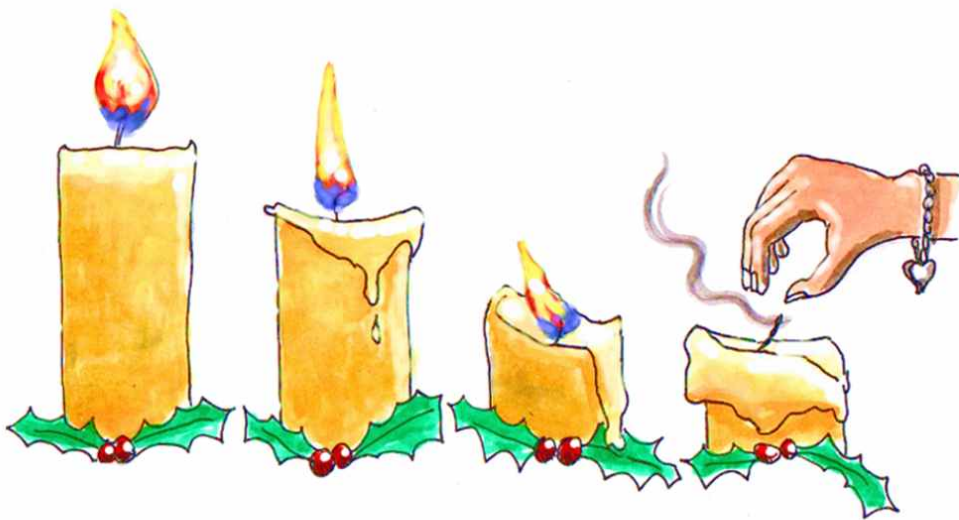




Four Advents

finding a way home at Christmas



Jen Blackbird

The First Candle

“I’ll be right in,” I informed my sister Gemma as she unbelted her youngest child from the car.

“You better,” she tucked her thick black hair behind her ear before lifting her 20 month old daughter Zoe out of the child seat. With Zoe securely on her hip Gemma leant into the Land Rover and with sisterly sternness added, “I’ll be back in ten minutes if I don’t see you in there... or I’ll get mother out for you.”

“I’m thirty-three years old Gemma as you keep reminding me and I’ve got house business to sort out,” I smiled happily and waved my iPad at her, “the sooner I get a house, the quicker I’ll be out of yours.”

“You know Jessie,” said Gemma. “I still think the idea of building a deluxe shed in our garden is very good. Minnie’s going to get one for her guests.”

“Yes. I’ve given that some more thought.” I paused and arched an eyebrow at her. “Can you imagine my address? Jessica Jameson, Spinster Shed, Bottom of The Garden, Heights Barn, somewhere near Abbotswold.”

Gemma laughed. “Ten minutes.”

I groaned inwardly as she smiled. Then I saw something in her hair. A mad cluster of red and green ribbons.

“That is quite a statement piece of hair jewellery.”

“Ah. Yes. Charlotte made it at school – thought I’d better put it in.”

“Well. In that case. It’s gorgeous.”

Gemma shut the car door and mouthed through the window. “Nine minutes.”

I watched her carrying Zoe and chatting with her, pointing at the lights. She followed her husband Gareth, who was ushering their other two children, eight year old Hugh and five year Charlotte, towards the front door of our mother’s Cotswold home. All of the four sashed windows on the ground floor emitted a warm light to the outside.

Suddenly the front door opened pouring a stream of bright light and forming excited elongated shadows over the gravel drive. I watched as their Christmas spirits were sucked up by the matriarchal house.

December was only a few days away. The Christmas Month. The Advent Season. It was now seven in the evening. With a frown, I looked outside the car. The early evenings were now dark, especially more so in the depths of the Gloucestershire countryside. The few orange-toned street-lights only gave a little light but sufficient visibility to the pavements. Beyond the gentle glowing cluster of the village – there was a huge gulf of blackness. No shapes or forms could be made within it. Not tonight at least. Clouds had passed over the waning moon rendering the ground darker still. Looking to the horizon, I could see only organic shapes of leafless ancient trees which I knew edged the vast fields. In one direction, I could see the distant glow of Cheltenham in the sky above it, and could only imagine what lay

beyond it – my salvation. The sudden change in my work situation had landed me exactly where I desperately did not want to be. I looked over at the up-lit sky again.

It was Sunday evening and although we had another day in November, Christmas was here with vengeance. Christmas had started to show its early festive shoots mid-November – strings of lights had slowly crept over bushes, trees, roofs, around door ways and windows like electrified ivy. Now there was a frenzy of colourful bulbs around the village which had just been liberated this weekend from their cardboard boxes.

I looked down at the display on my iPad. I had created a map with my childhood village as the centre pin with a clear thirty mile perimeter around it. Every village or small town I had already visited, I gave a score out of ten. My criteria: a pub, a shop, a post office, prettiness, a petrol station close by, proximity to good roads and easy travel to work in Cheltenham.

I had already seen quite a few houses in the villages on the furthest circumference but had seen nothing as yet that would entice me to move. I needed somewhere that would make me feel better about accepting a job close to the village I'd left twelve years earlier – without a backward glance.

I looked at the discarded places on my iPad which I had red-flagged - I feared the decreasing circle of my house-hunting.

The noise of rhythmic gravel alerted me to the arrival of more guests, who were now passing Gemma's car and heading up to the front door. I didn't want the bright screen of my iPad to be a beacon to everyone passing and invariably encouraging them to peak in to see me. I looked down on my iPad, high-lighted three villages that I would visit in the coming week, and switched it off.

It was now unavoidable. Time had arrived for me to attend the first of four Sunday celebrations. The first for a very long time.

There were a lot of people and a lot of noise as I entered. I smiled at a few faces. Some I knew, others I didn't. I didn't linger in the hallway but entered along with everyone else into the spacious lounge. Things were about to start and we were all summoned to enter.

I put my head down as a hush was being called for, tiptoeing around people as I hurried my way to the back of the room. I stood next to, and chatted briefly with, two of my cousins who'd come over forty miles especially for the First Advent party. I started to headcount. After I reached sixty I stopped counting. Clearly this event had not diminished in its popularity in my absence.

“Whose got the matches?” my mother's voice demanded attention. “I left them just here.” She tapped her polished nails on top of the highly-polished French side cabinet. The same cabinet that I was forbidden to touch as a child for fear of scratching it – my mother must have mellowed to have placed a box of matches on it. Forbid a coaster should ever hover above its hallowed shininess.

My mother, looking regal in a Christmas red blouse with her blonde hair seemingly magicked up into plenty of high hair, stood still as everyone else searched for the matches.

“Granny!” said Charlotte smiling excitedly. She shared the same black hair as

my sister and ivory skin. She waved the box of extra long matches and for an extra emphasis that she had indeed found them, shook them vigorously in front of my mother.

“Who's that?” my mother said, then looked down at one of her four grandchildren. “Oh. Charlotte. Thank you my dear.”

My mother looked from side to side and smiled. “Welcome once again everyone.” She paused waiting for Gemma to quieten down an excited Zoe. “Welcome to the first Sunday of Advent.”

A little cheer went up from a small group of the assembled guests standing away from me on the other side of the lounge. As my mother continued talking, I looked over at them and couldn't recognise any of them. All I knew for sure was that they weren't members of my family.

“As you know, we've held this Advent tradition every year. When my children were young it was in some ways easier,” she laughed out holding both arms to the small crowd. “Each of the children had their turn to strike a match on one of the four Advents with one left over for even me to have a go. However, in recent years it has been names from a hat.”

“I've got it Grandmother,” said Euan, my thirteen year old nephew and only child of my brother Henry. Euan wanted to use his own woolly hat.

“OK Euan. Over here.” Now, who would like to draw the first name out?”

Even from the distance of where I stood, I saw her eyes linger on me as she surveyed the room. I had refused to put my name in the hat earlier – I knew she would choose me.

Ignoring the jumping up and down of the small children in front of her, she said. “Jessica.” She smiled pleasantly just for me and everybody else.

As I manoeuvred my way around the children at the front sitting on the floor, my mother started her running commentary of the villagers past. This time it was my turn.

“Jessica hasn't been here for quite a few years.”

“More like a decade Mum,” offered up my brother Henry in a way that you'd believe he was just thinking and we all happened to have overheard.

I shot a look at my brother as I reached my mother.

Euan was still holding out his red woolly hat. I looked at him as I dove my hand inside. I didn't look around at the other guests but I tilted my head at Euan as I feigned to concentrate and muse about on what was inside. I handed over the small folded paper to my mother and whispered a thank you to Euan for the privilege of allowing me put my hand in his hat – wherever it had been.

“Thank you Jessica,” said my mother politely and loudly. “Jessica has picked... Scott! Scott? Ah yes. Scott!”

A tall man somewhere in his thirties approached us. He was grinning at us. I stepped back to allow him some more space – I'd done my duty.

“Scott, for those you don't know, is our neighbour's son, John and Marion Olorenshaw.” she finished speaking and handed the match box to him.

I had half-expected my mother to give us all a run-down on Scott Olorenshaw's credentials: job, salary, home address and what car he drove.

Scott Olorenshaw took the matches from my mother and I watched him as he moved over to the hallowed Advent wreath.

Where on earth... How on earth...How did this handsome man turn up at my mother's Advent party? I puzzled.

My mother's Advent wreath had truly become legendary in the village. Long gone were the days when two wire coat hangers had been intertwined together by me and my siblings, lavished with tinsel with four candles somehow secured onto it. Our innocent but not that safe craft had quickly evolved into quite a spectacular Christmas creation – the Jones had not a snowball's chance in hell to match our festive burnt offering.

One year, after her visit to a German Weihnachtsmarkt, my mother had arrived back home, looked at that year's effort and revamped it beyond recognition. From that year to this one, it has hung from the ceiling over a side table near a front window in the lounge. Since its first hanging it had grown laterally expanding to one metre in diameter. Gone was the tinsel. In its stead, it was lavished with fresh greenery, decked with jewels and baubles, and finally laden with four substantial red candles. It was really quite a feature.

Scott Olorenshaw waited patiently and with good humour, as my mother readied her camera. A few others had their phone cameras ready. I was unable to move back to my safe spot with my cousins and so exchanged a small smile with Gemma before turning as my mother pronounced herself ready. She pointed out to Scott which one he was to light. I looked up at Scott who again smiled slightly at me. Even from the distance I could see that his eye colour was a light hazel.

The extra long match was struck and the first candle lit.

“Bravo Scott,” someone shouted and a pleasant cheer went up and the chatter resumed.

“Jessie,” Henry called over, “hit the Play button would you?”

I looked behind me and pressed Play on the digital player. Christmas and Nat King Cole filled the air.

The conversation noise level had now returned up to its previous volume. A few people returned to the refreshments and drinks table. Mulled wine was the drink of the evening.

I'll get myself a drink and find someone to hang out with, I thought.

“Not many people brave enough to put their hand into a teenager's woollen hat.” I heard a male voice say.

I looked up to see Scott Olorenshaw smiling. Definitely hazel. He didn't seem to want to pass me. I instinctively rubbed my fingers that had pulled out his name wishing they were holding a drink instead.

“That's true but we are related so...” I smiled and shrugged.

“Of course you are.” Scott said, “Anyway, nicely done.”

“And nicely struck,” said a jovial voice from behind me.

Scott answered over my head with good humour and said, “Thanks Jonathan!”

I looked around and saw Jonathan, my rough and tough childhood friend,

beaming behind me.

“Hi Jonathan!” I hugged him tight. “It's really good to see you again. Wow, you're here on the first Advent lighting.” He had scarcely ever been inside this house when we was young.

“Hello Jessie,” he kissed me. “So nice to see you too. Gemma said that you had moved back here and was staying with her - but I haven't seen you at all! When did you get here?”

“Oh. Erm. October.”

“What?! You are kidding! I haven't seen you once.”

“Yes, well. I've been super busy with the new job and everything. Trying to make a good impression. Plus I've been house-hunting.”

“Of course. I'm sure you are doing brilliantly at your job. Where is it again?”

“VAV Systems. In Cheltenham.”

Jonathan nodded. “Actually, that's not far from where Sylvia works.”

I paused just for a moment. “Sylvia's your wife, right?”

“Yes. You've got to meet her sometime. Can't believe you've not met her yet?”

A drink appeared in front of me. Scott Olorenshaw was holding it. I thanked him, took it, and took a few thankful sips.

I caught Jonathan smirking and turned to see Scott doing the same.

“What?” I looked between the both of them.

“I think Jonathan is trying to say that your visits are infamously brief. As if you might catch something if you stay here too long.”

“No. That's not true.” I lied. Glancing at Scott, I quickly added, “So, is Sylvia here tonight? I would love to meet her.”

“Yes, yes.” he looked around, “she's disappeared into another room to take care of the baby.”

“You have a baby?”

“Yes,” he said slowly, “she's six months old now.”

“Just the one?” I added quietly.

Scott laughed out loud.

“Oh!” exclaimed Jonathan, “if you are going to live here, you really have to get up to speed.”

“To speed eh?” I took a sip, “Up to rambling pace and then what? Plateau off into first gear for the rest of my life? Or even worse get stuck in reverse.” I chuckled at my own joke.

Gratefully, or perhaps graciously, Jonathan changed the subject slightly. “What about the house-hunting?”

“Not too much to say. Seeing some houses this week. Feeling pretty confident that there be something.”

“Whereabouts?” Jonathan asked.

“Sedgecross”

“Where's that?!”

“About fifteen miles north of Cheltenham.”

“Fifteen miles? Then that'll be... twenty five miles from here.”

I nodded, “Yep”

Jonathan excused himself, "I should check on Sylvia and get her back in here. I'll catch up with you later Jessie," he gave me a friendly nudge.

"You really don't want to live back here then?" Scott stepped into the conversation again.

"No," I answer honestly and then stated honestly too. "I know it's been a while and people can change physically, I mean my nephew Euan is getting so tall now, but forgive me but I can't quite place you."

Scott held my gaze for some very long seconds before answering. "Yes, I suspected as much given that you are being quite nice. However you're right, people can change." One side of his mouth curled up.

I felt a twinge of guilt and some frustration. I looked up at his face trying not to scrutinise too close. I had the faint impression that he found this quite amusing. "Well, I could have stood here and just pretended." I felt my jaw tighten.

"Scott!" a voice shrilled across the room over the relaxed Christmas music and voices, "you must see this!" I deduced that the faux apologetic face staring in our direction belonged to Scott's mother.

Scott's smile faded a little and he breathed in slowly. He looked down at me steadily and without a word moved towards his mother.

"Another time then?" I spoke quietly to myself.

"Don't sweat it," I heard him say.

