride lies polished and proud on a shelf by the window, where a potted plant sits waiting on the morning sun and a CD player, with all his old familiar songs stacked beside it, plays constantly on low in the background.

I have softly lit lamps, a little fluffy rug and a bookshelf filled with novels and autobiographies that he once used to devour but can no longer understand. It is heart-breaking yet soothing to see his things scattered round this room, haunting shadows of the man he used to be, and who I believe, still is inside.

This may not be his 'real' home, but I've made it the best than it can be. It's a place where he is looked after in a way that I no longer can and it's like an alternate universe where the most important things are stripped back and carried out in a regimental routine every day. I feel safe here, close to the nest of familiarity, if you like, even though it's only been just under a year since my sister and I made the decision to have our darling father cared for, far away from the cosy townhouse existence where he lived with me, when he was well enough to do the everyday things we took for granted.

'Can I get you a drink, Dad?' I ask and he nods a bit. A reply of sorts, most welcome in this foggy existence where he struggles with the answer to the simplest of questions.

This place is good for him, I keep telling myself. It is warm, it is safe, it feels familiar by now and most of all it gives him a steady routine that I really couldn't devote to him at home which is empty and dark and silent without his wise words, philosophical ways, eclectic taste in music and hearty laughter.

My dad loves routine and I love it too. I cling to it like a security blanket, safe in the knowledge of knowing what I am going to do when I wake to face each day.

Tuesdays like today mean an early morning walk around the block before breakfast, then three hours picking through problems sent from the general public to me to give advice in my daily agony aunt online blog, lunchtime here with Dad and a quick dash home for more admin and work for my weekly city magazine column, then back here where I help supervise bingo night for the residents before tucking my dad in for the night. When he's settled, I set off home where I'll squeeze in another few hours at my desk, solving more of the city people's personal problems and file my daily copy to my editor before bedtime.

Most nights of the week are routine like that, minus the Tuesday bingo which is replaced on every other evening with my 'other life' of nonstop list of product launch events, movie premieres, dinner dates and other necessary 'profile building' occasions that my newspaper publisher and manager, the infamous Margo Taylor, insists I partake in to keep the problems pouring in from readers who are convinced I can help change their world with my wise words.

In the snug of this room, a sense of routine is as regular as clockwork and worlds away from the life I lead outside, so I cherish these moments with my one true hero, my dad, whose life was once like mine with not enough hours in the day, juggling his commitments to his university day job and the students he helped to advise, with looking after my sister and I, whether that be our own education or cooking and washing for us, always making sure we had everything we needed.

I go back to Poirot and my crisps and wait for Dad to tell me to 'stop munching' like he used to do, but of course he doesn't notice if I'm making noise any more. His mind is mostly now only a muddle of faces, faraway places and a whirlwind of random thoughts which he expresses through pigeon speech that is becoming less and less frequent. He is lost in a fog of oblivion and it's only those who love him and remember the man he once was who suffer so much by watching his whole self-crumble from the inside out.

I turn down the volume as the credits roll, feeling overly smug with myself that it was indeed the husband who committed the deadly crime and ponder for a moment how much more exciting it would be to be a private eye than a super busy 'celebrity' agony aunt, a job I fell into almost by accident after a feature I wrote on dealing with a break-up which had the newspaper's readers banging

down the door for more. Is it a bad idea to change career when you're flying high and kicking the ass of thirty-three years old? I probably wouldn't change it even if I could. Or would I?

I think of my biggest dream of running away from this world that I know and living in a cottage by the sea where I'd write to my heart's content with the sound of the waves lapping outside and gulls flying up above. I might even run a little bed and breakfast and I'd marvel at everyone who came to stay with me, hearing all about them and probably trying to solve their problems as it's what I'm best at these days.

I check my phone briefly and a message from my sister reminds me again of my evening plans.

'Guess who is coming to see you tonight?' I say to my father, his smiling face and innocent wide eyes staring back at me like it really doesn't matter, because it really *doesn't* matter to him. He has very little concept of who or why or when any more.

'Elena,' he says, reaching his frail hand up to touch my face.

He isn't answering my question by suggesting her, but mistaking me again for her and my heart skips a beat just like it does every time he mentions my mother's name. I put my hand on his and take a deep breath in and I remember that the best thing about his stroke is that he doesn't remember her leaving him. The worst thing about is that every time he mentions her name, I am reminded all over again of the agony he felt when she left.

