

The *Sunday Times* Top Ten Bestseller

Katie
FFORDE

Staying
Away
at
Christmas



An exclusive digital short story

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Katie Fforde

Staying Away at Christmas

‘IF YOU COULD just stop moaning for a minute and keep a look out for the turn,’ said Miranda to her eldest daughter, ‘I don’t want to miss it.’ She was creeping down the Devon lanes looking for the holiday home they’d had such fun in that summer. It was only four o’clock in the afternoon but it was already dark. And these winding country roads were bad enough to navigate in the light. ‘I know you don’t want to be here, you’ve told me, but could we at least get there before we have the whole argument again?’

Isa, who was sixteen, sighed. ‘I just

think if we couldn't go to Granny's it would have been better if we'd stayed at home for Christmas. Then at least we'd be able to see our friends.'

'I know, darling, but we're here now. Is Lulu still asleep?'

Isa looked over her shoulder at her sister. 'Yup. Shall I wake her?'

'Let's get there first.' Miranda glanced at Isa, feeling guilty for what could have been the wrong decision. 'We'll make it fun, really we will.'

Isa grunted. 'Well, it wasn't all that great at Dad's last year.'

'You got lovely presents, though,' said Miranda, secretly relieved that the gifts showered on her daughters by their father and his new wife didn't make it a

great Christmas.

Isa sighed. 'Yeah.'

'Are we nearly there yet?' came a voice from the back seat. Lulu had obviously woken up.

Isa giggled. 'Silly! And yes we are, if we don't go wrong.'

Miranda relaxed a little. Now Lulu was awake, Isa would be less teenagerish, although at sixteen, she was entitled to be.

'I think it's here.' She slowed to a stop by a narrow turning, barely visible from the road. 'Do we agree? This is the last turn?'

'Yes!' yelled Lulu, filled with ten-year-old confidence. 'There's the white

stone in the hedge!’

‘Well spotted, Lu,’ said Isa, and Miranda turned into the lane.

After what felt like at least a mile of uneven driveway, they pulled up in front of a converted barn, framed by two little bushes with fairy lights on them. The light above the door was on, and there was a wreath on the door.

‘Oh wow!’ exclaimed Miranda as she struggled with the key. ‘Sheila’s really made it Christmassy.’ As the door opened she said, ‘Come on girls, it’s lovely and warm inside.’

Together they went into the hall and from there into the huge room which was a kitchen first, a sitting room in the

middle and a dining room at the end. The kitchen was separated by a half wall so you could cook and still chat to people in the sitting room but you didn't have to look at the dirty dishes while you ate. In the summer they'd kept the French doors at the end open and watched the swallows in the evenings. It had been a brilliant holiday.

‘It looks amazing!’ said Lulu, running into the place that, ever since the summer, had somehow felt like it was theirs. ‘I wasn’t expecting a Christmas tree!’

Miranda wasn’t either, although Sheila, the woman they’d hired the house from, had said she’d do her best to make it Christmassy. There was not only a tree

but other decorations as well, and with the several sets of fairy lights which Miranda had packed, they'd soon make the house festive.

It was hard being a single parent at Christmas when everything on television and in every magazine assumed everyone was part of a family with two parents. It was all right – sort of – when they could go home to Miranda's parents because they recreated something similar to the Christmases Miranda and her sister had shared as a child. But that year her parents had been invited to spend Christmas with old friends and when Miranda discovered this, and that her mother was planning to refuse, when

really, she yearned to have a Christmas off, Miranda said she was taking the girls away and it would be a great adventure.

The girls had not been enthusiastic but eventually Miranda's best friend had said, 'You know what? You go through a lot of Christmasses in your life – some are better than others. Get over it.'

Now, Isa volunteered to light the wood burner while Miranda and Lulu chose bedrooms and got the cases upstairs. They were still doing this when Isa called urgently up the stairs.

'Mum! There's a car in the drive!'

As the drive was only for their house, Miranda came downstairs. There would be a knock on the door, someone

would be lost and she'd have to try and remember the way back to the main road.

There was no knock. The door opened and a teenaged boy, a shock of dark hair that was at once modern and romantic, and made him look like he should be famous, came in.

‘Oh!’ he said. ‘What are you doing here?’

Isa, who was wearing long woollen tights and a very short skirt, hooked one leg round the other in a gesture she'd had from childhood. ‘We’re, like, staying?’

‘What’s the problem, Dan,’ said a deep male voice from behind.

‘It’s like, occupied.’

Miranda placed an arm around Isa's shoulders, not so much to protect her daughter from a dangerous stranger but to support her in the presence of a boy when she hadn't had at least three hours' notice.

'Hello!' she said, knowing she was embarrassing her daughter but unable to stand there in silence. 'Can I help?' She looked beyond the beautiful boy to the man, who was tall, dark and clearly tired. He was obviously related to the boy but the beauty had been eroded by time and care.

'We've rented this house for Christmas,' he said, his jaw firmly set. 'And you're in it.'

‘We’ve rented this house too. I mean, you’ve probably got the wrong house.’

‘No!’ He glared at her. ‘I’ve got very clear directions. This is definitely the right house.’ That he had made a mistake was *not* a possibility.

‘Why don’t you come in and we can sort this out?’ said Miranda, fairly sure she and her daughters were in no danger from more than irritation.

The man grunted. ‘Hang on, I’ve left my youngest in the car. She’s asleep. I’d better check she hasn’t woken up.’ He went back into the darkness.

‘Come in,’ said Miranda to the boy, unrepentantly hospitable. ‘I’ll put the

kettle on.’

The boy followed her into the kitchen. ‘It looks really Christmassy. I wasn’t expecting that.’ He scowled. ‘Dad bought a fake tree – we probably won’t need it.’

‘Dad’ appeared a few moments later with a girl of about seven.

‘Well, come in, do,’ said Miranda. ‘Then I’ll ring Sheila. She’ll know where you’re booked in. I know she has several houses she rents out.’

She felt confident that all would be well and was pleased that the fire was going and that the house looked so welcoming. It wasn’t her house of course, but she had a strong sense of ownership. It was why she’d wanted to

come here for Christmas. It was like home, having spent their summer holiday here, but without the depressing absence of her husband, which her real home still held, even after two years.

She smiled and held out her hand. 'I'm Miranda, this is my daughter Isa, and here's Lulu.'

The man frowned. He didn't seem happy to be put in a social situation with strangers when he was expecting to move into his holiday home. 'I'm Anthony Berkley, this is my son Dan. And this is Amy. But we won't take up your time having tea. I think maybe you should be getting your things together. I assure you, this house is ours for the

Christmas period.'

Miranda didn't react but carried on making tea. It would keep her going until the moment this man and his beautiful family had gone and she could open the wine. 'I'll ring Sheila –' she said.

'I'll do it,' said Anthony, pulling out his phone and clicking on a number.

As Miranda would have taken a while to find the number she felt obliged to forgive him for his high-handedness.

He moved out of earshot which Miranda found rather rude. It was a shared problem, after all. She decided to abandon the tea. She found the bottle of wine which was part of the welcome package and the corkscrew. Possession was nine tenths of the law and having a

glass of wine in her hand would definitely declare her ownership.

Dan stood still, watching what was going on but not speaking. Isa, who was probably dying inside, Miranda felt, was fiddling with some of the decorations. Although Miranda felt a strong antipathy to Anthony, once everything was sorted out and he and his family were in the right rental property, which would probably be nearby, it might be nice for Isa and Lulu if they arranged to meet up in a couple of days' time. It would be some sort of a social life and it would stop them missing their friends so much.

Anthony stalked back into the kitchen looking furious. 'She's coming over,' he

said, 'to sort things out.' He looked enviously at Miranda's wine.

Miranda considered offering him a glass but his referring to Sheila, who worked so hard to make everything nice for her tenants, as 'she' had annoyed her.

'Don't think,' he said, 'the fact that you have a glass of wine and I haven't will make it so I have to move and not you.'

Miranda took a sip. She might as well take advantage.

Lulu had sloped off to the living end of the room and put the television on and to Miranda's relief Isa went to join her. Amy soon followed and then Dan. A discussion about what to watch went on briefly and then a familiar theme tune

was heard followed by general sounds of approval.

Had the situation been remotely normal, Miranda would have said something along the lines of ‘It’s good they seem to be getting on’, but the situation wasn’t at all normal and Anthony’s prickly attitude wasn’t helping.

Shortly afterwards, the back door opened again and Sheila appeared, looking harassed, notwithstanding a trail of tinsel in her hair, which didn’t seem to have been put there on purpose.

‘I’m so sorry! And I would have been here sooner only we’ve got a family party going on.’

‘So sorry to have troubled you,’ said Miranda, who felt awful dragging her out here on Christmas Eve.

‘Can you sort it out, please?’ said Anthony, just the right side of rude. ‘This muddle? How two families seem to have been double booked into the same property?’