I was annoyed with him and *that* did feel familiar. "Don't worry I won't." I muttered softly after him. I sighed at myself and felt my spirits sinking. I came back here to this village. To this house. I was back as Gemma's sister. My parent's daughter. Suddenly my actions and my speech were exactly as they had been as a teenager. My sense of foreboding for this whole Christmas thing was feeling justified.

I had to get out of this village as soon as I could. Christmas would test me.

I finished up the glass and went to fetch another. Gemma grabbed my wrist as she sat with Zoe. "So?" she gave me a knowing look that I was unable to share. "What do you think of Scott now?"

"Scott? Now?" I frowned. I looked over at him as he seemed to be intently looking a book.

Leaning towards my sister I whispered, "Who is he?"

"It took me a while too. At least I worked it out by myself." she said. Of course I wasn't going to ask again.

Scott's slightly wavy light brown hair flopped around his face as he looked at a photo album. No one is that interested in old photographs, I thought. His distraction gave me an opportunity to examine his features. The way that just a small smile would reach his eyes. Eyes that were clear and hard to ignore with slightly arched eyebrows which opened his eyes even more. There was an increasing familiarity and that worried me because any feelings I may have had belonged to a time I didn't want to deal with. I thought I could never forget my sixth form college friends – the thing was – his name was unfamiliar to me too.

Scott stood up and clocked me watching him – that was all the excuse I needed

to stop trying.

Clink, clink clink. My mother was striking the side of her nearly empty glass with a spoon. “Now everyone, oldies and a few newbies,” she smiled. “As at each one of the four advent Sundays, we will have something uniquely special to entertain us. Tonight it is our very own band – Cromwell's Crooners.”

“Oh my word,” I whispered to myself. A smile was trying desperately to escape from me and I had to bite my lips hard to trap it.

My mother and her closest friend Beryl were encouraging all of us to move further back into the room away from the door which led into the hallway. I cringed as memories were flooding back of musical “bands” and “singers” - made up mostly of neighbours and sometimes in desperation – a family member – used to entertain us on one of the Advents.

I exchanged smiles with Gemma who didn't seem so concerned about it as I was – perhaps it was because she was encouraging Zoe to eat something. I mouthed to her that I was going to move back even further – she rolled up her eyes at me. I shrugged. Just how much distance could I make between my present and my childhood?

Scott, who was standing up to let someone take his seat, let me pass too. His eyes held something close to amusement. I couldn't help thinking that the joke was on me. Despite the childish urge to hit him, I forced a smile. I had to maintain an indifferent stance until I could figure him out. However I was never good at hiding my feelings and feared that indifference was the last thing I was showing – he had got to me and he knew it.

“Moving as far away as possible?” he asked. I momentarily stopped en route.

“Yes. I have a feeling they're going to be quite loud,” I looked over to the band moving into the space that I had just vacated – and looked again. Four members of the band – three well into their pension hood, one guitar, one tambourine, a violin and a wooden flute.

“Oh yes,” he answered matter-of-factly and tilted his head towards me, close enough that I felt his breath on my face. “They better pass out the ear plugs – health and safety. That tambourine in particular, looks like it could hit some serious decibels.”

I opened my mouth to deflect off the sarcasm – but there was nothing smart enough or quick enough that would satisfy me. I would let him have that one.

I shook the dig off and secured a space leaning against a window pane, with a drink, and snuggled up between two warm shoulders – one belonging to my uncle Bill and the other to my auntie Florence.

I was staring at the back of Scott.

“Did you enjoy working in France?” Florence whispered into my ear as the music started. “Sorry to leave I suppose?”

“Right now I am.”

My mother's sister laughed out loud, and then quickly stifled it. My mother nodded at the group that they were to begin.

The lead singer was a woman of around or about fifty. She had a pretty elfish-shaped face, with short blond hair. I recognised her as Annie, the post office lady. She'd hardly changed at all. I never knew she could sing.

It was easy for me to listen, and there was a certain ease with which the folk band played and sung. They had no inhibitions about the intimacy of such a small gathering – and such close quarters. They started immediately in a zone with their music – smiling amongst their friends and neighbours. The fiddle's bow skipped over the strings and then would suspend the senses with a single high note. I thought of an enchanted time and space that I was sure I'd never visited. The simpleness of the music charmed me. The wooden flute gave its hollowed but light tones – the tree from which it was carved had found a voice. The human voices harmonised with confidence. The guitar gave a background of solidity and warmth but it still left gaps for the other musical sound – the stillness. Distant memories of my childhood were being summoned up from the vaults of memories – some of which weren't even mine. Maybe they were fantasies of what I thought life should be like when I was a child. My knowledge of this folk music was unknown but resonated an almost uncomfortable truth of exactly who I was.

There was a pause after the end of the last song. - followed by a happy applause. I was now perched on the arm of a sofa next to my brother Henry. “Happy you came then?”

Happy that I came? I hesitated to answer. The chatter of the guests bought me back sharply to the present, but not for long.

“Oh look,” said Henry. I looked to the door and saw a stylish dishevelled blonde-haired man leaning against the door frame and smiling broadly at me. “Rufus has graced us with his presence.”

The Second Candle

Gemma and Gareth had recently moved into a converted barn with their three children sliding in on the varnished floors behind them. The ground floor was an open plan, with windows extending from floor to roof on one side of the conversion.

The guest room was on the first floor. I was now dressed and layered up for work – skinny trousers, leg warmers, t-shirt, shirt, jumper and jacket. I was ready to accommodate the various temperatures of every interior of every room I was going to be in today. I looked through my bedroom window and across the flat vast fields that surrounded the barn. The inside of my head felt like the weather outside - foggy.

This wasn't a good way to start the working week. I wasn't exactly reeling from a huge consumption of alcohol but my head was just a tad sensitive. I wanted especially to avoid any discussion of last night's first advent party with my sister.

There was never any chance of me creeping down the stairs and sneaking out the front door in this house unnoticed. If only Gemma and Gareth had been as engrossed by morning television as their children were. I stepped down the curved staircase which began from the side of the long balcony of the first floor, and ended up in the middle of everything on the ground level. Across the expanse of the polished floor and scattered rugs, their parents looked up at me from the dining table.

“Good morning auntie Jessica,” Gemma threw her comment towards me. The children ignored both me and her. “There's some breakfast here,” Gemma walked back into the kitchen area.

“Coffee would be great,” I put my bag on the floor against the table leg, and sat. “Thank you.”

“Uh huh,” Gemma turned to the coffee machine, picked up a cup and filled it.

“Something is not right here?” I looked over to the children. “It is Monday isn't it?”

“Teachers training day,” Gemma walked back to the table.

She sat down next to me, bringing me my coffee. Pulling her laptop closer to her, she pressed a few keys and shouted at the screen. “Oh, of course!”

Both Gareth, who'd been looking at his iPad, and I looked over.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“Samantha.”

“Who's Samantha?” I enquired.

“Oh, that doesn't matter! It's just that she's just put up photos of her children making gingerbread houses.” She closed the lid of her laptop. “So,” she sighed heavily “how's your head today?”

“Just fine thank you,” I continued drinking my coffee. Gareth looked up again looking from Gemma, to me and back to Gemma. “You can't get that drunk on mulled wine,” I continued. “Believe me I've tried.”

Gemma stood up to see to the children but she continued talking. “I'm not going to say anything about the potency of the Christmas punch.”

“OK” I looked over my coffee cup watching as Gemma returned to where we sat, “I am fully aware of what happened last night. I don't know why you are so peeved that I was hanging out with Rufus and,” I added just in case this subject was the next to be brought up, “I told you that I did like the band very much but I didn't want to join in the sing-along afterwards...” I shrugged.

“I'm not peeved about Rufus,” she responded.

When Rufus appeared the previous night at my mother's house, it was like being rescued from my old home life all over again. I took some solace in his presence and his smiling support. I was probably speaking a bit too loud. And laughed louder still. I don't believe I said anything I'd take back. I had simply spoke about past life in the village and the funny things that had happened. I did though have a little rant about Christmas and the inevitable headache that comes with it – at least I think I did.

Rufus was the guy at school with his own car, indulgent parents, all the latest gadgets, and went on the best holidays. All this was bundled together with good looks and a natural talent for sports – although he never felt the need to pursue any of them to the next level. He was the standard of wealth and popularity.

“Rufus is my old mate,” I looked at my watch, it was still early. I reached for another piece of toast and the jar of marmalade.

“If you had bothered to make an effort here when you first arrived, you would know that things have changed – it's not all the same. Well, some of it is, obviously. Things have moved on. The days you remember are in our very distant past. For you it might as well have been yesterday. And by the way, I love Christmas and it's absolutely no trouble for me to make Christmas wonderful for the children.”

I picked up a knife and started scrapping butter on to it. “But you do give yourself a ton of projects to do.” I looked over to three elaborately painted objects. “Those Advent calendars are really quite something.”

“It's Christmas time. That's what we do.”

I looked at the work that Gemma had spent on three wooden locomotive Advent calenders. They were all lined up against the window wall. They had been constructed from wood (she had ordered them). Each with twenty-four drawers carefully hand-painted by Gemma and filled with treats. I knew she spent a couple of all nighters painting them. It was now the last day of November and she was still to recover from the frenzy of activity to get them finished by today.

I softened my voice and tried to direct my thoughts to what Gemma had been saying. I took a large bite of toast and marmalade. The marmalade gave me a way to change the subject – but not for long. “Has this marmalade got cinnamon in it?”

“Yes. I made a batch last February – my Christmas marmalade. Do you like it?”

“Yes, it's nice,” I put the last piece in my mouth. “There's nothing like being prepared.”

“I might have lots to do but where I can, I can be prepared.” Gemma looked out of the window. “I've already written a list for Christmas puddings. I've got behind a little but I'll sort that out this week. Sometime. Should be done already of course. Stir Up Sunday was last week. I guess it's still OK.”

“You've done a lot already,” I gestured to the Advent calendars. “If you need a hand with anything, I can help.” I think I already knew the answer and can't deny I still felt some relief in hearing it.

“I think I've got it all under control thanks. Like every year.” Gemma said in an upbeat voice.

Gareth stared at me pointedly. We silently agreed to say no more. He stood up, pulled off his suit jacket from the back of his seat. “Right. I'm off to work Gemma. Do you need a lift to work Jessie? I'm in Cheltenham today.”

“No thanks. I think I can manage to drive under the influence of a heck of a lot of coffee, paracetamol and cinnamon-flavoured marmalade. Besides I'm still house-hunting!” I rallied.

“Hugh has a violin recital tonight and tomorrow evening I've got the playgroup committee at the Highwayman – last one of the year. Then of course we're having dinner here on Thursday with a few friends of Gareth's friends from work.”

I looked at Gemma slightly astonished and thought it best for me to leg it before I got sucked into any more festive madness.

“Work!” I exclaimed. “I'm off to work. Bye lovely nephew and lovelier nieces! Enjoy your free day with Mummy!”

Zoe jumped up to say good bye. Hugh yelled Bye, without taking his eyes of the television and Charlotte turned from the television to say, “We are making Merry Christmas cards today aren't we Mummy?”

“Yes we are!” squealed Gemma in a way that I had to look over to see if it was she that actually answered Charlotte's question.

“Sounds like fun! Bye.” And I was off into the fog.

VAV Systems was an aeronautical engineering company. Mathematics had been my best and clear favourite subject at school. My father had worked as an engineer for the RAF and so I headed off in the same general direction, albeit the civil one. It was either that or become an accountant.

After going to university in London, I worked for a few years with a British firm and then two years ago, I was delighted to be offered a job at VAV Systems near Grenoble, France. I enjoyed it and I loved living amongst the mountains nevertheless I regularly scoured the job vacancies in the aeronautical magazines.

I was aware of a UK-based VAV Systems in Cheltenham and would occasionally have to liaise with several of their engineers, but never thought I'd end up working there.

In the summer redundancy cast a shadow over our heads in Grenoble and I along with six other personnel were given notice. The very next day I was given a lifeline from their Cheltenham base and because I knew the job market well I accepted the job almost immediately. I grabbed onto the homeward-bound rope and closed my eyes.

Monday mornings were always the most intense time of the week. Engineers were my favourite type of people to work with, and my colleagues knew how to get the most of their weekend. One of the tasks I was working on needed my full attention.

I'd sat all morning analysing a computer model when I heard a work colleague say "Pre-Christmas drink anyone?" - it was like a call from a plain... far far away.

"Pre-Christmas lunch drink Jess?" he repeated.

"Forget the Christmas angle," I called over my computer, "you sold me on drink."

"Before you lot go," one of the secretaries walked in at that moment, "this has just arrived for you Jessie." I stood and with one arm already in my coat, I watched her place a cellophane-wrapped pretty package on my desk along with a large envelope.

"Thanks..." I finished putting on my coat and sat down again. I pulled off the ribbons from the top of the package, pulled the noisy red cellophane paper apart and inside there was a pretty bottle. I looked at the ornate label – a hangover cure. Along side the bottle was a family size package of humbugs. The A4 sized envelope contained a traditional, glittery advent calendar. There was no card.

"What did you get Jessie?" my work colleague Stefan asked and then answered his own query. "A bag of humbugs?"

"And a hangover cure..." I added. "Who sent it?" I wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or laugh.

"Well... whoever it was," Stefan added, "it's hardly unpleasant and rather thoughtful." He smiled kindly at me and put on his jacket.

"The humbugs? Not unpleasant?" I retorted.

"Look Jessie," Stefan lent on the low walled partition in front of my desk, "it's quite funny. I wouldn't mind. Who is most likely to have sent it...then you can see their motivation."

"Well..." I thought of Sunday evening. "Well..."

"Well?" echoed Stefan.

"I think there may be quite a list." I looked up at Stefan and smiled despite of myself. "And you're right, I'm sure that no one wants to offend me...but there's absolutely no way I'm going to give the satisfaction of mentioning this...gift...to anyone."

I opened the humbugs for anyone to take and put the advent calendar into my desk drawer.

It was during the pub lunch that the subject of Christmas crept in. I sipped my drink (I opted for a ginger ale) and listened as the others discussed their Christmases. I was curious to know if their wives, girlfriends and, in Stefan's case, husband, were doing the same as Gemma.

"I just bought the kids a chocolate Advent calender from Smiths. I think Jake has already eaten all his. Christmas pudding will be from Tesco. Mince pies too, no doubt." said one.

"On my word," I said, "Gemma hasn't mentioned mince pies yet and I know she will. And I know they'll be home-made."

"Oh. I love mince pies," said Keith, my manager, "especially the home-made ones."

"It's that sort of careless talk that my sister latches on to," I shook my head

with a slight smile. “Is there anything in your household that will be home-made Stefan?”

