

Sophie
Claire

This
Christmas in
Paris

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HODDER

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Carys

Carys was hurrying to get to the bakery when the car came screeching round the corner.

She'd just dropped into her friend Natasha's flower shop to buy a pretty pot of marguerite daisies and hugged it to her as she stepped out into the road. But the loud roar of an engine made her freeze. She glimpsed the car coming towards her and dropped the pot.

'Miss Bell?'

Her brain froze with terror, and she saw the accident all over again. Headlights hurtling at her, swerving and snaking out of control. The blood draining, and her fingers gripping the steering wheel. Metal smashed into metal, throwing her head back. A hospital room, faces peering down, strip lights making her squint—

'Miss Bell?'

A hand tugged at her arm, and she blinked. The pictures in her head shrank away, and she stared into the face of a former pupil.

It took her a few moments to remember her name. Jessie Mallard. She'd been tiny when Carys had taught her. She must be around twelve now. Her little brother, Stephen, was in Carys's class.

'Are you all right, Miss Bell?' Jessie's mum asked.

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Carys swallowed. Jessie and her mum had stopped, and she realised other passers-by were watching curiously too. Heat rose in her cheeks and she tugged her scarf a little tighter. The bold red satin felt cool against the back of her neck.

Natasha rushed out of the flower shop and arrived, panting, at her side. ‘Carys, what happened?’ she asked breathlessly.

‘I— D-didn’t you see?’ she stammered. ‘That car was going too fast.’

‘It was,’ Jessie’s mum agreed. ‘But it’s gone now.’ She patted Carys’s arm.

Her daughter crouched to rescue the pot of flowers. Soil had spilled all over the road. Damn. Carys had bought it for her best friend Liberty, thinking the summery daisies would look perfect by the front door of Damsel fly Cottage.

‘Come into the shop,’ Natasha said, steering her away. ‘I’ll make you a cup of tea. You’re in shock.’

Carys felt sick at the thought. She shook her head. ‘I’m fine,’ she said – but her legs gave way, and Natasha caught her, propping her up until the strength slowly returned.

‘You’re not fine,’ Natasha said firmly. ‘Come with me. You can sit in the back room while you catch your breath.’

The crowd in the street seemed to be growing with every minute that passed and she could feel all eyes on her. ‘Okay,’ Carys murmured. ‘A glass of water would be good.’

Twenty minutes later, she’d stopped shaking.

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‘The shop’s quiet now,’ said Natasha, returning to the back room after serving a customer. She wiped her hands on her apron. ‘Shall I get Liberty?’ she asked, with a nod towards the Button Hole fabric shop where Carys’s friend worked.

‘She’s at home,’ Carys said. ‘She has the day off because she ran a couple of evening workshops this week.’

Natasha sat down. ‘How are you feeling?’

Carys wrapped her hands around the mug of tea. ‘Mortified.’ She groaned. ‘I don’t know what happened. I saw that car and suddenly I was there again.’

‘The accident?’ Natasha’s blue eyes were soft with understanding.

Carys nodded and took a sip of tea, wincing at how sweet Natasha had made it, then put the mug down. Her fingers instinctively reached for the scar on the back of her neck and she made sure it was well hidden beneath her scarf. Then she pointed at the street. ‘He *was* speeding, though, wasn’t he? He was driving recklessly – and in the middle of the village, too.’

Her friend tilted her head, as if choosing her words with care. ‘He was going a bit fast.’

‘Didn’t you hear the tyres squealing? Didn’t you see how out of control he was? He almost skidded round that corner.’

There was a short silence before Natasha said, ‘It was difficult to tell from inside the shop.’

Her friend was being tactful, Carys realised. In fact, thinking back, no one else in the street had looked frightened. But they’d all been staring at her with concern.

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Because she'd reacted with terror. Perhaps the car hadn't been speeding at all. Perhaps she'd simply panicked.

'Oh, no.' Her head dropped into her hands. 'When am I going to stop getting them?'

'Flashbacks?'

'The doctors said they'd fade with time but it's been over a year now.' She thought of Jessie's anxious expression. 'And it'll be all round the village, how I had a panic attack in the high street.'

'Don't worry about that,' Natasha said, with a wave of her hand. 'Everyone cares about you, Carys. If they talk, it's only because they're concerned.'

She knew her friend was right. Everyone did care. But she didn't welcome their concern. She just wanted her life to go back to how it had been before the accident, when everything had been normal.