Sheila produced a book and put it on the kitchen table, then ruffled through the pages. ‘I’m terribly sorry,’ she said to Anthony. ‘I thought you’d changed your mind and cancelled.’

‘Why did you think that?’ he demanded.

‘You didn’t pay your balance. I asked you for it but you never sent it,’

said Sheila.

Anthony peered over her shoulder. ‘Oh God, I really thought I had.’

The hot air leaked out of him slowly but inevitably. Possibly sensing this, Sheila took the upper hand. ‘I’m afraid if I don’t get the balance, the booking isn’t confirmed. I sent you at least three emails telling you this.’

‘God, what a mess,’ he breathed. ‘I’m afraid my secretary left and I got a new computer at the same time. A lot of things fell through the cracks.’

‘Well,’ said Sheila, ‘I could offer you a little two-bed but I haven’t been in it since October and it hasn’t got a wood burner or a fireplace or anything.’

‘That doesn’t sound very festive,’

said Anthony and for the first time smiled somewhat ruefully.

Miranda felt a moment of relief – and triumph – that she had been in the right. And then the spirit of Christmas kicked in and she made a decision. Before she could change her mind she said, ‘You could stay here.’

Anthony looked at her, frowning slightly. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, there are four double bedrooms, you could stay here. We could both have the house for Christmas.’

‘We couldn’t possibly impose –’ Anthony began.

‘Otherwise it’s the two-bed with no

wood burner,’ said Miranda.

‘That I haven’t been in since October,’ finished Sheila. ‘You only need pay half each this way,’ she added, glancing at Miranda, possibly guessing that this was a consideration for her.

Anthony looked at Miranda as if for the first time. He’d done nothing but huff and puff since he’d arrived and now all the huff and puff had gone out of him. ‘We should ask the children,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ agreed Sheila, ‘but can I suggest you ask them all privately?’

‘Good idea,’ said Miranda. ‘I’ll ask Isa first, she’s my toughest.’

She went to where sofas were arranged round the wood burner. Isa was sitting cross-legged on the floor, her

back against the sofa. It was how she always sat. Dan was on the sofa and looked pretty relaxed. Lulu was on the other sofa, playing a board game with Amy, her long fair hair hanging down over it. Amy was giggling.

‘Isa? Can I have a word?’ said Miranda. ‘It’s important.’

Isa frowned but didn’t argue and got up. Miranda drew her into the ground floor bedroom she had been looking forward to sleeping in – it had such a sumptuous en-suite bathroom. ‘Isa, there’s been a mix up. There’s nowhere else for that other family to go. They won’t find a hotel now and I don’t know how far they’d have to drive if they went

back. Would you mind if they stayed here?’

‘What? And we’d have Christmas with them?’

Miranda nodded. ‘I’m not sure how we’ll work things out but there’s room for us all, in theory.’ She hesitated. ‘I know you think I’m mad but I really wouldn’t feel happy about turning them out into the snow – figurative snow –’ she added quickly, seeing her daughter’s eager glance towards the window. ‘But on the other hand, if it would ruin your Christmas to have them –’

‘No, it’s cool,’ said Isa with a flick of her hair. ‘Christmas has been pretty much ruined anyway since you and Dad split up. It’ll be different.’

‘Can you ask Lulu to come and see me?’ said Miranda, shocked that her daughter felt like that about Christmas, but relieved she had accepted the plan so easily.

Lulu came skipping in a moment later, a lock of hair now disguised as a Christmas decoration. ‘Yeah?’

‘Darling, those people have nowhere else to go. Would you mind very much if they stayed here and we all had Christmas together?’

‘No, that would be fine. It would be a bit “no room at the inn” if we threw them out now. And Amy is sweet and Isa fancies Dan.’

‘Lulu! How do you know? And don’t

say that to anyone else. Isa would die.’ Miranda couldn’t help feeling sorry for Isa, having such a perceptive sister.

‘She wouldn’t actually die you know, Mum.’ Lulu skipped off again.

Miranda went back to the kitchen. Sheila was there with Anthony. She assumed he’d spoken to his two.

‘Well?’ asked Sheila, ‘are your girls happy to share their Christmas?’

‘With strangers?’ added Anthony.

‘What do your two feel about it?’ said Miranda. She didn’t want to say her girls were fine about it if his children had said they’d die rather than share Christmas with them.

‘They’re fine,’ said Anthony, tightly.

‘Excellent,’ said Sheila. ‘Now, have

you got enough bedding? Do you need another put-you-up?’

‘We’ll be fine,’ said Miranda, ‘you go back to your party.’

‘But we might need a put-you-up,’ said Anthony. ‘I mean—’

‘There are four double bedrooms,’ Miranda reminded him, ‘and a put-you-up in a cupboard.’

‘How do you know?’ Anthony asked, apparently not pleased about her greater knowledge. ‘I mean about the cupboard?’

‘We stayed here in the summer.’

Anthony nodded. ‘Oh, OK.’

‘Are you sure you’ll be all right?’ said Sheila, addressing them both but

looking at Miranda.

‘We will. We’ll be fine,’ said Miranda sounding more confident than she felt.

‘I’m only up the hill if you need me,’ said Sheila.

‘We will be fine,’ said Anthony, much more convincingly.

After a little more protest, Sheila left, clearly eager to be off now the crisis had been averted.

‘Right, well, we’d better sort out bedrooms,’ said Anthony.

Dan wandered into the kitchen. ‘We’ve done it,’ he said. ‘Miranda will have the downstairs bedroom. Dad’ll have the room at the end, I’ll have the other double and, and the girls are all

going in together.’

Both adults looked at him in surprise. ‘I don’t think you should have a room on your own,’ said Anthony. ‘What about – Isa?’

‘She and Lulu always share at Christmas,’ explained Miranda.

‘Yeah, and they asked Amy if she wanted to go in with them. Isa said it was quite a big room.’

‘Right,’ said Anthony with a frown. He was obviously accustomed to doing the organising and now it had been done behind his back.

‘Why don’t you go and see where you’re sleeping?’ Miranda suggested to him. ‘I’ll unpack our car. I haven’t

brought the groceries in yet.'

'We're getting hungry,' said Dan.

'Then help Miranda with her stuff,' said Anthony. 'You don't mind if he calls you Miranda?'

'Of course not.'

Miranda was a little embarrassed by the amount of food she'd brought, given that the shops would be open the day after Boxing Day and when she'd gone shopping, she'd only been shopping for three. But filling the house with food – be it her own home or this temporary one – made her feel more Christmassy. She didn't need to do it when they went to her parents' because her mother was of the same ilk and also bought far too

much.

She hoped that Dan, being a boy, and about the same age as Isa, wouldn't realise how much she had over-catered.

Her hope faded the moment she lifted the lid to the boot of her car.

'Wow, were you going to have a party?' asked Dan, hefting a large cardboard box.

Briefly, she considered making up a lie about her plans but abandoned them.

'Nope. I just got a lot of stuff.' She hefted a box of her own and followed Dan into the house.

She couldn't criticise his helpfulness. He carried on unloading her car while she stowed things, grateful that the capacious cupboards got it out of

sight quite quickly. She could hear giggling from upstairs and it made her smile.

Assuming Dan would go back to doing whatever other young men of his age would be doing in the circumstances, Miranda was surprised that he stayed in the kitchen, picking up bottles and cans at random. Then he opened the fridge and shut it again. ‘No turkey,’ he said. It wasn’t a question.

Miranda shook her head. ‘There are only three of us. I didn’t want to be eating it till the end of the holiday.’

‘No worries, we’ve got a turkey,’ he said.

At that moment, Isa and Lulu came

into the kitchen. ‘We’re hungry,’ said Lulu, ‘and so is Amy.’

Miranda put the oven on. ‘I brought a lasagne. It’ll probably be enough. I’ve got garlic bread and I’ll make a salad.’

‘You make it yourself?’ asked Dan.

‘Don’t be rude,’ said Anthony, appearing from upstairs, presumably having been wrestling with the put-you-up.

‘No, it’s a fair question,’ said Miranda, not at all offended. ‘Yes, I did. It’s all home-made.’

Dan nodded approvingly. Miranda felt relieved.

‘Dan? Would you mind getting our stuff in?’ asked Anthony. It was more of a command than a request.

Dan sighed but went.

‘I’ve got wine – and some champagne. Would you like a glass? Or are you happy with the red?’ Anthony was making an effort but Miranda could tell he wasn’t yet resigned to the situation.

‘I’m fine. And there should be enough to have with the lasagne.’

‘We won’t run out, I have a case of it. Red, I mean. And white, and ...’

‘Why?’ Miranda was suddenly worried that she was about to spend Christmas with an alcoholic.

‘I ordered a mixed case but didn’t have time to choose my favourites, so I just put the lot in the car.’ He raised his

eyebrows, possibly reading her anxious thought. 'I wasn't intending to drink it all, and Dan always has a glass at Christmas.'

Miranda, who had the lasagne and the garlic bread in the oven, warming, was starting on a salad. 'So, if you don't mind me asking, why did you come away for Christmas?'