“Of course... perhaps the cake. Yes. The cake. Or maybe just the icing and the figures on top.”

“You don't really know do you?”

“Can't say that I do,” Stefan replied, “we have a rather nice home-made wreath on the door.”

“Well. Who doesn't?” I answered thinking of the elaborate wreath adorning Gemma's door.

The rest of them shook their heads in a glorious chorus of “We don't”.

The conversation changed direction and my thoughts drifted over to the theme of Christmas. I thought about the miniature Christmas figures on top of our own childhood Christmas cakes, and the elaborate thick ribbon wrapped around the sides. Of course, as a child I barely touched it. I nibbled the fruitcake, avoided the marzipan and ate as much icing as I could but I loved looking at the snowmen, the trees and the boy on the sledge. Dad loved the whole thing. Maybe I could help out Gemma with that? said a fleeting thought, or was it a nagging thought?

After work I drove to the house I had arranged to see in Sedgemoor, north of Cheltenham. I drove in the dark, looking at what was around. It seemed quite a nice place from what I could see on a winter's evening. The estate agent waited outside shuffling from foot to foot, the temperature had fallen quite a bit and it was still foggy.

The inside of the red-bricked row house was in need of some superficial work, nothing that I couldn't manage. It was on a quiet road opposite a very small village store. Fifty metres further was the village pub. It was on-street parking and that didn't seem too much of a problem. It was the first house I'd seen that I could see myself living in. Two bedrooms, a box room, two small reception rooms. Yes, it was a good distance away. I put in an offer feeling resolved it was the best thing to do.

I drove home carefully through the dark and the fog. It was half-past seven when I arrived back at Gemma's.

I dumped my stuff by the main entrance, took off my boots and entered the living area. “Wow Gemma. Looks like you had a productive day.”

My sister looked at me wearily as she sat at the large dining table. She was picking out the larger pieces of card from the paper mass covering it. There were also innumerable piles of stickers, metallic shapes and snowflakes. The two older children were laying out in their pyjamas on the sofas and Zoe was already asleep.

“Hi,” she continued picking out pieces of card, “the children managed to help until ten o'clock then their interest fell – I'll write in them another day. We've been to The Rapids this afternoon.

“No wonder you look so tired.”

I started to help clear up as Gemma carried a barely-awake Zoe off to bed.

I checked my phone again for any message from Rufus. That's typical of course, I thought with a smile – he always calls, just not when you expect.

Work kept me busy. And there was no time for me to relax or help out Gemma on either Tuesday or Wednesday evening – even if she had let me. I had not yet found the right opportunity to say that I'd made an offer on a house.

On Thursday evening I came home from work around seven to find Gemma in the kitchen giving orders to Gareth about some last minute instructions.

"I've got to get ready myself now Gareth!" she yelled, "I've been here the entire day you know!"

Despite the mass of activity Gemma was overseeing, she still spied me coming in. "Ah great Jessie! You're home."

"Is everything under control?" My question was barely audible as I finished asking it. My attention was diverted to the children who were freshly bathed and ready to go to bed. I picked up Zoe and hugged her. "Wow!" I said – something had caught my eye. Along one side of the counter, beyond the dinner preparations, were eight large pudding bowls, all sealed with foil and secured with string. "Wow!" I said again, and turning to Zoe in my arms I said, "Did you help Mummy make all those Christmas puddings?"

"I stirred it," she said proudly.

"You must have very strong arms, that's a lot of stirring." I looked at Gemma who was busying herself, so I spoke loudly. "I guess today was Stir Up Thursday."

"Oh funny!" said Gemma, but she didn't seem to be laughing. I wandered quietly back with Zoe to the sofas and the other children.

"No no Gareth, the other glasses!" Gemma instructed Gareth. I glanced over to her as I played with the children (who instinctively knew that any demands on their mother at that moment would be futile). Gemma announced her intention of leaving him to it. "Come on Jessie, I'm getting ready too." She took off her Santa apron, called the children to come up with her. We all followed after her wake of nervous energy.

After the children were settled down, I had a quick shower and changed. Gemma came into my room, dressed for dinner and brushing her hair.

"How was the committee meeting last night then?" I asked her.

"Ah yes... the drama Jessie."

"Drama?"

"Now that everyone in the village knows that you are actually here and not just some figment of my imagination, some of your old friends stopped at our table asking about what you are doing, where you're working and please could you contact them, etcetera etcetera etcetera."

"Oh"

"Oh indeed. Plus the subject of Rufus. Rufus and you. Rufus and his ex-wife. You and Rufus. Rufus and Jonathan and you. Your return has made quite an impact." She looked in the mirror on my wall. "And Scott. Did I mention that I invited him tonight?"

"Who Rufus?"

"No. Scott." she shook her head.

“What?” I grimaced.

“Maggie thought you and Rufus would make a wonderful couple,” Gemma pulled a face, “but only because she wants Scott for herself.”

I suddenly remembered not to ask Gemma about Scott Olorenshaw but where was I suppose to know him from.

The door bell rang.

“Time for the festivities to begin...” we heard Gareth exclaim from downstairs.

Gemma had placed me next to Scott at the table. Amongst four work colleagues of Gareth's, two of them had come without partners – awkwardness avoided. As I was the last guest (albeit living-in guest) to sit down just prior to Gemma serving up the first course, greetings and introductions were rushed around the table, the last being a short “yes, we've met before” nod in Scott's direction. He in turn, returned the same greeting...without the nod.

It was during a particular loud story-telling of Gareth's that I heard Scott whisper to me, “So... didn't Rufus want to come tonight?”

“Oh.” I turned to meet Scott's face closer than I expected and I didn't mind at all. “No. I don't think he was actually invited. Sorry.”

“It's all the same to me.” he held his gaze too long and I caved in and spoke.

“So...erm...you've known him a long time then?”

Scott burrowed his brow a little, “Err... yes.” He turned to the guests opposite and immediately joined in their conversation.

The dinner chatter was general and inclusive. During the moments when I could turn to my own thoughts, I wondered about Scott. There was something so familiar about him now and despite any fear I had, my need to know outweighed it by buckets.

“How's the house-hunting coming along Jessie?” Gareth's question came straight through to me.

“I saw a house on Monday evening. I liked it so I put an offer on it.”

Gareth looked at Gemma. “Really?”

“Sorry.” I looked quickly at both of them apologetically, “I've hardly seen you this week and, anyway, as I'm still waiting for the owners to decide whether they are going to accept it or not, there really isn't any news.”

“So. Where is it?” asked Gemma.

“Sedgecross. About fifteen miles north-east of Cheltenham on the A46. Good roads into town.”

There was a little silence and then the subject moved away from my home to someone else's house-hunting experience. I didn't mind.

“Your turn,” said Gareth. The board game was on the coffee table, we were seated round it on the sofas or the rugs.

I shook the dice. One die rolled a few times before coming to a stop. The other continued to roll away from us all – the wooden polished floor offered little friction to stop it.

The closer die showed a two and I made a quick calculation. “I don't want a

one or a three!” I was in danger of landing on Gareth's dark blue and substantially built-up section of the board .

Gareth stood up as I did and we both ran across the room to see what number was face up.

“Stop it Gareth,” I laughed. We scrambled on our knees to be the first to look. I wasn't going to trust Gareth not to change it, and he evidently didn't trust me either.

“You two!” yelled out Gemma, “it's monopoly not a bloody rugby match!”

I cupped the die under my hands and took a peep while Gareth tried to pry my fingers apart.

“Oh yeah!” I shouted, “It's a six. Ha!” I beamed as I returned to my seat. I brushed my hair from my face and straightened down my dishevelled shirt.

“Your turn Scottie!” Gareth passed the dice to Scott.

I was still giggling about the touse. Then I thought about rugby, the nearby town rugby club, the Friday nights out with friends there, including Gemma and Rufus, and then something felt very familiar.

There were other teenager rugby players there – they didn't go to our school. We would hang with with them occasionally, and there was a few I would bicker with sometimes, well one. I turned to look at Scott and scrutinized his face - I was quite sure. He smiled. And that did it.

I opened my mouth to say something, “Scottie. Of course. You were that...” I wagged my hand at the tall handsome imposter, “annoying boy!”

Scott raised his eyebrows at me. I heard laughter around me.

“Oh my word, you really enjoyed winding me up!” I felt a little relief that I'd remembered him, but there was a little irritability creeping inside me. “And you were always drawing cartoons and laughing with your mates at me – I could only assume that they were of me!”

“And why not me?” Gemma asked mocking indignation.

“It's not a compliment Gemma,” I answered firmly. “I don't recall Scott being mean to you.”

“Although in my defence Jessie, if I'm allowed to have one,” Scott said, “you did tell me on several occasions to drop dead.”

“Your turn I think Scottie,” Gareth said indicating the dice that Scott was still holding.

“Erm... Yes.” Scott rolled the dice and picked up a Get Out Of Jail Free card.

“You just might need that,” I said to Scot without glancing up. The feeling I'd been trying to keep away from me since returning here was flaring up and I really needed to buy that house.

Scott and I hadn't been at the same school, which was a relief because my memory wasn't that bad. We had met enough times at the rugby club for me to feel quite comfortable enough now to continue bickering.

I swear I could not help it.

I presumed Scott to be one of Gemma's admirers who felt they better include me as a tool in their quest for her attentions – although normally her admirers at least had the pretence to be nice to me. It was all very clear now – I had confused feelings then, and confused feelings now. I had been instantly attracted to him when I

first saw him and I felt it was the same for him – although we were just two people in a middle of a crowd of other teenagers. Sadly it seemed that I was mistaken and we communicated through bickering. I'd been a regular visitor for nearly a year. One Friday evening I noticed he wasn't there, then another. I had missed him. Rufus told me his family had moved away. I had felt disappointed or relieved, I wasn't sure – and for that reason I turned myself to my school work and my plan to get away.

I suddenly heard the laughter and shouting of the others as I realised I'd totally zoned out of the game. I raised my eyes and looked quickly around – everyone was engrossed in the game except Scott.

Leaving earlier than normal on Friday morning I missed Gemma and Gareth. I had taken my gym bag with me and planned to spend a few hours at the health centre after work. I got on with a lot of work...far less complicated than my life outside it. During the day the estate agent called me. The owners wanted a better offer. I offered more and I got back to my busy day. Arriving at the gym I anticipated a chunk of time without anyone asking me questions, just barking instructions at me about straightening my back and bending my knees. Unfortunately all I could think about was Scott – especially while struggling through my least favourite exercise – push-ups.

On Saturday morning I woke up to the familiar noises of a family with young children. I stretched out to reach for my mobile to check for messages – my muscles put up some resistance. No house news. I lay back on my pillow and sighed. I needed some time by myself and sleeping was no longer an option. As a teenager I definitely didn't do recreational walking but I soon found myself getting dressed and making my escape to outdoors. As I left I looked back at Gemma's converted barn. I caught a feeling of how easy it was for me to walk in a beautiful countryside which involved no more work than getting dressed for it.

The land where the village lies is a gentle slope of the huge limestone escarpment running downhill from Birdlip down to Cirencester and further still.

The morning was foggy but the ground was dry. It was quite enchanting seeing shapes emerge from the white cloud. The invisibility of the horizon made me look closer. The village I was headed towards wasn't one I had really travelled through before – it was in the wrong direction to Cheltenham. I may have visited school friends years ago once or twice, but I couldn't remember it.

I saw a white signpost at a crossroads. I followed the direction towards Cobblesdon. One and one quarter miles. I started to walk up the narrow lane with grassy verges and a low grey stone wall.

Along the lane, large chestnut and oak trees emerged from the white mist. Some trees appeared in the middle of a meadow filled with sheep, others stood closer to the road. They were all stripped of their leaves. The wind that blew across the escarpment could really strip the majestic trees. Occasionally there was a cluster of trees. It seemed very random but I doubted that it was. Perhaps these trees were the ones that survived living here, I thought, others found their destiny on other land.

Picked up by the strong winter winds, putting down their roots elsewhere. Some place where they were more appreciated. I looked back from where I'd walked. Even allowing for the fog, what should have been so familiar looked so different from this perspective.

Cobblesdon had one thing very common to my own home village - plenty of the houses were built in the typical Cotswold stone. It was pretty. It was a little bigger than my own village and it boasted its own pub. My local pub was a one mile walk, sitting on one of the main roads which criss-crossed on the escapement, following the original Roman routes.

I had another motivation for walking this way. Last Sunday Rufus mentioned that there were a few houses waiting to be rented, and had been for some while. "Awfully awfully small Jess," had been his exact words.

Looking into my bag, I pulled out my mobile, opened up the maps and memorized the exact location of the houses.

There was an infant school there, which was small but served a few villages around. The post office hadn't been closed and neither had the church been sold and converted to apartments. I looked at the notice board inside the porch entrance to the church – there was toddler playgroup through the weekdays, a variety of clubs on some evenings, and on Sundays church services were held. A little further along was the location of a driving school. The small car park behind the more model Cotswold stone house was empty. I guess Saturday morning was their busiest time, ironically leaving the village quieter still.

The fog seemed to isolate sounds in the country and soften them – it was eerily quiet – I was loving it. Then I heard a mechanical purr some distance away. It became louder. "Hey Jess!" a voice called from behind me. Rufus stopped in his yellow Lotus. "House hunting then!?"

"Morning Rufus. Here? I needed to get out of the house but as I'm here I'll check out those houses for rent you mentioned and be thankful that I've already found something to buy twenty-five miles away." I grinned.

"Oh that's good news! Especially the twenty-five miles part eh?"

I stepped closer to the car's open window. "Although I am waiting for the owners to finally accept my offer."

"Ah. Well jump in!" he pulled some papers from the passenger seat and threw them behind the seat. "I'm curious to know if we can swing a cat in one of those houses." We turned two corners and arrived outside in twenty seconds.

We stared at them for a few moments.

"They are quite pretty," I said. And they were. Cotswold stone terraced cottages, two of them, waiting to be rented out.

Rufus was smirking broadly, "Mais très petite, ma chérie."

"Oui, je sais." I rolled my eyes at him. "I would feel I was living in a mausoleum."

"I've been inside similar cottages. The walls are extremely thick, like the

inhabitants, but they really are pretty well insulated.”

“You are awful you know Rufus!” I laughed and shook my head, “but they make me feel... I don't know...”

Rufus laughed again, “Stay at your sister's longer then.”

I pulled a face. “What's it like living with your parents again?”

“There's a fair distance between us – there are days when we don't see each other” he started to lean over to the glove compartment for his cigarettes. “Just like always really. I just don't need to sneak in girlfriends any more. Not that you ever sneaked in.” Rufus pulled out his lower lip and made puppy dog eyes.

I shook my head. “So your ex kept the house in London?”