'She isn't coming back, Dad, I'm so sorry,' I say to him, just like I've done for so many years now. He'd insist she would change her mind one day, but I soon came to accept that she wouldn't.

It is cold now, despite the clammy room, and when my eyes meet his, mine fill up and I shake my head and smile, grateful in so many ways that he forgets how long it has been since we've seen her and the pain her leaving caused all those years ago when my sister and I were just getting our heads around periods and puberty and girlhood crushes. She left just when I really needed her most and I don't know if I can ever forgive her for it.

'I won't be here for bingo but Ally will be here tonight! Super Ally?' I say with a bright smile and his face mirrors mine. His navy-blue eyes, his smooth forehead and his head tilted as he drinks in my every word but understands very little that I have to say about my sister, the daughter he used to call his other super hero. Super Ally and Super Ruth . . . we were always quite a team of three.

I feel that old familiar choking sensation and my bottom lip trembles as I look into my father's ailing eyes which are so far away from me.

'I wish you could talk to me, Dad,' I tell him. 'Please just say something. I miss you so, so much. Why are you so far away?'

Chapter Two

‘Did I hear from someone that you’re missing tonight’s bingo?’ a familiar voice says, and I look up to see Oonagh, one of the staff here at the nursing home who looks after my darling daddy like an egg. She pulls down the covers of his freshly made bed and puts a jug of water and a clean glass on his tray.

‘Believe me, Oonagh, I’d actually rather be going to bingo night than where I have to go,’ I tell her. ‘The very thought of getting dressed up and painting on a smile when it looks like it’s going to snow pains me right now. How’s the family? Looking forward to Santa?’

Oonagh’s eyes light up at the chance to tell me about her children.

‘Well, Harry can’t decide if he wants Superman or Spiderman stuff this year. Talk about torn between two lovers,’ she says, laughing. ‘And Molly, well anything that involves music is what she’s been asking for. Where will you be spending Christmas this year, Ruth?’

I try to answer but she does it for me.

‘You do know that all our residents are welcome to have their families come here for dinner?’ she says. ‘We have volunteers who come and help with music and craic and we even have a visit from Santa which everyone loves. I’m off this year on Christmas Day but I’ve worked it before and it can be really lovely.’

I look at Dad, who has no clue of what we are saying and is still focused on the TV.

‘Ah, that does sound nice,’ I reply to Oonagh, ‘but I’m going to be cooking up a storm this year at home. We’re going to take Dad home to Beech Row for Christmas Day.’

‘Now that’s a much better idea,’ says Oonagh. ‘You’ve told me how much he loved that house and his garden.’

‘Yes, it was once a pretty special place,’ I say with a distant smile. ‘My sister, her husband and her sons are coming home for Christmas too, so I’m really looking forward to it. For the next while, for as long as we can, we’ll be having every Christmas there together, just like it used to be. Just how Dad would like it.’

We both look across at him, so innocent and childlike, watching the dancing colours on the television that make very little sense in his weary mind. Oonagh knows she has pressed a sentimental button and I try to hide the tears welling up in my eyes as I remember how Christmas used to be in the home I always returned to for the last week in December, no matter where I was in the world at the time. The house would be bursting at the seams with decorations and trees and lights as my father really did go overboard, in a way that I just know was to compensate us being a one-parent household. He always did go that extra mile to make life special for us.

‘So, tell me, what do you have on tonight then that could possibly beat bingo?’ asks Oonagh, changing the subject tactfully. ‘I always point you out in the newspaper and I tell everyone who will listen how I know you personally now, so you’re my official claim to fame.’

We both laugh.

‘It’s true!’ she says. ‘I can’t wait to see what you wear this time. Mind you, you could wear anything and still look like a movie star.’

I blush slightly. I still can’t believe that women my age have such an interest in my whereabouts and what I get to wear as part of it all. I’m not exactly a skinny supermodel, but maybe that’s why they like it. I’m perhaps an achievable version of themselves in appearance, with just more visits to the hairdressers and I get sponsored clothes for posh events.

‘It’s a screening of that new film with what’s-her-name?’ I tell Oonagh. ‘You know, the one about the mermaids? It opens tonight so they’re doing a big Press launch at the cinema on Hope Street and I said I’d go, not even thinking of the weather forecast and how mermaids really aren’t my thing.’

Oonagh lets out a genuine gasp.