He hesitated before answering. 'We usually go to my sister's but this year she was also inviting her old friend, newly single, and on the lookout for a husband. I'm not in the market for a mother for my children just now.'

Miranda felt herself blush and opened a cupboard door at random, to hide her embarrassment. How awful if

he thought she was on the lookout for a husband. And what had happened to his wife? There was no polite way of asking.

‘So, what about you?’ he said.

Miranda went back to grating carrot. The salad, if it was to feed six instead of three, would have to be substantial. ‘Oh, we usually go to my parents’ but they wanted to spend Christmas with friends this year.’ Without thinking, she went on, ‘If we’d just stayed at home it would have felt lonely without – my ex-husband.’

‘So he’s still alive then?’

‘We’re divorced. Two years ago. I don’t miss him at all but I do miss being

a proper family.’

‘I do miss my wife but she died a long time ago, when Amy was a baby.’ His expression became set, reminding Miranda of how he had been when he had arrived. ‘Please don’t feel obliged to express your deep compassion – we’re fine as a unit, we don’t need to “complete it” by adding a stranger.’

‘Right,’ said Miranda, and looked in the fridge to find the celery she knew she’d packed. She was offended although she knew she shouldn’t be. It hadn’t occurred to her to make a move on him because he was a widower. She didn’t want a new relationship herself – life was tough enough holding it all together for the children without adding

a random man who could cause all kinds of trouble.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said a couple of moments later. ‘I’ve been under a lot of stress lately.’

She looked at him, impressed by his quick, sincere apology that came with an endearingly shy smile. ‘It’s OK. And don’t worry. I’m not looking for a relationship either. I have enough on my plate.’

The smile broadened. ‘Now we’ve got that out of the way, I’d better go and wrap some presents.’

Alone in the kitchen Miranda thought, yes, it was Christmas Eve and you’re a man. You will have presents to

wrap at the last minute. Her ex-husband had been spectacularly bad at present buying and Isa had always done his wrapping.

Miranda had finished making the salad and taken her glass of wine into the sitting room. She was enjoying the guilty pleasure of watching a celebratory special when Anthony appeared.

‘Sorry to disturb you, but have you seen Amy?’ It was not a casual enquiry. He looked worried.

‘She’s probably with my girls. Have you asked them?’

‘Of course,’ he said shortly and stalked away.

She was off the sofa and after him in

seconds. ‘There’s a big cupboard on the landing. Have you looked in there?’

‘Yes,’ he snapped. Dan appeared in the hallway. ‘You should have kept an eye on her!’ said Anthony.

‘Excuse me, but you’re the dad here, Dad!’ said Dan.

‘I can’t be everywhere!’

‘Well nor can I! And it’s not fair to blame me because Amy’s gone missing. Again!’

‘She has a habit of wandering off on her own,’ said Anthony. ‘She’s always very surprised to find that we’ve been worried sick. I’ll ring her friends’ parents and see if she’s been in touch and said anything.’

He got out his phone and began

scrolling through his address book. Dan scowled at his father, obviously just as concerned.

Isa and Lulu appeared at the top of the stairs looking anxious. Miranda hurried upstairs to join them.

‘Have you found her?’ Isa asked.

‘I didn’t mean to.’ Lulu’s voice caught on a sob.

‘What’s the matter, darling?’ said Miranda quietly. ‘If you know anything, tell us. No one’s going to be cross.’

‘I’m sure it’s nothing to do with you, Lu,’ said Isa, trying to be comforting.

‘I shouldn’t have told her –’

‘Excuse me!’ Anthony called up the stairs. ‘If we’re discussing Amy, could

you please involve me?’

Miranda threw him a look and then returned her attention to the girls. He was desperately worried and it made him angry. She wanted to protect her girls from it if she could. ‘Have you any idea where Amy might be?’ she asked.

Isa shook her head. ‘Not really.’

‘We were telling Amy about how wonderful it is here. I mentioned the look-out point,’ Lulu said, fighting tears. ‘Amy got up ... we thought she’d gone off to find Dan. You don’t think she’s gone there do you, Mum?’

‘OK, we’ll go and tell Anthony about this.’

Anthony listened while Isa explained what had happened. It was to his credit,

Miranda thought, that he didn't shout.
'OK, can you tell me how to get there?'

'It would make more sense for me to go,' said Miranda. 'I know where it is.'

'Amy is my child! I'm responsible for her!'

Anthony obviously didn't think it was so necessary to keep his temper when he was talking to Miranda.

'But I know where she might be.'

'Then we'll both go,' said Anthony.

'Shall I come, Dad?' said Dan.

Anthony considered. 'No, you stay here and take any calls from her friends' parents. I've left so many messages –'

'I could do that, if you like,' suggested Isa.

Anthony shook his head. ‘No. If she came home, it would be nice if Dan were here.’

The plan agreed on, Miranda hurried into her boots and coat, whilst Lulu and Isa hovered beside her.

‘Try not to worry, girls. We’ll find her, I’m sure. Now keep the fire going, Isa, we’ll need it when Amy comes back. Oh, and make sure the lasagne doesn’t burn.’

‘I’ll take care of that,’ said Dan.

After everyone had promised to call the moment there was news, Miranda and Anthony headed off into the night, torches in their hands. Anthony agreed to go in the direction of the village and then

if he didn't find her, he was going to drive round the lanes. Miranda was headed for the point.

Miranda didn't much like the dark. It wasn't a real phobia but at home she always made a point of putting a light on in her bedroom before she went to bed so she wouldn't be going into a dark room on her own. She had a time switch on lamps in the sitting room too, so no matter how early the evenings were drawing in there would always be a light on when she got home from work. But now she set off up the path as fast as she safely could. She felt sick and her mouth was dry. She didn't know Amy, she'd exchanged very few words with her, but

she was a child and was lost – and because her own daughter might be inadvertently to blame for her disappearance, Miranda felt responsible. She must do everything she could to help.

Miranda knew where she was going. The girls had told her about this little ruined building up on the cliffs that had a wonderful view of the village and the harbour beyond. Then they'd taken her there with a picnic. Isa had pretended to be blasé about it but Lulu had loved it. She had taken a rug up there one day and spent hours looking out at the world and reading. If Lulu had told Amy about it and Amy was prone to running off it might easily be where she had headed.

As she walked, her eyes grew accustomed to the light level, and it didn't seem nearly so dark. There was a moon somewhere behind the clouds and a few stars pricked through.

Miranda turned off the torch and put it in her pocket. She wanted both hands free in case she stumbled and needed to stop herself falling. She wished she'd brought a walking stick – there was a collection of them in the utility room along with the torches. Just for a second she allowed herself to think about how she would feel if she had to come back alone. She was sick with worry now but how much worse to be sick with despair.

She reached the brow of the hill at last and had to walk the same distance again to get to the building. She could see its outline now and thought she glimpsed a light in it. Then she realised it was probably just her imagination. She was hoping to see a light, that was all.

When she was on the flat she started to run. She had to know as soon as possible if Amy was in the look-out building. If she wasn't then she, Miranda, should be somewhere else, not wasting her time on random notions.

As she got closer she realised there was indeed a light but it was intermittent and even when it was on it was very faint. She tried to go faster but she

wasn't a runner and already sweat was running down her spine. She was hampered by her heavy coat too.

At last she got there. She dug for her torch in her pocket and switched it on. 'Amy?' she called, as she wriggled through the narrow doorway.

Miranda could see the little girl crouching there, her eyes wide and frightened. She was clutching one of those key-ring torches you had to hold on. 'Hello,' she said huskily.

'Are you all right?' asked Miranda.

'Not really,' said Amy after a few seconds and Miranda could tell she'd been crying. 'I came here because it sounded so lovely and then I remembered I didn't know the way

back.'

'Well, you did the right thing, staying put,' said Miranda, rummaging in her pocket for a sweet. 'Here,' she said, handing her one.

Amy took it. 'Is everyone very angry with me? I know I shouldn't have done it but sometimes I feel I have to be on my own.'

'You could have been on your own without scaring us all,' said Miranda, trying to sound calm.

'I know, but it's better if I can just go.'

'Not for your dad,' said Miranda.

Amy put her head in her hands and began to cry.

Miranda longed to take her in her arms and hug her, tell her how no one was angry and would just be pleased she was found. But she didn't know Amy and didn't know how Anthony would react. Some parents did want to beat their children about the head with relief when they reappeared after an absence. She wasn't like that herself but it was a common reaction.

'Let's tell him you're found, shall we?' Then she realised, in spite of all their plans and precautions, she'd forgotten to put his number in her phone. She sent Isa a text instead asking her to tell Dan, who could tell his father.

'Shall we go back now?' Amy

nodded.

The two of them walked along the path that Miranda had run down just a short time before. How different this journey back was! She just hoped that Anthony had got the news that Amy was safe by now.

‘Dad does get angry,’ Amy said quietly, a little later.