“Something like that. She isn't without money so we jiggled a few things out as she wanted to keep it.”

“You're happy to come back here?”

“Yeah! I love it here. London is a few hours away. It's great, perfect!”

“Jackbarrow House is a lovely place.”

“Yeah. Not bad for a pile of bricks. Do you fancy going for a drink?”

I looked over at the two vacant properties. “Yeah... why not?”

As we drove further along the lane, just before leaving the village boundaries, I suddenly saw a detached house with an estate agent's sign outside.

“Stop stop,” I grabbed onto Rufus's arm.

The Cotswold stone cottage was set away and up from the lane. It was not huge and had seen better days but there was potential.

“That must have only just come on the market.” Rufus leant over to see it too. “Williams is the name. He's in a care home – but must have died I guess. The tenants must be moving out. Williams is Jonathan's grandfather you know.”

“Really. What a shame that they are selling it. It's going to be sold very soon I bet,” still looking at it. It was perfect but just in the wrong location. “It's going to be too much for me especially with any renovations.”

Rufus was trying to estimate its price whilst I admired the beautiful voluptuous Christmas wreath with purple ribbons and silver baubles hung on its light wooden door. The windows were old and would probably cost a small fortune to replace them but judging by the amount of condensation on the glass, there was plenty of warmth to be found inside.

“Three bedrooms it says here,” Rufus said. I turned to see that he was checking his mobile. “Enough room for plenty of cats and the mad woman engineer.”

“No cats.” I smiled, “at least not yet.”

“Ready to move on,” Rufus said to me.

“Oh yes. Time for that drink.”

The Harp Inn was a lovely pub in the same style typical of the isolated public houses strung along the straight long roads. It was made of stone – it felt that they had been there a long time – after the Romans and a short time before the highwaymen.

The Harp Inn had four staggered floors and ceilings, partly thanks to the new

extension which was designed to accommodate the slope of the ground on which it was built. I wasn't actually sure whether it was still an inn but it was definitely a pub and a restaurant. The regulars tended to drink in the bar area and that is where we headed to.

We walked through the back door of the inn which took us through a part of the restaurant. It was difficult not to peek into the nooks and crannies which held tables, chairs and patrons. We descended further down into the oldest part of the building. An image of Scott Olorenshaw had entered my mind.

Rufus and I squeezed ourselves into the bar area which was adorned with swaths of greenery, pine-cones, baubles, and a soft toy Father Christmas pinned up on every beam. Christmas music filled up any remaining empty space.

"I'll get the drinks," I said to Rufus, "I can get in and out easier."

"Nope," he squeezed past my knees and groaned dramatically at the effort, "What would you like? Punch? Mulled wine? Or perhaps a rum and coke?"

I nodded and grinned. As Rufus fetched the drinks and I felt myself drift into a tired daze. I lay my head back against the wall and closed my eyes just to see how it felt with one less sense being bombarded by Christmas.

"Hello Jessie," I looked up and Scott was standing above me. I looked at him for a moment longer despite immediately recognising him.

"Hello," I straightened myself up, looked over to Rufus whose back was turned towards us. Scott looked over too without any acknowledgement.

"How are you? Busy weekend?"

"Oh yes," I sighed, "I'm just here with Rufus. He was kind enough to rescue me from the perils and disillusion of house-hunting."

"Not too much disillusion I hope. What about the house you put an offer on?"

"Yes well...I've got to keep my options open. Obviously I hope it'll go through." I said. He stood a moment longer in silence. "Where do you live?"

"Oxford."

"Nice."

"Yes. It's nice here too though." he was watching me closely, still standing.

"I've never said it isn't nice here," I replied. "I guess it just depends..."

Scott looked over to the bar then leaned further down. "Jessie... it really wasn't how you think it was. Back then."

Rufus appeared back with the drinks, settling them down on the table.

"Scott."

"Rufus."

Rufus squeezed past me.

"I'd better get going," Scott smiled. "I'll see you around. Good luck with the house-hunting."

"Are you coming tomorrow?" I quickly asked, "Or is once too much for you?"

He stopped a moment. "My parents want to go. I may be able to handle a second time."

"Maybe tomorrow then."

I watched him walk out with some friends, who up to that point I'd not noticed.

"Steven Spielberg off to shot another toilet roll commercial."

“Rufus.” I elbowed him in the ribs. “Why don't you like him?”

“I tell you, since his parents returned to the area last year, I can hardly move around the village without bumping into him.”

“So... nothing actually in particular.”

“Well....” Rufus picked up his beer. After several gulps he turned to me, “Seriously though Jess, you and him have never been friends from what I remember. I recall defending you a few times.”

“Defending me?” As if I needed help. “Well...thanks.” I looked hard at Rufus and grinned until he grinned back.

Through the pub doors I managed to catch a glimpse of Scott.

Gemma spent Sunday morning making mince pies for the second Advent party then she disappeared in the afternoon for a few hours. I would have offered to help but she seemed to have everything under control plus I was sure she'd refuse my assistance again. When she wasn't rolling out pastry and checking on the children (I was playing with them), she was groaning and rolling her eyes at whatever was on her laptop screen.

After playing with the children and begging unsuccessfully for their advent sweets, I decided to go and check the house in Sedgemoor while there was still daylight.

It looked alright here. Although maybe I should imagine this place without the abundance of Christmas lights. I spotted a few nice cars parked which said that they were plenty of professional people to get to know. Before heading back I checked my messages, replied and read a few articles. I was distracted and before long it was dark.

The journey back to Gemma's was annoyingly long.

On arriving at our mother's place, there was a little more decoration in the hallway than there was last Sunday. The three conifers in the garden were now decked with twinkly cool blue lights. It was surprising to see that my mother had changed the traditional twinkly lights with these. They were a pretty change – giving a little more chill effect in the absence of snow.

Hanging up my coat in the already overloaded closet, I could hear that the nativity play was well under way – mostly by the silence.

There were a few guests standing in the hallway gathered by the door to the lounge. Immediately in front of the adults were three children dressed up in crowns and long robes awaiting their cue.

“Hi,” I whispered to one of the adults, “no way in?”

“Yes...if you're spiderman,” said one.

“OK.” I replied, and took on the challenge.

The children's voices were uncharacteristically quiet as they recited their lines, and it was now the adults turn to giggle behind their hands and try not to spill the eggnog.

I walked to the right and found a place immediately. I stood with my back against the wall. I looked again for another place to park myself. As I looked around

the room, all but one face was enthralled by the nativity – Scott was leaning against the far wall and smiled.

It was then that my arms were dragged down and I found myself sitting in Rufus's lap.

I was a little annoyed but thankful to be wanted.

I tried to concentrate on my nephews and nieces as they played their parts but I was sitting on the lap of the biggest kid there. After several attempts to quiet Rufus, he eventually kept his comments to a volume that only I could hear.

I listened to the children and soon blocked out Rufus. I never did get to play Mary. I do remember that. Gemma had been Mary at least once at primary school. The guests were cued to sing a song – Little Donkey – and the donkey stumbled in. I recognised the paper mache head. It had received a makeover since I wore it. I looked over at my Gemma watching with a tired smile – then I knew that she had some involvement with the revamped donkey costume. Perhaps it's different when you have your own children? I didn't know. I wanted my nephews and nieces to have fun and experience wonderment at Christmas but at what cost? Images of my nativity play experiences were superimposed on every scene.

The nativity play was over, mince pies were being eaten and I found myself standing next to Scott. “So Scott. Two Sundays in a row.”

“Yes,” he tilted his head down towards me, “you are showing great fortitude in managing that.”

“Oh,” I said, “I actually meant you.”

“I know,” he smiled easily, “Not sure about next Sunday, so you may still win.”

“I'll draw you a cartoon of what happens next Sunday, if you like...”

Scott's smile faded but his eyes softened.

The dumbest thing then happened to me. I felt the slightest tightness in my throat. It moved to my eyes. I hadn't cried for years but I hadn't forgotten the warning signs. I suppressed it well but found I couldn't speak. Immediately I turned to go but was thwarted by Rufus standing in my way.

“Hey Scott... again!” Rufus pulled me towards him and leant his head towards mine. I barely smiled, caught between staying and going.

“How's work Scott?” Rufus now put his hand on my shoulder. Normally I wouldn't mind. “Filming any decent models recently?”

I was going to move off but when Rufus asked that question, I wanted to hear Scott's answer.

“I barely notice,” shrugged Scott, “but last week I was filming two pensioners for a cat food commercial. They were perfect for the job so I guess they were decent.”

Rufus merely nodded and his eyes wandered around the room.

Scott continued, “However, there was a TOWIE girl on a shoot last week, probably more your type.”

“Absolutely right my friend! A chap I know from work is friends with one of them” Rufus sparked again and then slipped his hand around my waist, pulling me towards him, “but you should know that Jessie's the only girl for me.”

“I guess she always has been,” replied Scott. “Hold onto her.”

Scott moved off and I shrugged my shoulders to shake Rufus off which was almost unnecessary as he was already loosening his grip.

Pouring myself a soft drink, that was definitely not eggnog, I looked over to where I'd left Scott. Rufus had moved off to chat with my mother. Scott was now laughing with Gemma. There was a familiar old pain in my chest but since eighteen I always had a choice – I left the house.

I was approaching my car and there, clipped behind the windscreen wiper, was a note from Jonathan - 'Jessie – can you pop round to see us this evening? Jonathan. PS Don't bring Rufus.'

“As if...” I muttered.

The Third Candle

There was a white edged sharpness to the green pastures and harvested fields. The rising winter sun was still low in the pinkish-coloured sky – its colour mirrored my own cold cheeks.

The two spaces in the double garage were claimed by Gemma and Gareth's cars, my car rested about on the gravel carpet outside.

Putting the key in the ignition, I turned carefully and for a few seconds I held my freezing breath. The engine made a reluctant sputtering noise but soon began to hum. I leant back into my seat, taking my time to drive off until the windows were clear. Instead of listening to Radio 4, I switched over to Radio 2 to a more familiar wavelength from my teenager years. One song lasted long enough for the car windows to be clear and that was all I wanted. I needed my thirty-three year old head on again and shook off the revisited insecurities of yesterday's second Advent.

The route to work was very familiar and my mind easily wandered. I thought of last night. After the nativity play, I would have been flattered to receive such attention from Rufus, however I knew him too well. Jonathan and his wife Sylvia were eager to talk to me about Jonathan's parents situation when I had visited them last night. They were selling his grandparents' house (I decided not to let on straight away that I already knew about this). They wondered if I would be interested in purchasing it.

“You know Jessie,” said Jonathan. “It would make my parents happy knowing that the cottage would be taken over by someone who's local and not a weekender.”

I looked from one to the other, “Yes, I was born here,” I paused. “But Jonathan, you know me, I'm not looking to live close by...to my...” I sighed. “It is a little too pricey for me.”

“Yeah well,” Jonathan nodded “we thought we'd let you know. It's only just gone on the market and we've already had an offer of sorts on it. My grandfather had to re-mortgage the house to pay for his nursing home expenses. And as you know he lived a long time. Dad would really like a local to buy it.”

“It really is a gem of a house Jonathan and I confess I saw the estate agent's sign up yesterday. The house caught my eye straight away. I just hope that someone buys it that you feel comfortable with.” I smiled at my friend, “but sadly it's not a possibility for me.”

Entering the VAV building, I quickly checked the time and made a call to my estate agent.

“What's the delay in accepting my offer?” I asked.

“Well, “ said the agent, “I've just been on the phone with them again. It seems that they are having second thoughts about selling. They haven't told me definitely either way. As soon as I know, I'll call you.”

I finished the call and flung my coat down on the back of my chair.

Solving problems at work made me happier. The tasks I was working on took my focus off the house and everything else that was bugging me.

Two minutes before lunchtime my mobile rang. It was Gemma sounding very hoarse.

“Hello Jessie,” she coughed and cleared her throat, “I’m running out of time to go shopping. Charlotte’s teacher is having a little thing,” more coughing, “after school and I don’t think I can manage to get into Cheltenham today. Could you please get a few items including ingredients for the Christmas cake?” A lot of coughing. I held my mobile away a little and waited.

Gemma read to me a extensive list of items.

“I could help you and the children tomorrow evening?” I said.

“I think it’ll be in the oven by the time you’re home tomorrow evening.”

“If you’re sure?”

“Yes it’s fine. I do need sweets for the gingerbread house but I can probably manage that,” Gemma said. I waited for her to remember that she had called me. “OK. See you later...” She took a huge breath and coughed painfully as her phone went down.

After buying myself a sandwich and locating a few of the items on Gemma’s list, I headed back to work. I was going to have to resume the hunt for all the items on the list after work. I stopped at an estate agency. I hadn’t looked in this one for a few weeks. Perhaps there would be something new for me, as it seemed very likely now that the Sedgemoor house would come off the market.

I had five minutes and started scanning the information cards in the window. Location? Price? Any other features were becoming less and less important to me. I was getting desperate. I kept my eye moving and then I paused. Should I just postpone looking...just until the New Year?

“Hello Jessie,” said a soft voice behind me.

“I thought it was you.” Scott smiled at me. He looked so warm in his dark blue padded jacket and old school style scarf. “Are you still looking?”

“Houses. Yes. As always. Unfortunately” I sighed a little. “You’re working in Cheltenham today?”

“No, but I have some business to take care of here.”

“Oh nice,” I lifted up my bag of cake ingredients and other sundry items Gemma had asked for. “I’ve got business too.”

“Christmas shopping?” he asked.

“Ha! No. This is Gemma’s.” I caught myself just before rolling my eyes.

“Looks heavy..”

“Yes, ingredients for substantial Christmas cake.” I smiled. “I would blame Delia Smith but hey, it’s Christmas.”

Scott’s laugh came from deep in his chest – I could imagine that that was the best place to stay warm today. We stood for a few moments, his eyes flickered to the estate agent’s window. “Nothing interesting there.”

“Nothing that says Welcome Home... if you know what I mean.”

“Well, unfortunately,” he looked at his watch, “I’ve got to go. Listen. Jessie.

I know you must be really busy but do you, would you like to meet up for a drink after work this evening? Maybe a quick bite to eat?"

I looked at my watch, "Oh me too. I'm already late. What?"

"A drink? After work? Something to eat?"

"Yes. My presence isn't really required at Gemma's and well..." I looked at Scott, "yes. Thanks."

"Then let's meet at... seven... at Pfishers?"

"Pfishers on Rodney Road. At seven. Sounds good."

Pfishers was a place that I'd gone in once before. Scott looked like he was just settling down at a table when I arrived. I was on time – my best acquired continental habit.

I'd stuffed all my purchases in the largest carrier back I'd been given. Sitting down, I pushed it under the table between our legs. I sat back, sighed and picked up my drink of lime and soda water.