‘Wow, well if our Molly heard that she’d be green with envy! It looks like a fun movie,’ she says. ‘Now, you have a good time, do you hear? And don’t be worrying about a thing. We have everything under control here, don’t we, Anthony?’

My dad reacts to the sound of his own name and Oonagh and I catch each other’s eye like proud parents whose baby has reached an early milestone. It’s funny how one moment he can seem to be taking it all in and then in a blink of an eye he’s gone again.

‘If I didn’t have to put on heels and a dress in the snow I might enjoy it even more,’ I say, trying as always to play these things down.

‘Ah, you’re a lucky duck!’ says Oonagh with a hearty laugh. ‘I’d swap with you any day. It’s a far cry from my exciting evening, I can tell you!’

‘You only think that,’ I say. ‘A roaring fire, a glass of red and cosy pyjamas is more on my mind than a film premiere in the snow!’

But Oonagh isn’t convinced.

‘Oh, I can only wish for a lifestyle like yours, Ruth Ryans,’ she muses. ‘Celebrity openings, dinner parties, photoshoots, gorgeous men dripping off your arm and your name practically up in lights in this city! You’re living every woman’s dream and you know it.’

‘That’s very kind of you to say,’ I reply to Oonagh, who will go home this evening, as she always does, to her warm, modest semi-detached house on the outskirts of the city to eat dinner and watch the news with her husband. Then she’ll see to her family’s needs like homework and some housework before some soaps on telly and an early night and back to work in the morning. I sometimes yearn for the simplicity of such a life, but I won’t deny it, I do enjoy the perks of my profile and opportunities that come my way, so I wouldn’t dare compare or complain. My career took off, my father took ill, I moved back in with him to help and my love life and any notions of ‘settling down’ took a back seat, or a side seat, should I say. I’ve definitely no shortage of opportunities, but the right one just hasn’t come my way and it’s the furthest thing from my mind right now to boot.

Oonagh leaves us eventually, still convinced I’m living the dream, no matter how much I plead my ‘heels in the snow’ side of the debate, and I fix the blanket that sits across my father’s lap.

‘I’ve an event tonight, Dad, so I won’t get to see if you win at bingo this week,’ I explain, ‘but little Owen and Ben will be here with Ally and I’m sure I’ll get a full report from her as to who won what. Remember to watch that Mabel one for cheating. You know what she’s like!’

I’m jesting of course, and he smiles and gives me a ‘thumbs-up’ sign.

‘I love you, Daddy, and I’ll see you tomorrow,’ I say, giving him a light kiss on the cheek. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?’

His eyes crinkle at the sides and he looks past me to the television, reminding me to turn the volume back up before I leave. His words are minimal and not always easy to interpret but we have our little signals that both of us understand.

He might not be able to say too much, any more, but I hope that deep inside he still knows who I am and just how much he means to me.

‘Goodbye, Dad,’ I say once more from where I stand in the doorway but he is locked in a different part of his new routine, laughing at the cartoons on the TV, and so I leave him to it.

I walk away and, just as I always do when I leave him, my lips tighten and I fight back tears until I get to the car. And then I cry.

Chapter Three

‘This way Ms Ryans! Look this way please. Thank you, Ms Ryans.’

‘Ruth! Over here! Ruth!’

I flash my biggest smile, wave at the cameras as my plus one for the evening, George, puts his arm tightly around my shoulder (a bit much for a first date considering we only met in real life minutes ago) and we duck away from the camera flashes and light evening snow on Hope Street, through the cinema doors into the warm sticky heat and a sea of cheap champagne. Inside, tanned, perfect and perfumed bodies, huddle together with just enough room to pose for more photos and we see how many well-known faces we can spot as we revel in another fifteen minutes of fame.

‘Ruth, darling! You made it!’

Margo Taylor air-kisses me, admires my dress, swoons at my shoes, fondles my necklace and totally invades my space, but I don’t dare to even take a gracious step back from her overpowering ways and her wrinkly cold hands. I’m her prodigy, her discovery, her baby, her pride and joy. Without her I wouldn’t be where I am now and without me . . . let’s just say we know how important it is to suck up to each other, so I do the same back.

‘You look amazing as always, Margo.’

‘I should do,’ she cackles. ‘I’m bloody freezing in this weather but I’m wearing enough money to feed a small country. It’s all going back to the shops tomorrow, of course. The perks, eh?’