Miranda chose her words. ‘When someone you love very much goes missing you do get angry because you’re so worried about them.’

‘I hate it when they shout.’

‘Who?’

‘Dad and Dan. I hate it when there’s a row.’

‘Was that why you went? Because

they were rowing?’ She hadn’t heard anything herself, but she’d been engrossed in *Celebrity Come Dine with Me Christmas Special*.

‘They were going to. I could hear Dan getting rude and Dad hates that.’

Miranda didn’t have sons but felt that like daughters with their mothers, there was bound to be challenging behaviour. Which meant rows. ‘I think if you came home safely they’d be so thrilled, they wouldn’t think of rowing.’

‘Dad will shout at me.’

‘I won’t let him,’ said Miranda rashly, wondering what on earth her chances were of preventing a man she didn’t know reacting in a way that was

normal for him.

‘Could you stop him?’ Amy sounded doubtful too.

‘I might not be able to stop him entirely but I promise you I’ll get him to stop really quickly. Once I explain how you feel and it being Christmas, he won’t want to shout.’

The little girl shivered and Miranda put her arm round her. ‘Let’s hurry!’

‘If you promise it’ll be all right?’

‘I promise,’ said Miranda but her fingers were crossed in her pocket. She wasn’t in a position to promise really but she wanted to get Amy back to her family as soon as possible.

Amy held the torch as they increased their pace. Miranda felt her phone

vibrate and saw there was a text from Isa. She paused just long enough to read it. ‘Dan’s dad knows she’s safe. See you soon.’

Suddenly there was a gust of wind, blowing away the clouds and revealing a bright full moon. Stars appeared too and one, fairly low, seemed to settle across the bay, shining over the hills.

‘Look, Amy!’ said Miranda. ‘Look at that star!’

‘It’s like the Star of Bethlehem!’ Amy said in awe. ‘It’s magic!’

They stopped to look at it, Miranda with her arm round Amy’s shoulders and just then, the sound of singing came wafting up the valley. It took a few

moments but then Miranda recognised it.

‘It’s “Once in Royal”,’ she said.

‘Yes! I wish it was “O Little Town of Bethlehem”,’ said Amy.

‘They might sing that in a minute. I think they’ve just come out of the pub. Let’s walk along to their rhythm – it’ll get us home quicker.’

The sound grew nearer and they heard rich male voices singing familiar melodies. Amy took hold of Miranda’s hand and although she couldn’t be certain, she felt the little girl was happy again, her anxiety swept away by the moonlight, the twinkling stars and the sound of carols. As the party of carollers grew nearer they could see pinpricks of light. They were obviously carrying

lanterns. It was, Miranda thought, the perfect way to celebrate Christmas Eve.

They were on the way down the drive, nearly back, when Miranda felt Amy freeze beside her.

‘You promise I won’t get into trouble?’ she said desperately, clinging to Miranda’s hand, her voice tense with anxiety.

‘Sweetheart,’ said Miranda. ‘I can’t absolutely promise there won’t be – say – one or two shouts, but then it will be over. Your father will be thrilled to see you. That I absolutely guarantee.’

Still the little girl wouldn’t move.

‘Come on, honey, you stand behind me.’ Without giving Amy more time to

get anxious Miranda dragged her forward and opened the door. Then she thrust her behind her. ‘Amy’s back!’ she called. ‘I found her at the look-out point.’

Anthony appeared, mobile in hand. ‘She’s here!’ he said loudly into it and threw it on the stairs.

‘Now really,’ said Miranda, who could feel Amy pulling away behind her, ‘you mustn’t shout at her!’ She was looking intently at Anthony and for a moment caught a glimpse of the desperate father, worried sick about his daughter, drawing breath to relieve his tension by letting her know, loudly, exactly how worried he’d been. She held his gaze, willing him to take a few

seconds before speaking.

‘Amy, sweetheart, we were worried,’ he said calmly, and Amy threw herself into his arms.

Miranda had gone into the kitchen to give father and daughter time alone when she suddenly remembered the lasagne and garlic bread she’d put into the oven who knew how long before. It was unlikely Dan had remembered to do anything about it. She pulled open the oven door thinking that burnt offerings were the last thing people needed when she saw that the lasagne was golden brown and perfect. She pulled out the garlic bread and unwrapped the end. That wasn’t burnt either.

Dan, who had been greeting his sister in the hall, came in. 'I kept an eye on it for you. It should be OK.'

'Bless you! It would have been so awful if it had all been burnt.' Anthony came in just then. 'Dan has saved the day,' she said. 'Or rather the dinner.'

Anthony put his hand on his son's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. Whatever their differences had been they were over for the time being.

Miranda waited for a couple of moments. 'Where's Amy?'

'She's upstairs with the girls. Isa is giving her a bath.' Anthony sighed. 'I'll have to have a talk with her later. She's done this before and it's so terrifying. I'll never be able to thank you enough

for finding her.'

'It was just lucky I had an idea where she might have gone. Really, it was nothing.'

'Rarely, if ever, has that word been used so inappropriately,' he said and then smiled.

Miranda felt as if the sun had come out just for her. Her stomach flipped over and it was only with a huge effort of will was she able to remind herself that all this warmth was gratitude for finding his daughter. It wasn't personal.

'I think we should eat as soon as the girls appear,' she said, hoping she didn't sound as flustered as she felt.

'Give the girls a shout,' said

Anthony as Dan left the room.

‘You can relax now and have another drink. You deserve it. I see you have lemons – I’ll make you one of my famous hot toddies.’

Shortly afterwards he put a glass into her hand. ‘Now, go and sit down and rest. We’ll do dinner from here.’

She was nursing the drink which was so fantastically strong and lemony she could practically feel it killing germs as it went down her throat, when Isa appeared.

‘Well done, Mum, for finding Amy.’

‘Thank you, darling, but it was Lulu who gave me the tip. Is Amy OK now?’

‘Yeah, she’ll be fine. She and Lulu are playing happily – you know, little

girls' stuff.' She smiled at her mother, then said, 'Shall I set the table?'

This was almost unheard of. Setting the table was Isa's least favourite job and she usually had to be blackmailed or bribed into doing it. 'That would be lovely. I've got some Christmas napkins in one of the bags.'

'Will there be enough for tomorrow if we use them now?' Then Isa raised her eyes to heaven. 'Don't tell me – you've got two sorts.'

Miranda laughed. 'Really, my little napkin obsession is quite harmless.'

Her daughter laughed too. 'I suppose it is.'

Ten minutes later they were all seated

round the large, dining-room table. 'Well, this is very nice,' said Anthony, sounding, to Miranda's annoyance, slightly surprised.

Amy was in her dressing gown and everyone was eating the lasagne with enthusiasm, which gave Miranda a pleasant glow of achievement.

'What would you have done if we hadn't been here?' asked Dan.

'Sorry?' Miranda didn't think he was being rude but couldn't be sure. She had very little experience of boys. He'd been so helpful up till now.

'I mean, there'd have been a lot left over if we hadn't been here to eat it,' he said.

'There'd have been a lot left over

full stop,’ said Isa. ‘Mum always cooks too much. She can’t help it.’

‘Thank you, Isa,’ Miranda said good-humouredly.

‘I’m glad you made too much,’ said Amy.

‘So am I,’ said Anthony.

‘Me too,’ said Dan, with a surprisingly charming smile.

‘I think we should discuss our Christmas Day routines,’ said Miranda, wanting to move on from the lasagne.

‘Stockings, walk, then presents, then lunch,’ said Lulu.

‘We don’t have stockings,’ said Dan.

There was a gasp of shock from Isa and Lulu but Miranda was relieved they

didn't actually say anything.

‘Too much for Dad,’ said Amy. ‘He says he can’t be doing with such a commercialised myth.’

Anthony nodded. ‘I’m afraid that’s true.’

It had sounded like a direct quote. Miranda’s girls looked at each other with a mixture of absolute horror and compassion.

‘OK, so what do you do?’ asked Miranda.

‘Dad makes breakfast and then we go to my aunt’s,’ said Dan. ‘We open our presents and then have lunch.’

‘Before that there’s a row about the turkey,’ said Amy, with a shudder.

‘Aunt Flo puts it in the Aga at

midnight on Christmas Eve – before sometimes I reckon – and so by lunchtime it's turned to sawdust,' Dan explained, disapproval evident in every syllable.

‘Right,’ said Miranda.

‘Dad cooks a great breakfast though,’ conceded Dan.

‘I know Flo isn't a great cook but it's very kind of her to have us every year,’ said Anthony.

Dan sighed. This was obviously not a new argument.

‘What do you do after lunch?’ asked Miranda.

‘Wash up. It takes forever,’ said Dan.

‘Then we watch telly while the adults sleep,’ said Amy.

‘Sounds, like, really good,’ said Isa, catching Dan’s eye. He flicked his eyebrow in reply.

‘We’ll have to think up something that suits us all,’ said Miranda, shocked about the stockings herself. Her girls seemed to like them the best of all the Christmas rituals.