"Cheers," I smiled.

"So," began Scott as he put down his drink, "I've not been here for years...hasn't changed much." The restaurant music was flutes playing Christmas music. On every table there was a tea-light in a foggy glass holder each embellished on the outside with silver coloured holly leaves, fir greenery, artificial red berries, and holding it all together was an almost transparent red ribbon and thin silver wire with miniature stars along its length.

"I was here...gosh...not since I left for university. It's funny how everything gets Christmas-fied." I looked around at the other decorations. There wasn't a spare shelf or space that hadn't received this treatment. "I suppose they think it's worth it."

Scott didn't immediately answer. "It must be an interesting time for you at Gemma's. She really seems to enjoy everything Christmas. I don't know how she manages with the children and household and that's only the stuff that my parents tell me about."

"Well..." my leg felt the heavy bag of shopping leaning against it.

"You OK?" he leaned slightly forward and asked.

"Yes. Yes. I'm just thinking about what you asked? Gemma has always been active but I've never spent Christmas here since she's had the children. Christmas was obviously..." I looked at Scott pointedly "a big thing in our household. I guess Gemma has taken that whole thing on."

"Including the Christmas cake."

"Of course, but...insisting on doing or making everything does not make a perfect Christmas." Then in a quieter voice I added, "I should know." I immediately regretted it.

"What do you normally do at Christmas?" Scott asked as the waitress came over. I waited for her to go before answering his question.

"Anything really...depending on who I was involved with at the time. I went to Marrakesh one year, New York another. For several years I went skiing in France with friends when I lived there, the same thing when I lived in London...not skiing obviously but hanging out with friends. Oh and one year I was particularly busy at

work. On Christmas Eve I was working for most of the day and as luck would have it, a cinema in Notting Hill was showing *A Wonderful Life* with free entrance and popcorn that evening. There was such a lovely atmosphere there. It was quite special. Anyway, walking around the city on Christmas Day was a little surreal.” My remembering of my past Christmases had engaged all my senses. The silence from Scott switched them back on again. I looked at Scott. “Then I was back at work on Boxing Day.”

Our meals had arrived and I picked up my cutlery.

“So you spent that Christmas day alone?” he asked.

“Christmas had arrived before I'd realised it. I was invited somewhere, can't remember with whom. Anyway I went for a swim in the Serpentine, well, a plunge to be more accurate – I heard that a group of people gathered there early on Christmas morning and so I went along out of curiosity. I'm glad I'm did.” I took a mouthful of beautifully seasoned salmon.

Scott smiled, “I've filmed at the Serpentine - you are a brave woman.”

“When Gemma told me what you did for a living, well, I had no idea, well only a little idea obviously, that you were so... creative.”

“Oh yes,” I always have been. “Art, photography etcetera. Pure luck that I took a film-making module as part of our foundation art year and caught the bug.”

“And, presumably, you make a pretty good living at it. You're always busy?”

Scott nodded. “Unfortunately I have to turn work down – but it's a good sign I guess. Besides, work isn't everything.”

We continued eating and making small talk, speaking of childhood and youth haunts we had in common.

“Just how many ingredients are in THAT bag?” asked Scott laughing as I tried to push it back again to its allocated place under the table.

“Let me tell you because I can give myself another pat on the back for getting every item requested.” I put down my fork, leant back and felt around in my trouser pocket for the crumpled up piece of paper. “Christmas is going to hell in a basket if we don't get...a ton of dried fruit and candied fruit – I won't bore you with the particulars - almonds, spices including organic nutmegs, two bags of roasted chestnuts. In addition I've purchased chocolate from three different chocolate shops including Christmas pudding chocolates and brandy butter truffles. I'm pretty well...done in.” I heard him chuckle as I read. I crumpled up the paper and put it back in. Looking up at him to hand back the conversation, I saw warmth.

Remember the caricatures Jessica, I reminded myself.

“So I guess you've got to continue house-hunting?” asked Scott.

“Oh...yes...it looks like it's fallen through. Just a moment. I've got to mark something,” I pulled out my iPad, opened my house map and tapped the screen.

“What's that?”

“This is my...” I looked up at him.

“May I?” he handed out his hand.

“Sure.” I passed it to him tentatively.

He took the iPad and studied the screen for a few moments. “You've put Abbotswold in the centre of the circle. Why not Cheltenham, where you work?”

“Well...you know.”

Scott passed me back my iPad and sat back a little and smiled kindly. I took up my drink and looked around at the other diners.

After thirty minutes, I told Scott that it probably best for me to get back otherwise Gemma would worry that I'd not bought everything. On cue my mobile rang – it was Gemma. She asked about my whereabouts and the shopping status. I didn't mention who I was with.

“I've got everything you asked for.” I responded. I held the phone away from my ear as she coughed again through a question. “Yes. I'm just leaving. I'll be back soon.”

As I hung up, Scott was already dealing with the bill.

Standing just outside the restaurant door in the cold winter evening we briefly discussed the whereabouts of our cars – they were in different directions.

“Thanks Scott, I really enjoyed dinner. We didn't argue once. Who would have thought?” I'd just smoothed my hair away from my face, flicking it back again in order to say goodbye to Scott. Before I had a chance to say goodbye, he leant forward and kissed me softly on the lips. His face was all I could see for a moment.

“The cartoons?” he said. “It was nothing. I was... infatuated. I'm sorry if... I had no idea that I may have hurt your feelings so much. I just enjoyed your reactions.”

The stupid urge to cry was there again at the back of my eyes. I took in a determined breath to push them away. “I did tell you to drop dead – I guess we're even.”

“I found you a little intimidating but I was always pleased to have a verbal exchange with you.”

I looked at him – Gemma's loss. “Thanks for that. Consider your Get Out Of Jail card now redeemed.”

He laughed quietly. “OK I hold you to that. Thanks for having dinner with me. I'll see you soon,” he turned immediately and walked away. I watched after him for a few seconds until another couple needed to get to the restaurant door. It was as I stepped aside that I saw the bunch of mistletoe hanging above it.

I turned slowly and began to walk in the opposite direction.

A beautiful department store window Christmas display I'd passed earlier caught my eye again. I crossed the pavement quickly to stand in front of it. It was a scene from Dickens's Christmas Carol. Probably as a matter of there being just the one window dedicated to the story – all three ghosts were present. The ghost of Christmas Past was partially seen. A slight smile on his face. He was looking through Scrooge's bed chamber window as Scrooge laughed with delight. The ghost of Christmas present loomed large in the display with all the typical Christmas fare encompassing him. The ghost of Christmas future was off to the left. Looking both ominous and kind – as if congratulating himself on a job well done. His sinister personage completely dissolving in front of us with one upward curve of his mouth

I imagined if after Scrooge had been dealt with, did all three ghosts get together and have a briefing about him before being given details about their next

assignment?

I continued walking to the car, the elbows of Christmas shoppers and their bulging bags were quite inconsequential.

It was dark in the lanes as I drove up to the lit-up barn. I scanned the window wall to assess what the state of affairs were before stepping in.

The children weren't in their pyjamas yet and I could hear Gemma's scratchy voice.

I opened the main front door, took off my boots and opened the second door inside. "Good evening everyone," I glanced over at Gemma. She was pouring some hot water into a cup and cutting up a lemon. Gareth, still wearing his business suit, came out of the utility room pulling apart the static-held pyjamas for the children. "Hey," Gareth said barely looking at me as he continued hurrying towards his children.

"So. Gemma." I waited a moment for her to look up before continuing but she didn't. "I've taken the day off tomorrow so I can help you."

"Oh" she sounded better but was still hoarse. "You didn't have to do that."

Gareth's weary face lit up and he opened his mouth to say something. I jumped in quickly. It might be more effective to hear this from anyone else other than her spouse.

"I was due some time off anyway and I'd like to help you if I may..." I added cautiously, "just a little. It might be fun for me to learn stuff." I stopped before I started waffling too much.

Gemma shrugged, her brow furrowed a little. "I guess you could. Thank you. That would be useful."

"Great." I opened my eyes wide and made a soundless sigh at Gareth.

Gareth's shoulders released just a little and he smiled at me. "OK children. Let's get you ready for bed."

The following day, I took the two eldest children to school, along with their packed lunches which had already been prepared by Gemma and lined up on the dining table. At what unearthly hour she prepared them, I had no idea. Gemma was sitting on one of the sofas with Zoe on her lap when we left. When I returned, Zoe was amusing herself with some toys and Gemma was mixing ingredients in her mixing bowl.

"Oh. I thought you were going to do that with the children this afternoon."

"The cake, yes." she crooked. "I'm starting on the gingerbread house,"

"Can I help?" I asked.

"Well," she continued looking at the recipe on her laptop, "could you take care of Zoe? That'll be great."

I stood and watched her for a moment.

"I'm OK Jessie. I'm taking medicine. Having the children looked after gives me time to do other stuff."

I gave up and turned to play with Zoe.

Zoe was such a darling, I felt useful and had fun playing with my smallest niece. As I read a book to her, I noticed her slowly beginning to fall asleep. I laid her

quilt on the carpet and placed her, and her blanket, on it. I walked over to the kitchen and offered my services.

“Nice of you, but I've got all these things in my head,” she coughed back, pushed back her hair and stirred something in the pan vigorously. “You know, school things and making the dinner. But right now the gingerbread house will have to wait because I've just remembered that the chocolate truffles needs my full attention.”

“I could start dinner or give the chocolate my attention, I'm pretty good at that.” I suggested and smiled.

Gemma stopped in the midst of the chaos looking frazzled. “You can't just step in and make these truffles – it would take too long to explain. Thanks...but no.”

Gemma started looking for something amongst the culinary chaos and it was difficult not to mention the copious amounts of chocolate that I'd bought for her yesterday. Best not to ask.

“Is there anything else I could help you with? Anything?” my voice was quieter.

“No...it's fine.” Gemma didn't look up.

“Well, Zoe's asleep over there and I'm off for a short walk then. Is that OK?” I asked tentatively.

Gemma was now leaning over her recipe book, “Yes yes perfect. I can then concentrate on this. It will be easier if I just do it myself.”

I shuddered.

Sunday came around again. This morning though I awoke with the knowledge that the Sedgemoor house had definitely been taken off the market. So, no house but as I approached the kitchen area I was met with an enormous number of chocolate truffles. I stopped asking Gemma why there was so much of everything. The truffles were to be placed in bags and given to every one of the households that would be visited this evening. Plus a bag for every one who sang in the group of carol singers.

Thankfully the Cromwell Crooners led the carol singers – we were aptly named Cromwell's Carol Singers for the evening – I felt hugely criminal trying to sing the carols. However, a few old school friends joined us and we kept well to the back.

There was a list of twelve houses to visit – amongst them Jonathan and Sylvia's.

Jonathan is most definitely a good sport. He beamed as we started singing Oh Come All Ye Faithful outside his door. He spotted me and smiled even more and sang along. After singing at his door, he left Sylvia and the baby and said he'd walk along with us to the next household...lucky victims.

As the group walked its festive route Jonathan saddled up to me.

“You're not going to believe this,” he whispered, “but there's another offer – a better one.”

“Really! And are you going to accept it?” I whispered back.

“I just don't know,” he shrugged, “it's Mum and Dad's decision...and the profit is their inheritance and their pension.”

“Who's put in the offer? A local person?”

“I can't really say at the moment.”

Cromwell's Christmas Singers arranged themselves outside the Olorenshaws. I lagged behind reluctantly standing on their drive because Jonathan would have made a big deal of it had I done what I wanted to do – wait on the street for them all to finish singing. Nevertheless, I hid behind everyone else. As the door was open, Mrs Olorenshaw laughed and her husband stood behind her. I couldn't see Scott there so I relaxed a little and joined in the singing. Everyone seemed to be having a better time than me as they sang Ding Dong Merrily On High. I thought about skipping off and testing out the hangover cure - wondering if it was time to see just how effective it was.

Scott's parents donned their winter coats, hats and scarves and joined in the procession. I heard Charlotte amongst the Christmas gaggle giggling with delight. I wanted to give her a hug and share in her excitement but she'd been commandeered by her father and I didn't want to spoil the precious memories that were being made between father and daughter.

“Where's Scott tonight?” said one of my friends as she took another chocolate out of her own bag.

“I don't know...maybe he's had enough,” I muttered. “I mean how much can a non-resident take of this madness.”

My friend laughed and I smiled, glad that she hadn't picked up anything else. Jonathan turned towards me and smiled tentatively.

“Sorry Jonathan,” I whispered. “I'm having fun but...”

“I know. Sometimes a bowl of gruel and a dried piece of bread seems to be a happy alternative.” he briefly put his arm around my shoulder and squeezed me gently.

My eyes watered a little at his comical understanding. “Something like that.”

Jonathan bid goodnight to us before we reached the last on the list – Rufus.

It was a large house, tastefully decorated (although I'd seldom visited there) and the gardens were quite beautiful. A dream house to most people. It was detached, very detached, with a good hundred metres between theirs and their neighbour's house, and it was double-front in perfect symmetry. The front door was flanked either side by stained glass windows, inside a porch area. Far too small though to accommodate the thirty plus carollers. Rufus opened the door like a mischievous school boy just before anyone had begun singing – at least everyone else we'd sung to pretended they'd not heard our approach. Rufus had learnt at a young age that a certain amount of wealth meant that some social accommodating niceties could be dispensed with. Nevertheless, he seemed genuinely pleased that we were all there. It had been a long evening, especially for the children. My own family's children were tired and dragging their feet asking if they could go home. As his parents appeared behind him at the door, Rufus stepped forward to speak to my mother. She in turn spoke to my brother who then grabbed a friend, and they turned and ran into the darkness up the lane.

After the first carol Rufus asked everyone to come inside where everyone could get warm. My mother gave her approval by walking in first.

There were a lot of people in the beautiful, elegantly furnished room. Rufus

was totally relaxed but his parents were a little taken back by their son's insistence that everyone come inside. Rufus took the initiative to get everyone comfortable. Changing the location for the post-carol singing advent evening was a good idea.

During the final carol...Now Give Us Some Figgy Pudding... Henry appeared with the two large catering thermal flasks of hot chocolate, plastic cups and several bags of marshmallows. As we drank we were careful not to spill a single drop of hot chocolate onto the Persian carpet. Parents guided their children away from The Carpet towards the dark polished (and forgiving) wooden floors. Rufus' parents then relaxed a little and made it their job to thank everyone, enquire after every individual – loud enough that I heard them remark to Scott's parents that he had called to see Rufus this afternoon.

Hot chocolate seemed to soothe everyone. Rufus was at ease except Scott's parents– who didn't appear to have noticed his reserve towards them.