Natasha asked, 'Shall I call Liberty and ask her to pick you up?'

'No!' Carys said quickly. 'I'm fine, honestly. I've got the car.'

'Well, if you're sure.'

'Thanks for the tea, Nat.' She picked up her bedraggled flower pot and tried to pat down the soil, poking the daisies back in.

'Here,' said Natasha, handing her another pot. 'Take this one instead.'

'But you won't be able to sell it now it's been damaged.'

'I will,' Natasha said. 'It just needs a bit of TLC and it'll be good as new. Like you. Make sure you take it easy this afternoon, okay?'

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As Carys pulled up outside the cottage, she remembered when she'd come out of hospital, how excitedly she'd drunk it all in. The tiny cottage in a clearing in the woods. The loop of smoke weaving up from the chimney. Charlie, Liberty's black Labrador, barking at the door, impatient to greet them when they went inside. The birdsong, the peaty woodland smell, the crackling of a log fire in the lounge – it had all been exactly as Carys remembered.

Until Alex, Liberty's new boyfriend, had stepped out of the kitchen and greeted her in the traditional French way with a kiss on each cheek.

Brushing aside the memory, she picked up the pot of daisies and went in.

'Is everything okay?' said Liberty, rushing into the hall before Carys had even closed the front door. 'Nat called. She said—'

'Yeah. Just some idiot speeding. It took me by surprise, that's all. Here,' she said, handing over the flowers. 'I thought these might look good on the doorstep.'

'Aw, they're gorgeous. Thanks, Car.' Liberty ran her fingers over the bright petals. But when she looked up frown lines creased her brow. 'Nat said you had a flashback.'

'Let's not dwell on that. What are we doing this evening? A night out on the town?'

'Is that what you want?' Liberty's face told her it wasn't what she'd planned.

'Why not? It's Saturday, after all.'

Liberty tucked her red hair behind one ear. 'Um – the thing is, Alex was going to cook dinner for us. For you too,' she added quickly, 'if you like?'

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Carys hid her disappointment. And immediately felt guilty. Of course Liberty and Alex wanted to spend romantic evenings together. ‘It’s okay,’ she said, mustering a smile. ‘But thank you. I’ll – er – pop in and see Mum. I haven’t been over for a while.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Absolutely. In fact, I’ll stay over tonight. Then you two can have some privacy.’ She brushed a smudge of dust off a nearby picture frame. The photograph was of her and Liberty in the snow a couple of years ago. Her brown skin and Liberty’s red hair glowed in the winter sun, and their smiles were broad.

‘Oh, Car, you don’t need to—’

‘I want to,’ she assured her friend, and pulled her into a hug. Liberty smelt of freshly cut grass.

‘Are you sure you’re okay, Car? It must be so frightening to have those flashbacks.’

It was, but she wasn’t going to admit it. To do so would be like giving in to the fear, and she wouldn’t let that happen. ‘It’s nothing, Lib. Forget about it.’

She’d survived the worst, but ‘survive’ was the crucial word. Now she wanted to move forward. She was determined to put the accident behind her.

But that felt impossible on days like today when the past came crashing back and everyone was looking at her with sympathy or – worse – pity.

‘Carys!’ her mum, Jamila, cried, as she opened the door, arms wide to pull her into a hug. ‘My beautiful girl. It’s good to see you. How are you? Not overdoing it, I hope?’

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Carys had to press her lips together to suppress her irritation. It was only because her mum cared, she reminded herself. ‘I’m fine, Mum.’

Jamila didn’t seem convinced, and brushed the fringe out of her eyes as she studied her more closely. ‘How’s everything with Liberty and Alex?’

‘It’s fine. Why?’

Her mum arched an eyebrow as if she didn’t believe her, then beckoned her into the kitchen where something delicious was baking in the oven and a bottle of wine was open. Jamila poured her a glass and they sat down at the wooden table. ‘You asked to sleep over, that’s all. I thought you might have argued or something.’

‘Oh – no. She and Alex are having a romantic dinner and I wanted to give them some space. Is it okay? I’m not disturbing you, am I?’ It hadn’t been long since her youngest brother had left home and Carys knew her mum was enjoying her new-found freedom. She had some exciting house renovations planned to start soon.

‘Of course not. You know the spare room is free.’ Her mum studied her closely. ‘It can’t be easy for you, now Alex has moved in.’