‘Yeah,’ said Dan with surprising firmness.

‘Have we all finished?’ said Anthony a few moments later. ‘Get the plates together, guys.’

‘Would anyone like pudding?’ said Miranda, having handed her plate to

Amy. 'I've got ice cream. I expect I could make some sort of sauce ...'

'I have some very nice cheese,' said Anthony.

'Oh, much better,' said Miranda. 'Will you lot be OK with cheese?'

'I'll have ice cream but I can get it myself,' said Lulu. 'Amy, would you like some? Shall we go and get it? We can put drinking chocolate on it.'

'It's nice for Amy to have some female company,' said Anthony when he'd brought in the cheese and biscuits and the younger girls were still making ice-cream concoctions in the kitchen.

'She does go to an all girls' school,' said Dan.

'I meant out of school,' said

Anthony. 'I've just remembered! There's a bottle of port in that case of wine. I'll get it.'

Aunt Flo may not have been much of a cook but her washing-up training must have been first class. The kitchen was clear in no time and Miranda was able to get her presents in from the car and retire to her bedroom. It was late, but she had a lot to do before she could go to bed. She'd have done it earlier in the evening if she hadn't had to help look for Amy.

There was the briefest knock on her door and her daughters came in. 'We're going to do stockings for them,' said Isa.

'Though we can't do one for

Anthony,’ said Lulu. ‘Too hard.’

‘And he doesn’t believe in them anyway,’ said Isa. ‘But Amy must have one. Poor little thing. She must have been terrified on her own, before you found her.’

‘And we can’t leave Dan out,’ said Lulu.

Having had a think, Miranda said, ‘OK. I’ve wrapped up what I’ve got for your stockings but I can’t remember what the things are. Except they will all be girly.’

‘We’ll just have to unwrap everything to see what we’ve got. We’ll do Dan first as he’s the hard one. Amy is easy,’ said Isa, taking control.

Miranda watched as her girls opened

the packages, tossing anything remotely male into a pile. They seemed to be enjoying this as much – or possibly more – as having the things for themselves.

‘It would be better if we didn’t try and fill the usual stockings,’ said Miranda. ‘I’ve got a couple of pairs of new socks. They won’t take so much filling.’

‘Good plan, Mum,’ said Lulu.

‘Can you get them?’ said Isa. ‘When we’ve done Dan’s we can easily do the others.’

Miranda found herself sacrificing her new toothbrush (after she’d found her old one was still in her washbag) and Isa came up with a face flannel. A

lot of what Miranda put in her children's stockings was edible and useful but Isa declared she would not put facial scrub into Dan's stocking.

'It's unisex,' said Lulu. 'Boys get spots too.'

'Of course they do!' said Isa angrily. 'But we don't want to draw attention to it! They've got, like, feelings!'

'I know!' said Miranda after they'd sat in silence for a few minutes. 'There was a little bottle of truffle oil I meant to give to Grandpa but forgot. I'm fairly sure it's still in with the groceries I haven't unpacked yet.'

'Perfecto!' said Isa. 'Go and get it.'

'Please!' said Lulu.

Isa gave Miranda the lopsided smile

that so often got her out of trouble.

Miranda went into the kitchen. The Berkleys were all watching television and didn't notice her rummaging in her box. She found the little bottle and went back to her bedroom.

‘OK,’ said Isa, after the girls had wrapped and filled Dan’s stocking. ‘Do you mind going out for a bit, Mum? We’ve got things to do.’

‘But this is my bedroom!’

‘I know, but currently it’s Christmas Central,’ said Lulu. ‘Out!’

Obediently, she left the room.

Much later, Miranda hung four, fat, red socks on the mantelpiece and admired the effect. The room was all so

Christmassy, partly thanks to Sheila's tree and decorations, but also because someone had lit a Christmas candle and the smell lingered. The fairy lights had been left on and it almost did look like a magazine Christmas. She smiled. It was all going to be very different but it was going to be fun. Having turned off the fairy lights, she went back to bed.

Miranda was awoken the next day by Lulu and the smell of cooking. She looked at her watch. It was half-past nine. It was unheard of for her to sleep this late, but she had been really tired.

Lulu was holding a cup of tea. 'Get up, Mum! There's breakfast and we're all waiting for you.'

Miranda sat up and took the tea. She could smell cooking but couldn't identify it. 'So what are we having?'

'Scrambled eggs and smoked salmon. I don't think I like smoked salmon do I?'

'You might like it now.'

'I'll try it. Now hurry up.'

'Should I get dressed? Is everyone dressed?'

Lulu thought about it. 'Yes, but you don't have to be. You'll be ages and we can't start anything until you get there. Just wear your dressing gown.'

Miranda's dressing gown was new, a Christmas present from her mother, she had chosen it herself. 'Oh, OK.'

She took the time to fluff up her hair and put on enough make-up to feel human, and went into the kitchen. She couldn't remember a Christmas that had started with a cup of tea and breakfast cooked by someone else. Her ex could hardly make toast.

Anthony was by the cooker. 'Happy Christmas,' he said, apron on and smiling. A million miles away from the man she'd first encountered yesterday afternoon.

'Happy Christmas back,' she said, aware that she was happy. It was all so different from the usual disappointments that Christmas sometimes brought with it. She didn't need a husband today.

‘I have a very limited repertoire,’ said Anthony, indicating the saucepan he was stirring eggs in, ‘but what I can do, I do well.’

Dan was buttering toast. The table had been set and someone had lit the wood burner. Miranda checked to see the stockings wouldn’t be scorched when she noticed there were now five. A silver spangled sock sat fatly beside its scarlet companions. She smiled.

‘More tea or coffee?’ demanded Dan.

‘Tea. Milk, no sugar. I don’t much like coffee.’

‘Coming up.’

‘He works in a restaurant

sometimes,’ explained Amy, bringing in a plate full of toast. ‘I couldn’t find a toast rack.’

‘That’s OK.’ Miranda could have told her where to find the toast rack but something about Amy suggested she was expecting criticism and she didn’t want to imply that toast on a plate wasn’t fine.

Dan then swooped in with three plates of scrambled eggs, one of them balanced on his arm. Anthony came in with two more and Lulu brought the last one. ‘This is mine,’ she explained, ‘with no smoked salmon.’

Miranda realised that Anthony must have cooked hers separately and appreciated the gesture.

‘OK everybody, eat it before it gets

cold,' he said. Having just sat down he got up again. 'Talking of cold, I have some fizz. Glass of fizz, Miranda?'

'Oh yes please,' she said. This was getting better and better.

'With or without orange juice?'

'Without.'

'Kids, you have to have it with Lulu? Do you like Buck's Fizz?'

'Never had it,' said Lulu, obviously impressed.

'But you like orange juice?'

'Oh yes,' she said enthusiastically.

Anthony was very skilful with the champagne and orange juice, Miranda realised. He adjusted the amount of each to suit each person. Amy, the youngest,

had orange juice with just a splash of fizz, enough to be festive but not enough to make her drunk. Isa, she decided, had probably had a touch too much fizz when she clapped her hands. ‘Stockings!’

‘We don’t do stockings –’ said Anthony.

‘We do,’ said Isa, ‘but I’m afraid you haven’t got one.’

‘They are only for the children,’ Miranda hurriedly explained, and then found herself presented with the sparkly sock. ‘Oh.’

‘This year we did one for you,’ explained Lulu. ‘And for Amy and Dan.’

‘Cool,’ said Dan, looking at his, slightly perplexed.

‘Can we open them now?’ asked

Amy.

‘ ‘Course,’ said Lulu.

‘We should all open them together,’ said Isa. ‘Otherwise it’s embarrassing.’

There was a short silence broken by the sound of rustling and paper ripping.

‘Thank you so much for this, girls,’ said Miranda, undoing a little packet. It had a box of false eyelashes. ‘Oh goodness. I have no idea how to put them on.’

‘Wait until after brekkie, Mum, I’ll show you,’ said Isa, undoing some heart-shaped Post-it notes.

‘These are lovely!’ said Amy, holding up a pair of earrings Miranda had bought for Lulu.

‘I have a toothbrush and some soap,’ said Dan, although he didn’t seem to mind.

‘Don’t forget to eat,’ said Anthony.

‘We usually open stockings in Mum’s bed,’ said Lulu.

‘It might have been a bit much, us all piling in,’ said Dan. ‘We haven’t known each other twenty-four hours, yet.’

Maybe it was the champagne, or the unexpectedness about everything, but breakfast was extremely jolly. When she’d initiated clearing up afterwards, Miranda said, ‘Presents?’

‘Actually,’ said Dan, ‘if you don’t mind, I’d really like to crack on with lunch?’

This was a bit a shock. ‘Aren’t I doing lunch?’ said Miranda.

Dan shook his head. ‘Na-uh. You didn’t even buy a turkey. We’ve brought one from home that’s been in brine. I’ve had enough sawdust turkeys.’