I was the first out of the house, Rufus walked out with me.

“I thought you and Scott weren't the best of friends,” I asked smiling, “I heard your parents talking to the Olorenshaws.”

“Yes,” he grimaced, “I've no idea what he's up to. Glad he didn't turn up this evening. I mean HE doesn't even live here!” Rufus guffawed but brightened up immediately as someone thanked him for his hospitality. Before moving away from me he said, “but this was really nice wasn't it?”

Rufus bid goodnight to the other carollers and added theatrically “Happy Christmas To All and To All A Good Night!”

The Fourth Candle

Monday morning brought on a niggling feeling that I had been putting off, a reminder that the number of presents I've purchased so far stood at zero.

Being away from the family homestead for many years at Christmas meant I developed my own way of doing things in the festive season – including how I purchased Christmas presents. This had been accomplished with an efficient phone call or a visit to an internet site.

The children had often been talking about what they wanted for Christmas, whether Father Christmas was real and – on the off-chance that he was – what he might bring for them this year. However, despite or maybe because of the constant reminders of the Christmas craziness, it was too late for me to have any other present-buying option than to push myself from the sidelines and join in the drones of people who both hated Christmas shopping (my favourite in many ways – they made up their minds quicker and don't dawdle on the pavements) and the shoppers who thrived on it.

Conscious that I had neither an iPad nor paper and pencil nearby, I mentally counted again just how many presents I needed to buy and how long I could procrastinate the whole necessity of purchasing them. I wondered too if Scott Olorenshaw would be around this Sunday.

Should I buy him a present? I thought. That would be weird wouldn't it? As a thank you for dinner perhaps? Why would I want to buy him a present?

“How's the testing going Jess?” asked Stefan.

“What?” I said, slightly startled, “Oh good, so far.” And to be absolutely sure that everything was good so far I studied what my eyes were not seeing when I zoned out. Thankfully a problem surfaced on my monitor almost immediately. I could use my engineering experience and concentrate on something other than more complicated things like human beings and why Christmas threw up so many challenges – the festive can of worms.

“Jess,” I looked up to see my line manager. “You aren't taking any extra days as holiday next week?”

I nodded

“So just Christmas Day and Boxing Day? At least you've got the weekend attached so it'll be a nice break for you. You can only carry over three days maximum for next year and that still leaves you one half day that you are entitled to.”

Instead of relishing the prospect of having a massage and leisurely walking around some old stately house with friends, the dreaded words *Christmas Shopping* crossed my mind.

I cleared my throat. “Perhaps I'll take off Wednesday afternoon. Sound good?”

Unfortunately my line manager thought it a splendid choice.

The air was dry and chilly on Wednesday morning. I left for work extra early. My Christmas list was complete. I'd written out a list of Cheltenham shops to visit that would be the most time-efficient. No dawdling. No time to stop and admire the shop window displays though I allowed myself a scheduled glimpse at the three ghosts of Dickens.

My well-planned day could only be stalled by people and weather. It was six in the morning and very dark as I slowly drove out of the drive turning onto the lane and pausing to check the surface with my headlights. The small country lanes that criss-crossed over the escarpment could be perilous in winter. It was dry but certainly cold enough for ice. As it hadn't rained for a while, I knew that there would be no frozen puddles in the dips of the lanes or patches that were frequently damp.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when I pulled into the barn's driveway. I was both exhausted and exhilarated by the onslaught I'd put myself through and to be back at Gemma's before the sun went down.

Twenty-two presents purchased. Wrapping paper (I hadn't scheduled time for waiting in long lines for gift-wrapping). Tape. Tags. Ribbons. Cards. Plus just-in-case presents. A hoard of pampering toiletries for Gemma's stocking (that wasn't on the list). It was true that five of the presents were identical (I went off-piste from my list when I spotted the stunning watches – a digital clock on any mobile could not compare) and I only had one favourite. I'd given myself a time-restraint and it was a gut decision – so I bought five. I ordered a beautiful food hamper – no idea why – Gemma was hardly going to run out of food. Car was packed. Two trips back and forth from the car. Budget completely blown.

Gemma had been working herself up to fever pitch since Sunday. She had school commitments, favours that she was doing for friends and she was making a ton of mince pies for the old people's home, plus running a household. As I suspected from the lack of lights in the kitchen area, the house was empty. I felt somewhat guilty that I was relieved to see she wasn't home.

I hauled in bags and boxes, taking them straight up to my room and tried not to be overwhelmed by the volume as they occupied most of my double bed. Finally I discarded my coat and shoes and I slumped into a sofa with my eyes half open. The only light in the house came from the Christmas tree which radiated light and movement – for a few moments I willed it to be magical for me. I spotted a broken bauble and went over to the cleaning cupboard to get a dustpan and brush. After I swept up the broken pieces, I spent some time looking at the different tree decorations. The colour scheme was pale pastel-colours, predominately dusty pink. I looked at some of the baubles individually. As I was gently rotating one to see both sides, I saw snuggled above it – a small hand-sewn felt stocking about 12 cm in length with the letter G embroidered on it.

I pulled it gently from the tree trying not to disturb any needles. I looked inside the stocking. It was empty. We'd made one each as children – the Christmas before Dad died. It was he who suggested we write a note about our siblings and put it inside their mini-stockings to read on Christmas morning. My message to Gemma

had been rather hurriedly written – Gemma is good at sewing – it seemed apt and it was certainly better than mine. She had also taken upon herself to make our brother Henry's too.

I heard a knock on the window. Gemma waved at me from outside with Zoe next to her, before coming in.

I put the stocking quickly back and went over to the porch.

“You're home early,” she said. “You well?”

“Yes yes,” I said as I grabbed Zoe who was being guided towards me ahead of Gemma. “I told you I had the afternoon off so I did my Christmas shopping and just got home.”

Gemma looked hard at me not seeming to understand what I said and wondering if I understood what I had said. Either way she looked up at the kitchen clock before turning back to go outside.

“I've got a ton of stuff to unload from the car,” she called over her shoulder, “could you get Zoe some milk and put her down on the carpet for a nap. She loves to look at the Christmas tree too.”

Zoe was soon settled down drinking her bottle and playing peek-a-boo with the lights on the tree.

When Gemma finally finished bringing in all her shopping I asked her, “do you want me to collect the children from school today?”

“You did all your Christmas shopping in what...two hours?”

“No no. Three. I went to work very early.”

“All of it?”

“Yes”

Gemma continued to stare at me. “They're not all the same again are they?”

“Erm...no. All my presents are not all the same.” I said. “Maybe they've all had the same theme before but...I'm actually very pleased with myself. It was quite an experience.” I blew out my cheeks. “So, would you like me to collect the children from school then?”

“No need,” said Gemma still shaking her head, “Lorna drops them off on Wednesdays.”

“Oh really. Well, if you like, I could babysit Zoe whilst you go and make any deliveries.”

“No, I've got to do something for Sunday. I'll just sit here for ten minutes before starting.”

The sun was casting long shadows and would be gone from the sky within an hour. As I wasn't needed by Gemma, I bundled up against the cold and started to walk in the direction of Cobblesdon again.

I stopped outside the stone house again. I don't know if it is possible to bond with a house, but in that moment I believed it. But this house just wasn't an option. A car pulled up slowly beside me. I wasn't sure who it would be but I decided I'd been out long enough and it was my cue to start to walk back to Gemma's. I waited for the driver to get out of their car – it would be rude to ignore the only other person that was outdoors at the moment – it was Scott. We smiled at the same time.

Before either of us had time to say anything another car pulled up behind Scott's and a suited, coated and booted man with very white hair and beard stepped out carrying some paper and a mobile.

"Hello Mr Olorenshaw," the estate agent said, "perfect timing eh? Shall we go straight in?" The estate agent then noticed me, "Oh I'm sorry, you must be..." he looked over to Scott for a lead.

"This is Miss Jameson and she's interested in the property too." Scott smiled. The estate agent nodded and turned up the path towards the house.

"What are you doing here?" I asked hastily.

"To look inside the house of course," said Scott as he stopped outside the open door on which hung the huge classic green wreath adorned with purple and silver trimming. It looked even prettier up close. The estate agent waited for me to enter first. Scott followed behind me and just before the estate agent gave his spiel he said "The question is, what are you doing here?"

The estate agent started to take us through room to room.

I hoped that the inside of the house wouldn't hold the promise of the beautiful door wreath. It did. As we walked from room to room, Scott stepped aside for me to enter first. I was glad of that if only because he couldn't read my face at how perfect it was and how sickeningly depressed I was getting. Even the necessary updating was a perfect opportunity to put one's own mark onto the continuing history of the old house. Scott asked the estate agent questions now and then while I just looked. As we viewed the garden at the back, which was a good size with a shed at the far left corner, my spirits sunk further as Gemma's suggestion of a deluxe shed in her garden loomed in my head. She wasn't serious but nevertheless, every house I would view from now on would be compared to this.

"What do you think?" Scott finally asked after the estate agent locked the front door and walked ahead of us down the garden path. I didn't want to answer straight away. I resigned internally that it was going to be his and hold no resentment. It was just life. "Well.. what do you think?" he asked again. "Yes? No? Didn't think much of it?"

"Are you kidding Scott? It's a lovely home. It is...the nicest place I've seen. And believe me, I've seen plenty." I thought about the location, the distance, the house in Sedgemoor. And because I was now totally unguarded with pain in my heart I added, "I would take it in a heartbeat." I started to walk slowly ahead of him.

"Even with its location?"

"Well..." I walked through the gap between the two low stone walls onto the lane.

"Do you think it's too big for me?" Scott said as he stopped beside me.

"No, not at all. Maybe one day you'll settle down and...stuff." I felt colder still and quickly thought of the mausoleum houses.

"It feels good? Is that what you got?"

"Yeah...definitely," I said looking at him. "But you'll be living here, not me."

"Yes. Of course. But it's a huge amount of money, especially with some necessary renovations. And of course I've got to get my flat on the market as soon as possible."

“You would move from Oxford to come here?”

“Why not? It's a great house. Beautiful location.”

My eyes followed his as we looked beyond the few houses on the other side of the lane to trees and fields that were beginning to create a united silhouette in the setting sun.

A cold wind chilled me. I zipped up my jacket to under my chin turning to Scott again. I wasn't sure how long he'd been looking at me but I felt a little warmer.

“Your parents will be pleased to have you living so close?” I grinned.

Scott pursed his lips and smiled. “It won't make any difference. I mean, I wouldn't choose to live on the same street as them.” He paused. “Nor perhaps the same village. But this is good.”

“And one good snowfall will render all the lanes impassible and then...” I looked over into the fields again. “I've missed over a week of school once because the school bus couldn't make it to the village.”

“Would you be so unhappy Jess if you found a house here – living close to your childhood?”

It was so still that Scott's question was held in the cold air in front of me. Could I let go of my iron-cast criteria of maximum distance from Abbotswold. It would certainly open up more possibilities. My childhood though was always a problem no matter how far I travelled. I turned my face away from Scott and briefly shut my eyes tight willing the feelings off. I breathed in deeply, once more facing Scott. “Well, if it was a real option maybe I could be happy. Gemma would be close, and that'd be nice. I have some friends here, work colleagues. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad.” I had managed to ride over the slight panicky feeling in my stomach. “Anyhow Scott, this house. Apparently you've got serious competition.”

“Yes. I'm all too aware of that,” he answered.

“Well...apparently they don't fit the picture and as much as Jonathan's parents want to have someone local to settle down and not a weekender – they need to make as much money as possible. Convincing Jonathan's parents that you are local enough shouldn't be too much of a problem.” I smiled as we stopped by his car and caught sight of the house windows reflecting the last remaining rays and Scott stood in front of it. They looked good together.

“You don't know who they are then?”

“No idea. Jonathan was a little cagey about it.”

“Well, if I'm very lucky, I may have a trump card,” he said unlocking his car. “Want a lift home?”

I looked down the shadowy lane back to Gemma's. “Yes. Thank you. I should get back.”

I opened the door, sat down and as I strapped myself in over my winter jacket said “You've been dealt a couple of good cards lately then?”

“You wait years for one good card and then...” he shrugged and smiled over to me. He then checked that road was still void of traffic before moving on.

Thursday evening was my work Christmas dinner. The tables had been booked months earlier at an inn just outside Cheltenham. Taxis were booked and designated

driver volunteers negotiated.

After arriving back to the barn I rushed to get ready before Stefan from work arrived to pick me up.

“Gareth!” yelled Gemma. “Can you put another load of washing in and then put a load in the tumble drier? Have you got that secret Santa gift yet?”

“No,” answered Gareth as he walked towards the utility room, “it's hard to find a gift for just five pounds.”

“No cheap perfume.” I called over to be helpful. “Honestly...it will go straight in the bin or worse they will re-gift it right back to you next Christmas – I speak from experience.”

“Jessie's right,” said Gemma as she looked around the crammed fridge. “Anything small and nice. I have some chocolates left over. Take one of the pretty bags, fill it up and then you can buy a poinsettia tomorrow. That will do.”

As it was, Gemma's that-will-do gift was a gift-box (bought? handmade? I stopped asking) crammed with four kinds of homemade truffles, tied with cascading ribbons and a label written with a calligraphy pen – from your Secret Santa.

I heard a car honk and I was out of there.

Friday was the last day of school before Christmas for Hugh and Charlotte and *they were excited!* Gemma at this point was reaching the pivotal weekend of the fourth and last advent party - this was coupled with the remaining items on her list that had to be done beforehand. I just wished for the coming Sunday to be over. I felt a little uneasy about leaving her but then, she has managed perfectly well without me at Christmas time for years.

“The trouble with working with a load of male engineers is the lack of seasonal flair. Something a bit more than a flimsy piece of tinsel by Nigel's desk would have been appreciated.”

“What? Well you could have done something yourself,” was Guy's response. “It's a bit late now.”

“I'm the new girl,” I faked a whine, “it was your job to impress.”

My mobile rang and I picked it up without my eyes leaving my computer screen. I glanced down at the caller id and hit accept. It was Gemma apologising for the list that she was just about to give me.

I wrote them down as she dictated. After the first six items I interrupted her.

“They're all sweets...”

“For the gingerbread house decoration,” Gemma replied, “this year it's got to be spectacular, and more importantly, it's got to actually exist...by this Sunday preferably...well absolutely by this Sunday.”

I hung up and thought about the humbugs – all consumed at least a week ago. The hangover cure was still on my desk – I pursed my lips as I thought of the reoccurring annoying question – who sent it? Given that Gemma laughed too much when I mentioned it, I guessed it wasn't her.

I opened the drawer with the untouched advent calendar and sighed again.

It was later in the afternoon that Rufus called me. Despite him sounding agitated he was inviting me out to go to a club.