‘Alex is lovely,’ she said quickly, ‘and Lib’s been great too. They’ve told me a hundred times I’m welcome to stay at Damselfly Cottage ...’ She stared at an old stain on the floor. A tiny black circle where one of her brothers had dropped a match. Carys remembered how she’d had to stamp out the flame, and afterwards she’d scolded him. She’d been mothering her three brothers since they were

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born. Perhaps that was why teaching had seemed such an obvious career choice.

‘But?’ Jamila prompted.

She looked up. ‘How do you know there’s a “but”?’

‘I’m your mum, Carys Bell.’

Reluctantly she admitted, ‘I feel like a spare part and I think . . .’ she took a deep breath ‘. . . I think I should move out.’

Surprise flashed through her mum’s deep brown eyes, but she hid it quickly. ‘Well, you can always come here, but the builders are starting work next week. There’s going to be a lot of dust and chaos for a while.’

Carys shook her head. She was thirty and had lived independently for the last ten years. Moving home would feel like a huge step backwards. ‘Thanks, Mum, but I need my independence.’

‘So you’ll look for a place in the village?’

‘I don’t know. Willowbrook is tiny. There aren’t many places for rent.’

‘In town, then?’

Carys tipped her head half-heartedly. ‘Maybe.’

Jamila reached across the table to touch her hand. ‘Are you unhappy, love?’

Carys’s head jerked up. Was it that obvious? And *was* she unhappy? ‘No,’ she said finally. ‘Not unhappy . . .’

She couldn’t pinpoint what the feeling was exactly. ‘It’s like the world moved on without me.’

‘Well, it did, I suppose. You were in a coma for six months. That’s a long while.’

So much had happened in that time, not just Liberty meeting Alex, but she didn’t know how to describe how

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she felt. And it wasn't just about Alex moving into Damselfly Cottage. She sipped her wine thoughtfully.

Jamila sighed. 'It can't be easy for you. So much changed while you were in hospital.'

It wasn't a surprise that after years as a social worker her mum was good at reading people. And Carys knew she could be honest with her because her mum would never judge, but how could she explain her emotions when she didn't understand them herself? 'I suppose I'm still getting used to it.'

'And getting used to Alex?'

Carys stiffened uncomfortably. 'I know it sounds resentful, but home doesn't feel like home any more now Liberty's with Alex.'

Her mum patted her hand.

'I'm happy for Lib,' Carys went on, 'more than happy ...'

'But?'

Truthfully, she was also a little ... resentful. She hated herself for it, and it made her feel selfish, but it was how she felt. Pushed out. A gooseberry. 'But I had no time to get used to this change. I woke up in hospital and Alex was there, holding her hand.' And Liberty hadn't needed to tell her how deep her feelings ran for the Frenchman. It had been plain as day. Which was why Carys would never say or do anything to spoil their relationship. She wanted her best friend to be happy. She was thrilled that she'd found a man she loved and who was clearly devoted to her. Whatever Carys was feeling was her own problem, and she'd work through it.

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‘Damsel fly Cottage is too small for the three of us.’

More than anything she missed the cosy nights in she and Liberty used to enjoy, watching a movie or just chatting, sharing confidences and dreams for the future. She missed their closeness.

But now Liberty and Alex needed closeness too, and Carys understood that. Tonight she’d sleep at her mum’s, but it wasn’t a long-term solution.

Jamila studied her thoughtfully. ‘It’s difficult, love. But it was bound to happen. Sooner or later one of you two was going to meet someone.’

‘I know.’

‘So what are you going to do?’ Jamila topped up their glasses. ‘How are you going to find your happy?’

Carys felt her brow pucker in a deep frown. ‘I don’t know yet, Mum. That’s what I need to work out.’

‘Miss? Miss?’

‘Just a minute, Stephen.’

Carys continued down the list of names, making sure every pupil present was logged in the register.

‘Miss?’ Stephen perched on the edge of his seat, almost red in the face – he seemed desperate to share his weekend news.

Carys was used to it. Monday mornings were always buzzing in her classroom of five-year-olds. As soon as she’d finished, she smiled and said, ‘Right, Stephen. What’s your exciting news?’

He practically sprang from his chair like a jack-in-the-box. ‘My mum said she saw you on Saturday in the village.’