‘Dan is very foodie,’ said Amy, apologetically.

‘I even brought my own knives.’ Seeing Miranda’s bemusement he went on, ‘I read that in Elizabeth David – always take your own knife on holiday.’ He grinned.

Miranda stared at him for a few seconds thinking he was very strange but rather wonderful. ‘Oh, no, that’s fine!’ she said. ‘I don’t mind not cooking it,

I'm just falling into my default position. But I'm very happy to be galley slave and do the potatoes and things.'

She looked at Anthony for guidance.

He shook his head. 'I think the kids want to do it.'

'It is quite boring hanging round waiting for dinner,' said Isa.

'Oh,' said Miranda, not sure if she was offended or not. 'But you've got your presents to play with?'

'Mum!' said Isa, as if her mother was just the stupidest person on earth and shouldn't even attempt to make a joke.

'I'm going to be sous chef,' said Amy.

'I'll be in charge of sticking

plasters,’ said Lulu.

‘And what shall I do?’ asked Miranda.

‘We’ll go for a walk, in the direction of a pub, and leave this lot to it,’ said Anthony. ‘It’s OK, Dan’s a very good cook and a tyrant in the kitchen. And Amy has promised faithfully not to leave home without telling us again. We’ll come back in a couple of hours.’

While Miranda was getting dressed, including finding her thick socks and scarf, she lured Isa into her bedroom. ‘Are you sure you’re OK with this? Cooking your own Christmas dinner?’

‘Mum! I’m not a child. I can help Dan cook.’

Miranda opened her mouth and then closed it. It wouldn't do to ask Isa if she fancied Dan. She was fairly sure she did or she wouldn't be so obliging and helpful. 'OK, just checking.'

It took Miranda some emotional effort to leave a house full of children cooking Christmas lunch. She couldn't decide if it was a wrench or a liberation. It kept her silent for the first part of the walk, which, as it was uphill, was probably a good thing. Although it was lovely to be outside. It was frosty and cold but the sun was shining, giving the day a proper Christmas sparkle.

'Which way?' asked Anthony. 'You know the area.'

‘Over the fields and down to the shoreline. It means another walk uphill home but if we’re going to eat a huge meal it’s probably a good thing.’

‘I hope you don’t mind Dan taking over. He’s really interested in food and cooking and my sister is very territorial about her kitchen. Men are only allowed in to wash up.’

Miranda didn’t answer immediately. ‘I don’t think I mind at all. After all, even if it’s a disaster – and I’m sure it won’t be – it’s not like in the olden days when it was one of the few good meals to be had.’

‘It won’t be a disaster – he’s a very good cook – but you’re right. My sister

thinks the sky will fall in if the gravy isn't perfect.'

Miranda nodded. 'Actually I'm a bit fixated on gravy myself. It took me so long to learn how to make it, now I have, I get grumpy if I don't think it's perfect.' She paused. 'But only if I've made it. I'm very tolerant of other people's cooking.'

'I think something very bad would happen to my sister if Dan was allowed to cook the Christmas meal,' said Anthony. He paused. 'Miranda, I haven't thanked you properly for finding Amy. I was beside myself. As you've gathered she's run away before. I never know if I should be furious or just desperately relieved when I find her.'

‘So which are you?’

‘Both! The first time I’d sent her off to school with some other children and their mum and she just came home and hid in the garage. The cleaning lady found her. She did it again a bit later and last time we had a very long talk about how worrying it was and I thought I’d convinced her not to do it any more.’

‘She said it was because she hates rows. You and Dan –’

There was a short silence. ‘Ah. It’s tough to be a parent of a teenager without rows.’

Miranda sighed. ‘Tell me about it!’

‘I do try and accommodate Dan as much as I can – which was another

reason why I didn't want to go to my sister's this year. It wasn't fair on him. But he can be really stubborn sometimes.'

As Miranda remembered the main reason he hadn't gone to his sister's was because his sister had laid on an eligible female, she found herself laughing. 'It was a bit "out of the frying pan" though, wasn't it?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, you didn't go because your sister's friend was also invited and so you arranged to go away. And then you were forced to share a house with exactly the sort of person you'd travelled miles to avoid. Not that I'm all that eligible, too old and with baggage,

but you must see the irony.’

Anthony chuckled, a little reluctantly. ‘I’m not against meeting people in the ordinary way – by accident almost – but I hate being set up. Do you get set up by your friends who assume you must want another partner?’

Still giggling Miranda said, ‘No chance. There are very few single men about you know. It’s a quirk of nature, when men get divorced they find women ten years younger than themselves. A woman my age would only be able to aspire to a man in his late fifties or sixties. Nothing wrong with them, I’m sure, but frankly I’d rather not bother.’

‘Is that true?’ This seemed a

revelation to Anthony.

‘Yup. My ex-husband’s wife is ten years younger than me.’

‘And how old is she?’

‘Anthony! That is the same as asking me how old I am, which is very rude.’

‘I’d have put you at thirty-seven.’

This gave Miranda a jolt. Was he flattering her? If so, why? It surely couldn’t be because he genuinely thought she looked eight years younger than her true age. ‘I’m forty-five,’ she said. ‘There, you tricked me into telling you.’

‘I’m fifty,’ said Anthony.

‘And your sister’s friend? Thirty-six?’

He nodded. ‘Probably. But not my type at all.’

‘Do you have a type?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know. It’s hard to say. You’re either attracted to someone or you’re not.’

Miranda laughed again. ‘I think I feel sorry for your sister. Trying to find you a nice woman, mother for your children, and you refuse to co-operate.’ She allowed him a second to take this in and then said, ‘If we follow this path down here, we can walk along the shore and end up at the pub. It might not be open, of course.’

He took her arm and laughed. ‘But it might.’

It was and it was heaving with people. Decorated with paper chains

and paper balls, with a huge Christmas tree in one corner, there were fairy lights along every beam. The noise of people talking and laughing almost drowned out Noddy Holder and his pals. There was a tempting smell of wine and spices. Miranda was very glad they'd come.

Anthony fought his way to the bar and came back with two drinks to where she was standing, rammed between two families who had a year's catching up to do. 'I forgot to ask you what you wanted. I got you a mulled wine. It smelt so delicious.'

'Thank you. It's perfect.' She took the glass.

'Cheers and Happy Christmas!' he said. They clinked glasses.

Two drinks later they thought they ought to be getting back. The tide was further out and the wading birds made the most of the newly revealed food source. They wandered slowly along, having decided lunch wouldn't be ready for some time and not wanting to put stress on the cooks by too early a reappearance.

Miranda slipped on some mud and Anthony caught her. When she was steady on her feet again they set off, with his arm still firmly round her.

Maybe I shouldn't have had that second drink, Miranda thought, as they wandered along, but we seem to have come out of the pub more of a couple

than we went in.

‘Do you know, by coming to Devon I’ve missed three Christmas parties,’ she said happily. ‘Three opportunities to feel patronised by married couples.’ She paused. ‘I’ve got one I can’t avoid though.’

‘Oh? New Year’s Eve?’

‘I don’t mind the friends we go to for New Year at all. I mean, she’s my best friend and it’s always lovely. No, it’s the work do I’m dreading.’

‘After Christmas? Unusual!’

‘I know! But there wasn’t a date suitable before and it’s a dinner dance. Can you imagine anything worse? But it’s terribly frowned on if you don’t go.’

‘And you have to bring a plus one?’

‘That’s it. It’s always terribly awkward, everyone being in couples.’

‘I’ll go with you, if you like.’

Miranda stopped abruptly. ‘Don’t be silly, you don’t want to do that. Besides, I live in Bath. You probably live in North Yorkshire or somewhere equally miles away.’

He shook his head. ‘Bristol. It’s why we chose Devon – it’s not too far.’

‘That’s why we chose it too!’

‘So I’ll come to your works do with you.’

‘No, Anthony! You’d hate it!’

‘We can hate it together.’

‘It’s too much.’

‘Miranda, you seem to have

forgotten that you found my daughter. A slightly boring evening – which might well have its compensations – is the least I can suffer if it would make it easier for you.’

Miranda thought of the stir she would create, turning up with a very presentable man. None of the women would pity her for being single and the men wouldn’t hit on her because they thought she was desperate. ‘That would be really kind. It would be lovely of you.’

‘Then you and I shall both go to the ball!’

By the time they got back to the house they were both rosy cheeked and out of

breath. ‘That last bit was a bit of a killer but at least we can eat everything and not feel guilty.’

Anthony looked down at her and nodded. ‘There was just one thing wrong with that otherwise excellent pub.’

‘Oh, what? I thought it was lovely.’

‘No mistletoe.’

‘Oh there was! A great big bunch of it. Didn’t you see?’

‘There was none where we were standing. Never mind, if there’s one thing I’ve learned this Christmas, is how to improvise.’ Then he picked a spring of rosemary from the bush growing by the back door, held it over her head, and kissed her on the mouth. It was firm and for a moment she interpreted it as a

declaration of intent. Her stomach did the turning over thing it had before and for a moment she wished it didn't have to end so quickly. Then she swiftly got herself under control and told herself it was just a Christmas kiss.