“Come out with me tonight Jess. Let's have a laugh!”

“Rufus, I would love to but I'm babysitting.” I had offered to babysit for Gareth and Gemma Friday night as they had Gareth's work Christmas party in Cheltenham.

“Yeah of course. Maybe I'll swing by and visit you tonight.” Rufus said.

“Sure. If you want to that'll be fine. I am going out tomorrow night with a group of friends from the village – why not hang out with us if you want.”

“Oh yeah...I've been invited too but hey, I'll see you later yeah?”

I lay down on a sofa, picked up the remote and straight away thought of getting myself a hot drink – which was all the way over in the kitchen. It was already half nine when I finally put the last I-can't-sleep child into bed. The excitement of the day and all the anticipation of Christmas was exhausting but somehow the children had an extra storage of energy that took forever to empty.

I had almost given up on Rufus arriving when I saw the approach of headlights slowing up outside the barn. I stood up to check who it was. It was Rufus who waved as he struggled out of his car. It was too much of a familiar sight.

“Seriously Rufus,” I said as I opened the door and took a whiff of his breath. “When will you learn? Just call me or not turn up at all!” I was miffed but his usual protests weren't there. He mumbled sorry and came in and collapsed on the sofa.

“I know, I know...” he started up. “I shouldn't have come over but I'll sleep it off here right? Gemma won't mind.” I was sure Gemma would mind but she didn't want anything on her conscious if anything happened to him or anyone else on the roads.

“Yeah. You'll have to stay somewhere. You can sleep here but be gone first thing in the morning OK? Or else I'll be throwing you out myself.”

“Now Jess. If you weren't here, I could sleep in the guest room.”

“Now Rufus. If I wasn't here, you wouldn't be here either. Anyway, enough. What's going on?”

“Nothing. Nothing. That house. You know, the one you are so in love with.”

“Err...yes?”

“I decided to buy it, well, I asked my parents to put in a good offer and we could do it up and sell it on. All week we've been raising our offer when we were told that the asking price had been offered and accepted.”

“Oh...sorry,” I asked, not entirely sure whether it was Scott or not. “Any idea who it was?”

“Oh yeah. Bloody Scott Olorenshaw. Came out with some story about wanting to settle down with someone in the village...”

“With someone?”

“Yeah Jess. I though he was making a play for you again. It's like when we were playing rugby together. Anyhow I was going to settle down there too...or at least ask if you wanted to rent it from me for a while until you found your own house. How about a drink?”

“Lie down Rufus. I'm not getting you anything other than water.”

Rufus was already stretched out and sleeping by the time I returned with blankets and a pillow. I wrote a note and stuck it bang in the middle of the Christmas wreath for Gareth and Gemma plus an apology.

Saturday was cold. Very cold. The escarpment here was high, wide and exposed – always a good choice for any passing heavy snow clouds ready to lighten their icy load. It felt like nature was holding its breath.

Rufus had already left before the family woke up. Gareth had made up a fire – a real treat for all of us to wake up to. He had also been chatting to his parents on the phone who were to stay at a local inn (thanks in part to me occupying the guest room – but Gemma said she was particularly thankful to me). They would arrive on Monday and stay until Christmas Eve – then off to Gareth's sister's. They were pretty full on and I, for one, was glad that I was working until Christmas Eve.

“No no,” Gemma bent down, opened a cupboard and pulled out the big ceramic mixing bowl. “I forgot! I crossed the gingerbread house off my list but of course, had an unmitigated disaster trying to put it all together. So right now, the gingerbread house needs my attention otherwise it'll be ruined...again.”

Gemma was now leaning over her recipe book and several large pieces of greaseproof paper with sketches of parts that were to make up the edible house.

“Shall I take out the children out for a walk?”

“Yes, yes! Please. Thank you. I can then concentrate on this.”

The children were happy to leave the DVD for a short while. We dressed snugly and headed in the general direction of outside.

We picked up bits of foliage, I held their hands as they walked on the low stone walls, we watched the birds sitting and calling in the leafless trees. Charlotte spotted a robin redbreast – a ball of feathers with a beak and two stick legs. We stood in awe it longing it to stay still – I dared the children not to move a muscle – two seconds later it flew off. The chilly wind started to pick up and it whipped our faces pink and danced us around. We found interesting stones, sticks, a muddy puddle, enough moss to make an elf's house with little pieces of sticks. A tree suitable for hugging and telling secrets to. My ungloved fingers were muddy and pink with living.

“What was that?!” Charlotte stunned herself still with her question, her eyes widened dramatically.

I felt something on my face too. The children's delighted eyes met mine.

“Snow. It's snowing!” Charlotte screamed with delight and Hugh roared with happiness as the white falling snow increased and engulfed us. It played its silent magic with us all.

It was then that I really wished my sister was with us too. This is just the sort of fun we had with our father - she loves this sort of stuff.

As I got myself ready for going out that evening with my friends in the village, I had one eye on the continuing snowfall. I also had to admit that the news about Scott and his girlfriend settling down in the stone house was a blow to me – much more than I

had anticipated. I believed there was something there. I believed that there had been something there all those years ago – a strong undercurrent of feeling beneath all the sarcasm and juvenile exchanges.

Suddenly I grabbed my small suitcase and threw in some clothes and toiletries. I could leave the car in Cheltenham. Perhaps I could catch a train, a plane to anywhere. I'll decide later. I could send a text to my line manager asking to take the three days off work next week – most of the engineers were away anyhow. I wouldn't have to deal with all this crap.

I left the noisy barn to the noisier nightclub – fortunately Gemma was too busy to notice my suitcase. I arrived and met three friends outside. We managed to squeeze, duck and dive to locate the others, including Rufus who was locked lips and limbs to a woman I didn't know – and when Rufus introduced us it was clear he didn't know her either.

I'd been enjoying myself a good hour before I started worrying about the snow and driving the car through it. It was half past ten and I was at my limit with drinks. The nightclub was a short walk to work, there always seemed to be a lone engineer there and I guess tonight would be my turn. I had another drink and danced some more.

I arrived at work shortly before one in the morning – the snow had eased off a little and I walked through the snow fairly easily – the streets were brightened and still. I had enjoyed myself and felt a little better – and given the increasing pain that had crept up on me in regards to Scott, it was all I was asking for.

Security didn't seem too surprised to see me turn up in reception. Arriving at my desk I pulled off my boots (which I kept in the car) and pushed my suitcase away from me. I checked my mobile to send a text to my boss when I noticed several missed calls and a text from a number I didn't recognise.

I checked the text, it was Scott. 'Hi Jess. I guess you are out. I'm buying the house. We should celebrate. Call me back any time. Scott'

I texted him back. 'Congrats. Perhaps your girlfriend should have seen the house before you put in an offer. Have a good holiday. Jess'

Almost immediately my mobile rang.

“What?” said an irritated voice.

“I was told about your girlfriend – I guess it would have be nice to hear it from you.”

“Don't tell me, Rufus. Well, if he is the source of all truth and selflessness, I guess it's also true that you will have to find another house to shack up with him.”

“What?” I shook my head. “Look Scott, do what you want. It doesn't matter.”

“Look, it is not what it seems but I don't want to talk about this on the phone. Tomorrow?”

“I won't be around tomorrow Scott. Just...I don't want to talk about this. Have a...nice week.” I hung up and immediately switched off my mobile. I breathed in deeply, put my feet up on my desk and spotted a gift wrapped bottle of wine at the end of my desk with my name on. I opened my desk drawer to get out my Swiss army knife and spotted again the advent calendar. I took it out. Uncorking the bottle

I started to look for number one. A robin. That was sweet watching the robin with the children, I thought, I'll be sad not to see them open their presents on Christmas Day. I got up and walked to the coffee machine, pulling out a plastic cup. I sat down and poured myself a drink. Number two. A fireplace. This morning, Gareth was quite happy tending the fire – I bet he felt very useful doing something that Gemma couldn't do any better. I opened all twenty-four doors – baubles hanging from a fir branch, a snowy cottage, gifts under the tree, stocking, lantern, choir, postbox, sledging, a lit candle, Christmas tree, three wise men, angels, shepherds and lambs, mince pies, a steaming Christmas pudding, crackers, and finally a nativity scene. A small family with none of the items in the previous twenty-three windows. I saw nothing but the love of being together.

I had been experiencing it all without any feeling or awareness. I was soon crying.

My father had been killed as he walked home from the pub one chilly night in March. It was a mile walk down the lane from the main road to our home, and he was very conscious of not drinking and driving. Not everyone felt the same. The driver skidded on the black ice but his alcohol limit was enough over and that would always trump what would have been thought as an unfortunate accident.

The following year as the first Christmas without dad loomed, our mother went off to a German market encouraged by her best friend. Somehow it rallied her spirits and she busied herself to no end. We children just watched as she created a Christmas which for us had lost all heart. We wanted our mother to do simple things with us, just like Dad had done.

I'd drunk nearly half a bottle and my head was starting to feel heavy. I wiped my face dry with my hands. Pulling another chair close to me, I put my feet up and closed my eyes. I saw briefly the Ghost of Christmas Past, not looking through the window at a friendly distance as I seen in the shop display, but taking up room in the chair opposite me.

I kicked it out.

“Just know your place.” I whispered with the slightest smile on my face as another tear escaped my closed eyes.

Sunday morning. “Oh,” I peeled my face off the advent calendar which had doubled up as a very ineffective pillow. I was now lying completely on the floor. I was warm enough but felt rotten.

“You all right Jessie?”

“Oh crap, yes.” I sat up and looked up at Ben, the security guard. “Hi Ben”

“It's all right now,” he continued as I stood up and immediately sat down.

“What is?”

“The roads outside. The plough's been through but the forecast says more snow later. You should get home as soon as you can.”

“Yeah. Thanks Ben. I'll do that.” I squinted at my reflection in the monitor screen, I was pretty sure that the doors ten, fourteen and twenty-three were imprinted on my right cheek. I put on my boots, picked up the suitcase and hangover cure. The bathroom mirrors told me the worse. How Ben could keep a straight face was

beyond me – I guess this sort of thing happens all the time. Ten minutes later after some careful walking I got to the gym for a shower. The change of clothes in the suitcase proving useful.

After relaxing at the gym too much, I submerged into the dazzling daylight reflecting off the snowy roofs, gardens and pavements. It was past eleven and the wind began to pick up and the snow began to fall diagonally. I knew I had to get home as soon as possible but on driving past the supermarket I remembered the sweets for the gingerbread house. I groaned loudly but knew there really wasn't anything else to do but turn in.

The main roads were already being treated and continually ploughed but I was more concerned about the three miles off the main roads to get to the remote barn house – very low on the snowploughs' priorities. The window screen wipers were working fast to open a continuous view ahead. I sat tensely and kept as much distance as possible from other vehicles. I switched off the radio to further concentrate on everything around me. Here the snow was being blown sideways across the carriageway. What was normally a road where a sixty miles an hour limit was a necessity, was now down to twenty. Finally I saw the pub that signalled the lane home and I carefully took a right turn. I momentarily thought about abandoning my car at the car park but glimpsed a few fresh tracks disappearing down the lane to Abbotswold.

After a mile I came into my mother's village. I've come this far, I thought, I could spend five minutes talking to my mother. Five minutes ended up being fifteen minutes as I told my mother that things had to change, if only for Gemma's sake. My mother was surprisingly understanding and almost apologetic. I left the warmth of her house into a snow-lashing with hope, unnecessary instructions of the safest way to Gemma's – and a telling-off for worrying everyone. It was the telling-off that made me procrastinate further from switching my phone back on – my excuse of battery preservation was ready just in case.

The last two miles were treacherous. Perhaps some vehicle had passed through earlier but all evidence had long gone. The low stone walls were barely visible and there was a definite drift forming on one side of the lanes. The worse thing now would be meeting another car. Thankfully that didn't happen and I laughed out with relief when I turned into the barn's drive and arrived home.

There was no discreet sneaking in. I opened the door pushing my suitcase ahead, carrying my handbag and the shopping. A strong blast of snow encouraged me to move in a little quicker.

The fire was burning merrily and the children were playing with Gareth. Gemma was at the kitchen table collating items to go into gift bags. All turned to look at me.

“Glad you made it back Jess!” called Gareth. “Your mum just called to say you were on your way. This weather is pretty wild.”

“Don't I know it! It's crawling along on the main road.” I glanced up to see Gemma, who was looking at my suitcase. She didn't look up to greet me but continued with her task. “I'll dump this stuff upstairs and do any work that needs doing. Oh...and sweet children, here are the sweets for the gingerbread house!”

Hugh and Charlotte ran over to peep inside the bag before I put it up on the counter near Gemma.

“Thanks Jess,” he looked over to his wife who didn't react at all.

Although the clouds were still low and grey, the snowfall had eased off. Gemma wasn't being talkative and remained busy – the atmosphere was charged. I helped clean up without consulting her as to what needed doing and she offered no comment.

Gareth and I checked the lane outside. It was totally submerged in snow but it was a crisp snow that offered some friction underfoot. At five I drove very slowly over to my mother's to help set up. It may have been the last advent but this was a first for me. Before getting out the car I did the brave thing and switched on my mobile. Several messages came through from Scott and Gemma.

I checked Scott's messages first.

'I know you've switched off your phone, but we will speak tomorrow. S'

'Where are you? Just contact me to tell me you're safe. S'

There was also several missed calls. And finally...

'I hear you are back home. I will see you this evening. S'

Deciding to be a grown-up, I replied to him. 'OK. J'

There was one message from Gemma.

'Planning on going somewhere? G'

Scott would be at the last advent party this evening. At least I would get some closure this time with Scott. I was already nervous about what he would say.

My mother had been thinking.

True to form she had already thought of handing out assignments for next year. After Rufus had invited everyone in last Sunday, she'd felt lightened. She enjoyed letting something go. She definitely wasn't planning on letting everything go, but there was a light at the end of a tunnel she didn't even know she had been excavating.

It was now six o'clock and I sat with Hugh and Zoe in the lounge, frequently looking up neighbours joining us – no one was expected to come from further afield with all the snowfall.

The final Advent began. The fourth candle was lit and the lounge lights were dimmed. My uncle was dressed in a Dickensian hat. He stood in front of us and coughed.

“Is everyone comfortable?” he asked in the candle-lit lounge. “We are very glad to have you here on this Fourth Advent. Only four more sleeps until Christmas,” he beamed as the children squealed with delight.

“We've got a lovely line-up for The Christmas Carol,” he continued.

“Everyone who is reading a part has a script. If you haven't got a specific part, you read the Chorus part. Nice and loudly everyone.”

I saw movement by the door and this time it was Scott. He stood by the door staring directly at me. It was hard to read his expression in the dimness but my heart

was very easy to read.