I nod and smile and laugh in all the right places. Margo Taylor is not to be messed with and I know that thousands of freelance writers like me would pay the *price* of a small country just to spend a moment in her company in a bid to further their career.

‘And this must be the handsome landscape gardener?’ she continues. ‘How lovely to meet you at last! Ruth has told me all about you and I have to say you are much more gorgeous than she ever mentioned.’

George looks away, embarrassed.

‘This is George,’ I correct her above the noise, giving her a look but she doesn’t as much as blush. ‘This is George Gallagher. He works in—’

‘Mischa, darling!’

And at that she is gone, leaving only a faint echo of her rasping voice in the suffocating heat of a hundred voices and I’m glad she left when she did as whatever it is that George does for a living, I can’t for the life of me remember. I think of my dad, a world away in his little room – and for the first time in my career, I feel slightly suffocated in this unfamiliar crowd of unimportance.

‘Sorry about that,’ I say to George who, to be fair, seems already over it as he ogles the scantily clad promo girl who serves us a drink. Her ‘outfit’, which I assume is meant to be a mermaid to fit in with the theme of tonight’s movie premiere, leaves very little to the imagination and I automatically pull in my tummy and straighten my shoulders, feeling frumpy in my little black dress which cost me a bloody fortune and looks like a bin liner in comparison.

‘I wrote to you once,’ whispers the little mermaid as I sip champagne from the glass she hands to me. ‘Man trouble, of course. Over it now, but I took your advice.’

‘Oh, really?’ I say in genuine surprise. ‘What did I tell you to do?’

‘Dump the bastard,’ she says, a little too loudly over the din and I see Margo crane her neck from her neighbouring company. The mermaid covers her mouth and laughs. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to shout!’

I burst out laughing and look at George who hasn’t heard a word as he still seems infatuated by her boobs and I remind myself not to invite him out with me ever again. Another one bites the dust.

‘You must be like a total expert in relationships!’ she gushes. ‘My mum reads you every week and she lives by your words and even quotes you sometimes. Swear.’

She crosses her voluptuous chest to emphasise her enthusiasm.

‘Wow, thank you,’ I say to her. I am genuinely touched, despite the irony in what she is saying. It’s so nice to get feedback from readers and it doesn’t happen very often.

‘Then my dad tells her to stop believing everything she reads in the paper, ’cos if you knew so much about relationships, he says, you’d have a proper one of your own.’

She covers her mouth like she has said too much, her hazel eyes wide in despair.

‘That’s okay,’ I whisper. ‘Your dad might just have a point.’

I grab another glass of champagne from her tray before she gets out of reach and off she disappears as George ogles her from behind. I’m going to need more than alcohol to get through this evening with outspoken mermaids and George with his roving eyes. I think of people like Oonagh the nurse, snuggled up on the sofa with her loved ones, and of my big empty house waiting for me on the little street I grew up on, filled with not much more than memories of days gone by, and of the mermaid’s father’s words that have hit a nerve. It’s true, I’m crap at relationships of all sorts. Crap. I just can’t do it. I can’t seem to let people outside of my tiny immediate family into my life too closely or for too long and it doesn’t take a genius or a psychologist to know why.

The crowd starts to shuffle towards the movie theatre and George and I follow suit, grabbing goody bags and free popcorn along the way. He puts his hand on my shoulder and I subtly move so that it falls off and I feel the champagne bubbles go to my head and wonder what day of the week it is. Tuesday, that’s right. Bingo night at my dad’s care home . . . I really hate to miss it and the guilt is eating me up inside. I wonder if anyone would even have noticed if I hadn’t shown up here at all. I should have said that my sister was in town and I needed some family time . . . anyhow, I’m here now. Live in the present, as my dad used to say, and never, ever take any of life for granted.

‘Are you having a good time?’ I ask George who really hasn’t spoken to me much since we got out of the taxi, despite his over-friendly hands. He is open-mouthed, looking like a starstruck schoolboy, which is a bit unimpressive for a man of his calibre. Surely he has been to a C-list celebrity event before where the guest list is made up of soap stars, ageing pop stars and the odd media face like me? I mean, it’s hardly Hollywood . . .

‘I didn’t realise that so many people *know* you!’ he says, wearing a very unattractive stupid grin now. ‘They all keep staring and whispering. It’s like you really are a celebrity or something.’

A celebrity or something?

Get me out of here. I should have known this wouldn’t work when he told me he’d arrived at my house thirty minutes early in a taxi and waited there for fear of being late and me cancelling on him. He must really like mermaid movies.