‘That’s good improvisation,’ said Miranda, when she’d got over the shock.

‘I’m not always a stuck-up old so-and-so who makes mistakes and blames other people,’ he said. ‘I need you to know that.’

‘Oh, I’d stopped thinking you were that ages ago,’ said Miranda, slightly pink. ‘So it was a wasted kiss.’

‘I don’t think so,’ he said. Then he took her into his arms and kissed her

again.

She'd hardly got her breath back before he'd opened the door and ushered her into the house.

'Hi Mum,' said Lulu excitedly. 'We need you to make the gravy! We said you did the best gravy ever.'

Miranda, who didn't want to offend Dan for all sorts of reasons, hesitated. She was still a little flustered from Anthony's kisses. 'I'm sure Dan's got it covered.'

Dan actually looked a bit harassed. He was scraping at the bottom of the turkey roasting pan, presumably trying to get some colour into a sauce the unappealing pink of uncooked sausages. 'I give up!' he said, throwing the

wooden spoon into the pan.

‘Why don’t you check the table’s set?’ said Miranda to the others, not wanting Dan’s difficulties to be too public. ‘Now,’ she said to him when they were alone, ‘would you like me to sort it?’

‘Yeah. I’ve never managed proper gravy. If it was beef, I’d just do a jus, but turkey juices aren’t the same.’

‘I’ll just fetch something from my room,’ said Miranda, and she hurried off, glad her room was on the ground floor. She came back moments later.

‘What’s that?’ asked Dan, sounding horrified.

‘Mother’s Little Helpers. Watch and

learn.'

'So what are they?'

'Gravy granules and soy sauce,' said Miranda, not sure if she was proud or ashamed.

Five minutes later there was a saucepan full of gravy that Dan pronounced, 'OK.'

Miranda nodded, pleased with his praise. 'Have you got the stuffing sorted?'

He nodded. 'Loads of fresh herbs in the garden. It was easy.'

'Are we good to go?'

He nodded. 'Yup!'

'I think that was the best Christmas meal I have ever eaten,' Miranda said, half an

hour later. ‘Certainly the best turkey. It was so moist!’

Dan accepted this praise with a nod.

‘It was really good, Dan,’ said Anthony.

‘I think this whole Christmas has been great,’ said Isa.

‘Yes,’ agreed Lulu, ‘and we haven’t even opened our presents yet.’

‘I’d like us to have Christmas like this every year,’ said Amy with a sigh.

‘What? You’d like us to come to Devon for Christmas every year?’ asked her father, frowning slightly.

‘No! I don’t care where we are,’ Amy explained. ‘I just want to have it with Lulu and Isa and –’ she looked up shyly. ‘Miranda.’

Anthony cast an anxious glance at his family. ‘Sweetheart, we could do stockings, if you like. I’m sure I’d manage.’

‘Oh Dad!’ Amy became distressed. ‘You don’t understand! I just want us all to be together.’

‘Like a family?’ suggested Lulu, taking Amy’s hand.

‘Yes!’

‘Well, unless you guys live in the north of Scotland,’ said Isa, ‘I’m sure we could arrange something.’

‘Bristol,’ said Dan.

‘Bath,’ said Isa.

Miranda caught them exchange glances.

‘Well, I’m with Amy,’ said Miranda, ‘I think I’d like it a lot if we could spend Christmas together again, too. And not just because I didn’t have to cook and Dan is so good at it.’ And she meant it. It was the least stressful Christmas she’d spent as an adult.

‘But does it just have to be at Christmas?’ asked Anthony. ‘Maybe we could meet up at other times?’

‘Sunday lunch,’ said Isa. ‘Mum does a great roast.’

‘Which you will sample tomorrow, probably,’ said Miranda, ‘unless you want to go on eating turkey. We were going to have roast beef and Yorkshire pudding.’

‘Cool,’ said Dan. ‘I make great Yorkshires. You could come to ours, too.’

It had been a very different Christmas. As they hadn’t cooked, Miranda and Anthony cleared up together, chatting randomly, their inhibitions weakened by Anthony’s very good wine – and perhaps by their shared kisses. She couldn’t help smiling to herself at the memory.

And afterwards, instead of watching television they had got out the many different games the house provided and, as Dan insisted, played them all. Eventually, at about six o’clock, they felt able to face the mince pies that Dan had made (rough puff pastry, just perfect)

and they opened their presents. But as they'd agreed only to open presents from people who were there, that didn't take long.

Then Anthony produced the port and a bottle of Madeira and they went back to Monopoly.

Boxing Day had been largely similar – walks, games, food and jollity.

Miranda was thrilled to see Isa having a nice time with Dan. She couldn't quite work out if they were just friends or if Dan fancied Isa – there seemed to be a fair amount of teasing. But whatever it was, Isa was laughing a lot. And Lulu seemed to get on really well with Amy, who, in spite of being younger, was mature for her age and

treated Lulu like a loved older sister.

‘OK, Isa. Remind me if it’s left or right at the top?’ Miranda said, as they set off home, leaving the final look-round and rubbish disposal to Anthony, at his insistence. ‘I know both ways will get us to the main road eventually, but which one is best?’

‘Honestly, Mum! What are you like? It’s right!’

As she had suspected, the helpful, supportive Isa had been left at the house. The old, combative, challenging Isa had returned. She couldn’t help smiling.

A little later, Lulu said, ‘Dan says his dad definitely fancies you.’

Miranda was a bit surprised. ‘What

on earth makes him think that?’ It wasn’t that they hadn’t got on – they had, and he had kissed her – twice – but that was because she was there and it was Christmas, and he’d had a couple of drinks. Miranda knew better than to make anything of it.

‘Because he wants to meet up and actually got your contact details,’ said Isa.

‘That’s only because he very kindly offered to come to my works do with me. And our families got on,’ said Miranda. ‘It won’t be anything to do with me personally.’

‘No,’ Lulu went on. ‘Amy says there are loads of women who drool over her and Dan just to impress him and their

dad never does anything about it. She said there are always women offering to cook meals and he won't have anything to do with them.'

'Dan said he's interested, and he should know his dad,' put in Isa.

'Oh,' said Miranda.

'And we're going to theirs for Sunday lunch next week,' said Isa. 'That's quite soon. If you're just saying, "Oh yes, we'll do lunch" you don't make a definite date, do you?'

'I really can't remember!' said Miranda beginning to laugh.

Mum! You're blushing!' said Isa.

'I expect I'm just having my first hot flush,' said Miranda trying not to show

her excitement. But she was feeling the glow on the inside as well. Christmas had really worked out perfectly. And who knew what the New Year might bring?

Read on for an extract from
Katie Fforde's new novel, out
in February 2013

The
Sunday Times
Top Ten
Bestseller

Katie
FFORDE

A
French
Affair



Gina and Sally Makepiece have inherited a stall in the French House – an antiques centre nestled in the heart of the English countryside.

Gina is determined to drag the French House and its grumpy owner into the twenty-first century. Bearing all the attributes of a modern-day Mr Rochester, Matthew Ballinger is less than happy with the whirlwind that has arrived on

his doorstep.

The last thing either of them
want is to fall in love.

But will a trip to France
change their minds?

Chapter One



‘I’m saying this more in horror than in anger, sweets, but are you really going like that?’

Gina shot her sister a look that combined irritation, amusement and a touch of exasperation. They were in the car on the main road to Cranmore-on-the-Green and turning back to revamp her outfit was not an option. Sally’s little girls were asleep in the back and Gina found it easier to drive if they were not singing and squabbling and spilling cartons of juice in her car. She wanted to

get as far into the journey as possible before they woke up.

Now, she said, ‘Seeing as we’re actually on our way, I *am* going to go like this. What’s wrong with what I’m wearing anyway? I’ve got a jacket in the boot.’

Sally, eighteen months younger and making the most of the Indian summer, was wearing a long skirt, drapey top, gladiator sandals and a great many beads. She brought off the hippy-chick look irritatingly well. Gina felt herself being judged.

‘It’s very corporate,’ Sally pronounced. ‘A black trouser suit and a crisp white shirt might be fine for your business meetings but this—’

‘It is a business meeting.’ Gina glanced at the sat nav. ‘Anyway, most of my clothes are still in those cardboard boxes the men give you when you move. At least the shirt is clean and ironed. Nothing else I currently own is.’

‘It’s not exactly a business meeting,’ said Sally, having cast an eye over her children to make sure they were still asleep. ‘It involves a significant letter. From our mad Aunt Rainey.’

Gina felt she should suppress Sally’s excitement just a bit. ‘It is business. Our dear departed aunt had a space in this guy’s antiques centre. That’s business, isn’t it? The letter is just something about that. Probably.’

Sally tutted at Gina's down-to-earth attitude. 'Yes, but it's contact from beyond the grave.' She said this as if she was Yvette Fielding announcing an especially spooky edition of *Most Haunted*.