“Everyone comfortable? Then I'll begin.” my Uncle said.

The play was a summarised version of Dickens's Christmas Carol. We all sat wherever we wanted. It was the most relaxed of all the Four Advents – a communal spirit of seasonal celebration.

As we began, I scanned the attendees and quickly whispered to Charlotte, “Where's Mummy?”

“She's at home still doing a shit load of stuff,” Charlotte replied nonchalantly. Her innocent unabashed reply gave me a sudden load of concern. I momentarily looked up wondering what I could do to help Gemma. I turned to one of my cousins who was sat near me. “Celia, I've got to go and sort something out... please take my script and play my part?” She readily agreed.

I passed Scott at the door. He smiled a little. “Giving up already?”

I stepped into the hallway holding his attention as he turned away from the lounge.

“It's Gemma,” I explained quietly, “she's not here and she never misses these things.”

I walked across the hall into the office. Scott followed me and asked, “What are you going to do?”

I pulled open some drawers in the sideboard, gathered up a few pairs of scissors and Christmas packing tape. Yesterday Gemma had remarked about the dreaded Christmas Eve last minute present wrapping. “I'm going to help her somehow.”

Scott was looking tired but still... undeniably gorgeous. And as much as I wanted to talk about where we were going, I had to go back for Gemma.

“I would like to come with you Jessie.”

“It's OK,” I was pleased, “but you must stay and enjoy the play.” Not believing a word I just said.

“No.” he said. “I'm not going to worry about you a second night in a row – that won't do at all.”

“It won't?”

“Why do you think I've come to...three out of four advent fests? Not that they aren't entertaining.”

“Because you're accompanying your mother?” Please don't say yes, I stared back.

“Really?” he said seeming closer than he was when he entered the room.

“When I heard you were back in the village well... the infamous Four Advents parties were a gift.”

“They were? That's really good.” I looked at what I was carrying and thought of Gemma. “How are your wrapping skills Scott?”

“Quick enough to keep up with you,”

“Well, as you see I'm armed with essentials. Gemma will panic if she can't find her own.”

The lanes were still holding out well. I had to get my focus off from Scott for a while

but it was near impossible to not watch him as he drove. It was mostly silent and our conversation was on various sections of the road ahead.

I had already made some plans on how to deal with Gemma.

The lights were on all over the ground floor. I turned to Scott. "Listen I better go alone first, I'll let you know as soon as I've dealt with her. I won't leave you out in the cold for too long."

"I'm banking on it." he smiled gently.

I smiled tentatively back.

I unlocked the door to the porch and walked through the main door undoing my coat as I entered.

"Gemma?"

"What!? Oh Jess! No, I can't come over! I'm..." she then burst into tears. "I know it doesn't matter... but it's just that I had all these plans and everything to do!" She cried some more as I gave her a hug. "And," she sniffled, "I can't do this tomorrow, you know Gareth's parents are here and that's even more...work!"

"Stop!" I shouted. Gemma's pained expression now had a dollop of surprise and she was quiet. "It will be all right but please just stop for a moment and come over here. Just for a minute" I held onto her hand and sat her down near the tree. Gemma sat upright, her legs twitching and her eyes were darting over to the kitchen.

"Why must everything on that bloody list be done?"

"What list?"

"*That* is not even funny! The List. The "I must do everything otherwise I have failed myself, my children, my husband, the whole community" List. That one!"

Gemma sighed heavily, her face still tense and body ready to rush over once more to the kitchen.

"Why do you hang up that old felt stocking every year?" I asked Gemma. She looked over to the tree.

"Well," she softened her face a little and she stepped over to the tree, carefully freeing the stocking from the branch on which it hung. "It was something that I made." She wiped her face. "And Dad asked us to put in messages for each other. Oh..." Gemma pulled at several pieces of small folded paper from inside the small stocking. She looked up at me suspiciously.

"I'll let you know when you can open those.." I put my hand on hers. "What does a perfect Christmas mean to you?"

Gemma opened her mouth to say something then closed it. For several moments she was quiet. All the time I was willing for her to get it. To get that she was enough. She was enough for her family. They would be happy with a fraction of what she'd been doing for Christmas. She should be happy with a fraction of what she'd been doing too. The quest for being the perfect mother and Christmas provider was overrated and was alienating her from her own family. Everyone appreciated her efforts in the local community but honestly, anyone who truly cared about her would say... STOP!

"That my children and Gareth have a wonderful happy time." Her eyes were watery and she looked down at her floury hands. One tear ran down her face – its trail cleaning off flour. "I guess the simple things of being together. Reading

together. Feeling safe. Feeling loved. Feeling excited. Having a happy mother would have been nice for us.” She looked up at me with a fairly messy face – tears, flour, runny nose wasn't her best look. “And a sister who didn't sod off every Christmas might have helped me put things into some sort of perspective. And when I saw your suitcase...I knew! I knew you would do it again!” The tears were really flowing now. “But then I thought...I drove you to it. But Jessie...I'm really glad you're here.”

“You weren't to blame. I was going to go but there was more to it besides Christmas.” I thought of Scott waiting outside. “I'm a minimalist. At least at Christmas. We were overdosed at Christmas but we weren't given what we really needed. Time to enjoy it. Dad died. No more time with him. Mother didn't value or notice what Dad's role was at Christmas. He was the one with the stories. He sat with us as we watched Christmas movies. He took us to Santa's Grotto. Ice-staking. He took us on walks when we were getting under Mum's feet. He was the lucky parent in many ways.” It wasn't my job to cry so I made myself stop.

I touched the felt stocking. “They're numbered.” I said distinctly.

“OK. Number One.” she started to read. “Stitches could be neater on this stocking and it's perfect.” She smiled to herself and sniffed.

“Number Two.” She unfolded it. “You've got three great children – PS They don't like mince pies.”

“Good to know,” Gemma nodded.

“Number Three, You are married to a saint. Seriously.”

“Yes, he is isn't he?” she turned to me with her eyebrows raised. I nodded back smiling.

“Number Four,” She laughed. “You're the perfect sister for me.”

“Number Five. It will be easier if I just do it myself.” Gemma paused. “I don't understand.”

“You said that to me when I asked if I could help you.”

“I did not!”

“Oh yes you did...Mother!”

We laughed and giggled out loud and as that petered out there was an air of healing around us. We had both sunk back into the sofa but the relaxing few seconds were unfamiliar to Gemma and she jumped up. A split second later I was standing too.

“Right.” I said “I know you are coming to the end of a very long unnecessary list.”

Gemma stood up straighter and nodded firmly, “Yes...”

“So even I can see that you've got to finish before the in-laws come. Please put me and Scott to work,” I said.

“Scott?” Gemma puzzled. “Where is he?”

“Hold on!” I ran to the door and Scott was already waiting with all the present-wrapping paraphernalia. I took it off him.

“OK?” he asked quietly as he removed his shoes.

“Much better.”

“We've got present wrapping equipment.” I showed her our wares.

“Over there. Three huge bags. One for each child. Labels and paper here.” She opened one of the numerous kitchen cupboards and pointed. She promptly went back to icing the Christmas cake.

Scott spied the cake. “I thought that...” he said quietly as we collected the bags and placed them on the carpet nearest to the sofas.

“I know, I know.” I whispered back, “she got way behind her schedule because she is human.” I shrugged and pulled a face. We sat down on the carpet and took in the number of gifts to be wrapped.

“Hey Gemma...” I called over. “Do you have any particular preference to how we...”

“Couldn't give a monkey's!” She said. Then added in a controlled and only slightly strained voice, “but as nicely as possible in the time you've got please.”

“Let's see if we can get this lot done in 30 minutes.” I looked down at my watch. “Let's go.”

We sat together hunched over the gifts. Lending each other our fingers and smiles, we made a good team as we finished the huge heap of presents.

“Twenty six minutes! What next?”

“Oh,” Gemma was rolling out the pastry for mini-quiches. “You've finished. Oh, that's great. Thank you. Next...”

Gemma exhaled, first meeting my eye and then looked over to spot of the laden work surfaces. “That damn gingerbread house.”

“Right” I glanced over at Scott for support. “Is there any particular...design Gemma?”

“Yes. Well...no.” she smiled to herself. “There is a plan but honestly it doesn't need to have a perfect symmetry – like Scott's new house. Please just put it together so it resembles a house and stick all the sweets on it. I swear if I see another photo of a gingerbread house posted on facebook...”

I looked at the gingerbread pieces to construct the house. “We'll put it together... but you know, sticking the sweets on would keep the children happy and occupied for about fifteen minutes tomorrow morning. I'll help them.”

Scott whispered, “We'll help them.”

Gemma pursed her lips a little. “OK. That sounds like a sensible idea.”

Scott and I fell silent as we moved over from the wrapped presents and sat at the kitchen island, fully aware of Gemma's fragility. Instead of talking, we whispered and charaded instructions to each other.

“I am the foreman here,” I reminded Scott again as he held the last piece of roof to the house, “don't let go too early.”

“Not a chance...” he smiled up at me.

A few moments passed.

“Please Scott. Just tell me what's going on.” I needed to know how he was feeling and what he was thinking.

We were both looking at the gingerbread house. Watching the caramelised sugar cool.

“I've been trying to tell you but the only thing you hear is what Rufus says. I

can't blame you for that, years ago he made me believe that you were his. Given our sparring it wasn't hard to believe that you weren't interested. Rufus couldn't compete so well against me on the field and you were his perfect weapon to play against me off the field.”

I heard my heart beating loudly. “So Rufus was being yet again Rufus?”

Scott nodded. “As for the house. Yes, I want to settle down and after some probing questions from Jonathan's parents, I did mention that there was a local girl...”

“So...all those years ago. You weren't interested in Gemma?”

“What? No. Of course not. Not that she isn't lovely...but it was always you.”

“Wow...” my eyes were watering up.

“I'm crazy about you Jessie. Always have been and now...I'm not going anywhere.” he whispered over the gingerbread roof.

“That's good...that's very good.” I wanted to kiss him right then but there was a table with a lop-sided gingerbread house in-between us. I was suddenly aware of the quietness from the other side of the kitchen and looked over to see Gemma smiling with her hands on her hips looking over at us.

Scott coughed and then said to Gemma, “So...what do you think?”

“Well, “ Gemma smiled at both of us, “I'm not sure if you want to know what I think.”

“What do you mean?” I protested, “This is a great house.”

“Oh yes.” she nodded, “Yes the house is great.”

Gemma just smiled and turned back to her work.

Scott looked over to me again, reached over to touch my hand and whispered. “Rumbled.”

One hour later Gareth returned home with three tired children to a clean and tidy house, a freshly showered wife, an exhausted sister-in-law and future brother-in-law. (Although he hadn't asked me yet...some things you know are just going to happen.) Gareth's whole aura seemed to change in front of us – absolutely nothing to do with the tidiness of the house.

The children were quickly put to bed by Gareth and Gemma and as they never came back down again we presumed that they went to bed immediately afterwards. Scott and I were curled up together on a sofa with an orange glowing fire and the lights of the Christmas tree. The snow was falling steadily outside.

“Scott”

He kissed me. “Jessie”

“Tell me about your plans for the house.”

“I have some ideas but no plans. I'm happy to discuss any suggestions you may have.”

“You'll be lucky if I'm the only one who has some suggestions. Just giving you warning.”

“Well...it's going to be perfect.”

I winced at that word – my sister and I were battered and bruised by that impossible quest.

Scott brushed my warm face with his warm fingers. “Perfect for us.”

I smiled. “Sorry...” that stupid tear was surfacing again and I looked away from Scott. “It's just been...a crazy time for me – especially this advents thing. I've been avoiding it for so long. I believed that I'd changed before moving back here. Then I thought I hadn't. Now I know I'm changing into the person I was meant to be.”

“I know.” After a few moments he then asked me. “Have you opened any of the windows on your advent calendar?”

“Hmm...” I let my head fall backwards into the back of the sofa as I realised for sure that he was the giver of the gifts. “Not until very early this morning. And coincidentally, the hangover cure was also used.”

We laughed and I snuggled into his warm neck and we held each other tight. I felt there and then that I was changing further.

“You're...” I struggled to find the right word for someone who had liked me when I was a confused teenager, never forgot me when I was away, and who was still crazy about me when I returned a confused adult. There had to be another word. Any word but that one. “Damn it Scott, you're perfect!”

The following year, and the Saturday before the First Advent.

“This wreath isn't as good as theirs last year!” the front door was open as I called over to Scott. I held the homemade wreath at arm's length against the door. I rotated it to see if it would enhance its appearance.

He left the kitchen and walked over to take a look at it. “It's great. It's even better because you made it.”

I looked at him questioningly. “Really?” I said looking at its imperfect symmetry.

“Yes... and it suits the house.”

“How?” I eyed him suspiciously.

“When someone comes to the front door of our home, they will think. Now, I wonder if the inside of this house resembles this wonderfully charming wreath... which clearly has not been bought from a shop...” he didn't seem to make any effort not to smile. “Seriously, I love it.”

“But it's lacking... perhaps someone coming to the door would think we had no furniture inside.”

Scott stood behind me and kissed my neck, “well... that wouldn't be too far from the truth.”

“Well, I could call Gemma for her opinion – I'm sure she'll give it anyway.” I looked at it further, “I think a red velvet ribbon would improve it.”

“Yes, maybe.”

“I don't suppose you have any stashed away somewhere?” I turned my head

and raised my eyebrows at him. Nothing surprised me, he came back with interesting items from his shoots all the time.

Scott looked blankly back at me and pulled me towards him. “Do I have some velvet ribbon? Listen, we could go and buy some tomorrow.”

“OK,” I laughed, “it's a date. I think I'll wait until then before I hang it up.”

“No! Absolutely no,” said Scott. “You wanted this up before the first advent and I think it's beautiful. Just think of it being organic – every neighbour, dog-walker, rambler and every learner driver will see it evolve into something even more beautiful.”

I eased into the Advents time with a heightened sense of self-preservation - move with caution. With the same sense, Gemma eased out of the madness. First on her list was always a question – Am I, Gareth or the children having enjoyment from this activity? She was learning to do what was absolutely necessary and what gave the most enjoyment. Once maligned by her, she has discovered the delights of ordering gifts over the internet – particularly homemade goods, just made by other people in their homes.

My mother helped Gemma too – she dropped three of the four advent parties from her home. This was decided by the newly-formed Village Advents Circle – naturally she is the Chair. The first advent party would be at mother's. The Olorenshaws took the second (keeping it in the family). Rufus insisted that his family would have the carol singing one. And the final one would be up for grabs via name pulling from a woolly hat.

But surely as winter follows autumn, my mother's advent wreath would always reign supreme in the village.

The End