‘I’m just going to nip to the bathroom before the movie starts,’ I say to him, relieved that we are passing the Ladies for some momentary relief from his boring company.

I check my phone when I go inside, delighted to see two missed calls from my sister who is undoubtedly calling to fill me in on Dad’s latest little outburst of imagination or to tell me how bored she is at the care home and in wonder as to how I go there every day. I call her back quickly.

‘Two fat ladies, eighty eight!’ I joke when she answers her phone. ‘Don’t tell me! You won the jackpot!’

‘No, Ruth—’

‘Did Mable call a false win? I bet you love her as much as—’

‘Ruth! God, I have been trying to get through to you for ages!’ she says. ‘Did you not get my message?’

I glance at my phone screen but there’s nothing there. Mind you, the mobile reception looks dire in this place.

‘No, what’s wrong, Ally? Is something wrong?’

I fear by the tone of her voice that this isn’t a social call after all.

‘It’s Dad,’ says Ally, sounding terrified now. ‘Oh Ruth, it was awful. He was just sitting there and then he caught my eye and I knew he was in pain when I saw his face.’

‘What!’

‘Ruth, they think he’s had a heart attack and he’s on his way to hospital so we’re following the ambulance into town.’

‘But I was just with him today and—’

‘I’ll pick you up in ten, okay?’ she says. ‘Meet me outside the cinema. I’m going as fast as I can but it’s snowing pretty heavily now. Go outside and wait for me.’

My body shifts into autopilot and I stuff the phone into my handbag then leave the bright lights of the bathroom and push past the sheep-like crowds with my head down, ignoring hellos and whispers until I find George. I tell him I have to go, a home emergency. I urge him to stay and don’t wait for his reply.

Not my Dad. Please, no. Not my darling daddy.

I stop outside when I hit the cold and a flurry of snow. Shit, it’s cold.

Just as the weatherman forecast, it’s below freezing outside and my warm breath fills the air as I stand, shuffling from one leg onto the other, with my fake fur coat pulled up under my chin, trying to digest what I’ve just heard and what news might lie ahead when we get to the hospital. I knew I shouldn’t have come out tonight! Maybe if I’d stayed with him like I always did? Maybe he panicked over something and I wasn’t there to help?

The flashing cameras and the madness of the hubbub from before are gone now and I stand here alone on Hope Street, with only the flurry of snow against the yellowing street lights and the hum of Christmas carols in the distance for company as I wait for my sister. I close my eyes and try to keep calm, but I’m shaking all over from anxiety and guilt and the cold and I hope to God that Ally will just get here quickly.

‘Please hurry up,’ I mumble as I shuffle. ‘Please, Ally.’

Seconds feel like minutes, minutes feel like hours. That’s it, I can’t stand here any longer. It’s too cold and I’m too worried to wait so I take out my purse from my bag and decide to hail a cab, unable to wait even though I know she can’t be far. With a £20 note clutched in my freezing hand I reach out to try and get the attention of a passing driver but he whizzes by, oblivious to my desperation.

‘Stop! Stop, please stop! Please, I’m begging you!’

‘It is you, isn’t it? From the newspaper?’

I look around to see a man huddled on the pavement against the cinema wall in a thick maroon blanket calling me, his dark eyes just about visible under a woolly green hat and an overgrown fringe and beard. He sits on what looks like a damp sleeping bag and I wince at how cold he must be. Then the beep of a horn alerts me and when I look towards the street again, I see the beam of lights from Ally’s car at long last.

‘Thank you, God! Here,’ I say to the man, handing him the £20 I had taken out for the taxi and another I pull from my purse. ‘It’s not much, but find a warm meal somewhere. You must be freezing, poor thing.’

He takes the money and my hand brushes his red, ice-cold fingers and we lock eyes for a split second.

‘You got bad news?’ he asks and I realise that I’m crying, then I’m thrust back to reality and I rush away as Ally beeps the horn.

‘You’re an angel!’ he calls after me as I get in to my sister’s car. ‘God bless you tonight. Thank you! Thank you so much!’

I look back to see him examine the money in disbelief, and then he catches my eye with his smile as we drive away from Hope Street.

I really wish I could do more for him right now but I need to get to the hospital. I need to see my dad before it’s too late.

But when we get to the hospital, we are just that. Our darling daddy is gone forever.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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