Gina giggled. 'Rubbish! We just got letters from her solicitor. It would only count as being beyond the grave if we had a séance.'

'Do you think that's a good idea?'

Gina was laughing properly now, even as she shook her head. 'Honestly, Sal, you're barking. I do not think a séance is a good idea. Besides, it's completely unnecessary because we have letters. Actual paper, here-in-the-

real-world, letters.’ She sent Sally a loving if somewhat despairing look. ‘I do wonder sometimes if being an artist and a stay-at-home mum has rotted your brain.’ She paused for a second. ‘Not that you don’t do a brilliant job keeping it all together on no money. But some of your ideas are a bit out of left field.’

‘Well, you have to keep yourself amused somehow when you’re hunting for little garments under the bed and stopping the girls from killing each other.’ Sally sighed.

Gina felt a pang of guilt for the brain-rot remark. ‘You’re such a brilliant mother, Sal, really you are. The girls are a real credit to you.’

‘But? I feel a but coming on!’

‘Nothing about you, but I do think this meeting will just be signing a document so the antique centre can get the space back or something. It won’t be anything exciting.’

‘So, you don’t think there’ll be actual money then?’

Gina shook her head. ‘I don’t see how there could be. You saw Aunt Rainey more often than I did but I think we’d have known if she was rich, surely? She didn’t own a house and she never seemed to have much cash.’

Sally sighed again, ‘I miss her, you know. Aunt Rainey was a real character, always talking about the Beatles and all those old bands as if they were her best

friends, but she was a lot of fun. I wish I'd seen more of her really but having the twins so soon after we moved down here, it wasn't easy.' She smiled. 'She came to tea a couple of times, always dressed like an ex-rock chick, and I thought how much the girls would love her when they were a bit older but, well, she died.'

'She was a lot of fun and quite eccentric. And if you're not careful, you'll end up just like her,' Gina added.

'I wouldn't mind. She was great.'

'I know. It was a compliment. Sort of.'

Sally regarded her sister as if not knowing quite how to take this. Eventually she changed the subject. 'So,

what was he like? This Matthew Ballinger?’

‘I haven’t met him, have I?’

Sally waved a hand, as if this was a minor detail.

‘But you spoke to him. What was his voice like?’

‘OK. Nice, even. Although he sounded a bit grumpy ... You’re doing it again, aren’t you?’

‘What?’ Sally’s outraged innocence reminded Gina of her nieces when confronted with some huge mess or other.

‘Matchmaking,’ said Gina, trying to sound firm. ‘That’s why you’re fussed about what I’m wearing. You’ve got to

stop this.’

Her sister looked out of the side window, possibly slightly embarrassed. ‘Well, it’s time you had a boyfriend again.’

‘No it’s not. I’m on a break from men. The last one was a real disaster, who actually took money from me as well as all the other crap you know by heart now.’ Gina paused. Being lighthearted about her failed relationship wasn’t yet easy, even if she was well and truly over him. ‘That was part of the reason why I moved down from London, in case you’ve forgotten. I’m not going there again, not for a long time.’

‘Where? London?’

Her sister growled.

Sally allowed Gina a second to calm down. ‘That wasn’t the main reason though. After all, London is massive. You could have avoided Egan if you tried.’

‘Oh, I tried! But when you know all the same people you’re bound to run into the one man you really don’t want to see.’

‘That’s just an excuse. You really moved because you wanted to see your nieces grow up,’ said Sally comfortably.

Gina smiled in agreement. ‘I do. And there’s the fact that business is so dire and my only big client left has come down here too. Also the rent on my flat had shot up and with the recession I had

to regroup. All of which you know.'

'You've missed out "and you pestered the life out of me",' said Sally.

'That too.' Gina laughed.

'You'll love it down here though. I know you will.'

Reluctantly, Gina agreed. 'I know I will too. I already love waking up in my cottage and seeing fields at the bottom of the garden instead of the back end of a dodgy fish and chip shop.'

'There will be things you'll miss though,' said Sally generously. 'You were in the seething metropolis and now you're—'

'In the sticks? Missing being able to get a good curry?' Sally had never before acknowledged a single downside.

Was she now feeling responsible for her sister's happiness?

‘We have a truly brilliant balti, but maybe you'll miss the buzz? I hope not. I'm so thrilled that you moved. We all are.’

‘Not just so I can babysit?’

‘Of course not! As if.’

Gina chuckled. She loved her nieces and although she found them fairly exhausting she always liked spending time with them. ‘I think I am a country girl at heart and it is so much cheaper renting here than in London.’ She paused. ‘But no matchmaking, you hear? If ever there comes a time when I think I might be ready for another relationship –

say in about ten years—’

‘When you’ll be forty, nearly past child-bearing.’

‘—I’ll either let you know or go on the internet.’

‘That’s so unromantic!’

‘Good. I’ve had it with romance.’

‘You haven’t really. Everyone has a romantic side, they just don’t want to acknowledge it.’

Gina raised her eyebrows and tried not to smile. It was her sister who was the romantic. She herself was a hard-bitten businesswoman who had a living to earn. She had absolutely no space for romance in her life, now or at any time in the future. Falling in love had been a disaster. From now on her head would

rule her heart, and just to be sure, she'd avoid relationships altogether.

‘Now I know that you are never going near another man, is it safe to wonder what this Matthew Ballinger might be like?’ Sally continued. ‘Is he young or old? Same age as Aunt Rainey, do you think?’

‘He sounded middle-aged. And no, I couldn't tell from his voice if he was married or single.’

‘I didn't ask!’

‘Did Aunt Rainey ever talk about him? When she came to visit?’

Sally screwed up her face in thought. ‘Not that I can remember, but I had the babies and they took up most of the

conversation, one way or another.'

'I asked Dad on the phone if he knew anything about him. He didn't. He did say that Rainey was prone to having younger men hanging round after her though.'

'Perhaps he's one of her young lovers.' Sally sighed. 'Maybe when I'm sixty-odd I'll have young lovers.'

Gina laughed. 'Not if Alaric is still around you won't!'

* * *

Cranmore-on-the-Green was a Cotswold town known for its historic, picturesque buildings, antiques, tea shops and tourists. Now, on this bright, autumn day,

it was bustling with people taking advantage of a few days of late sunshine.

Gina and Sally had found a huge car park seemingly miles from the town centre and, after a few minutes of struggle and ‘want to walk’, they managed to get both the girls strapped into the double buggy. The little party then made its way through the crowds.

‘You’ve never been to the French House, have you?’ said Gina.

Sally shook her head. ‘No. Cranmore-on-the-Green doesn’t have a supermarket, so I don’t need to come very often, and there are so many antiques shops and centres I wouldn’t know it if I had seen it. I always send Alaric’s parents there for a little trip out

when they stay. They love it. But I've got a little map so we should be able to find it quite easily.

'It's a shame he couldn't have the girls,' she went on, steering the buggy into the road to make way for a group of elderly women who had obviously had lunch in the pub and were now trying to find the coach park.

'No, it's good that he couldn't,' Gina said firmly. 'He had to meet a client which might result in a good commission.' Gina felt her artistic, romantic sister and brother-in-law needed to be bit more businesslike and sometimes became over businesslike to compensate. She secretly thought of them

as the Flopsy Bunnies, ‘improvident and cheerful’.

‘Yes, but not everyone likes children and we do want this meeting to go well,’ said Sally, hefting the buggy back on to the pavement.

‘Oh come on. They’re adorable. Anyway, we’re only going to be five minutes, I expect. Here we are, the French House.’

‘Goodness!’ said Sally. They stared up at the building, which was old, stately and huge. It was different from the Georgian buildings on either side, the windows being closer together and taller. A curtain of Virginia creeper covered the walls with scarlet and a couple of slightly rusty brackets

supported a sign proclaiming it was indeed 'THE FRENCH HOUSE'. A couple of bay trees in tubs stood on the front steps, which led to a pair of large double doors. The sign needed repainting and the bay trees had lost their original lollipop shape but to Gina the faint air of neglect made it look beautiful and romantic.

'It sort of looks French, doesn't it?' said Sally.

Gina nodded. 'I suppose it does.'

Sally sighed. 'We'd better see if we can get the pushchair up the steps and through the door.' The house didn't look as if children ever went into it.

A bell jangled as they arrived in the

entrance. Gina noticed there was quite a large hole in the carpet but the brass on the door was brightly polished. A pleasant-looking middle-aged woman came up to them. 'Hello, I'm Jenny. Matthew is expecting you. Would you like me to mind the buggy? He's upstairs.'

'Thank you, that would be very kind,' said Sally, after more introductions.

After some discussion about which twin wanted to go with Gina, they each picked up a golden-haired moppet and followed Jenny up a grand-looking staircase. As Jenny knocked on one of the doors at the top of the stairs, Gina straightened her shoulders. She didn't

know what lay ahead but it was all a bit daunting.



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