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Instantly her smile vanished. She opened her mouth to respond, but the words rushed excitedly from his mouth. ‘She said you were scared because of a speeding car and you dropped flowers in the road and my sister had to pick them up and then you almost fainted.’

Someone gasped. Another child giggled.

‘Were you all right, Miss? Mummy was very worried.’

Her heart turned over. Carys cleared her throat. ‘Yes, Stephen. I’m fine, thank you.’

A room full of faces watched her expectantly. Their concern was touching, but a prickle of unease made the hairs on the back of her neck lift. ‘There’s no need to worry. The car just gave me a fright—’

‘Is it because of your car crash?’ Stephen interrupted.

‘Kind of. But it’s—’

‘But you’re better now, aren’t you, Miss?’ one of the girls asked.

Carys swallowed. ‘Yes, Lucy. I’m absolutely fine.’ She clapped her hands, keen to get off the subject. ‘Right, now let’s start today’s work. Open your exercise books, please.’

As the rustle of bags and books filled the room she was relieved to get back to teaching. But as she crossed the room, she heard Stephen whisper loudly to the boy beside him, ‘Mummy said the car wasn’t even going very fast ...’

Later the same day Carys stood at the front of the main hall. Twenty-seven five-year-olds dressed in shorts and T-shirts grinned at her, waiting for her next instruction.

‘Imagine you’re an elephant,’ she said. ‘How does it feel to be really big and tall? Huge! How does it feel to have

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a trunk for a nose?’ She waved her arm like an elephant’s trunk and began to stamp her feet heavily.

The children copied her, adding their own elephant noises and happily stamping around the hall. But as the noise level rose, Carys kept thinking about her conversation with her mum at the weekend, and all the uncomfortable emotions that had gradually been building in her over the last few months since she’d come home from hospital.

Are you unhappy? How could she be unhappy when she was so lucky to have survived? When doctors said it was a miracle that she’d made a full recovery? When she was doing the job she’d always loved, and surrounded by people she’d known all her life? She couldn’t be unhappy. Yet she couldn’t put her finger on how she felt.

Carys stopped again, and the children followed suit. Once they were all quiet, she whispered, ‘Now imagine you’re a teeny tiny ant in a big jungle. How does it feel to be smaller than a leaf?’

The children gasped and giggled, then crouched down, fully immersing themselves in the imagination exercise.

Then Carys spread her arms. ‘And, last of all, a bird. How does it feel to be way up high in the sky, looking down on the earth?’ She nodded at the window and the blue sky, punctuated with plump clouds. ‘How does it feel to fly? To feel the wind lift you? And where would you fly away to?’

The noise level rose as the children swooped and soared, but Carys was distracted, her gaze drawn to the blue sky, and she felt a pull, enthralled by the idea of being lifted into the clouds. The vastness, the freedom. What was out

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there, beyond this village school where she'd worked for almost ten years?

Need swelled inside her as she imagined stretching her wings, feeling the wind on her face, and seeing the world from a different perspective.

And finally she realised what the feeling was that she hadn't been able to describe to her mum.

She was restless.

She was gazing out of her classroom window when her colleague, Suzie, popped her head in at five o'clock. 'Still here?'

Carys patted the pile of handwriting books she'd been marking. 'Nearly finished.'

Suzie crossed the empty room. 'You've been working late a lot recently. You're not avoiding going home, are you?'

'No,' Carys said quickly, then blushed. 'Well, maybe. I just feel I ought to give Liberty and Alex a bit of space, you know?'

Suzie perched on the corner of her desk. She picked up a pencil and twirled it with her fingers, like a majorette. 'Is everything all right?'

Carys sighed. She was constantly reassuring people that she was fine. 'I wish everyone would stop asking me that! I just had one flashback, that's all. It's not—'

'Woah!' Suzie put up her hands, smiling.

Carys bit her lip. If only she could turn back time. Or escape to a place where no one knew about her accident. Where she wouldn't be treated differently. 'Sorry, Suzie.'

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I know you mean well, but Saturday was a one-off. That car just—’

‘I wasn’t talking about that.’

‘Oh.’

‘I meant here – at work. Are you enjoying being back? Only there are times when you don’t seem as ...’ she seemed to choose her words carefully ‘... enthusiastic as you used to be.’

Ah. Carys leaned back in her chair. Was it that obvious?

‘Don’t get me wrong,’ Suzie added quickly, ‘you’re still a wonderful teacher and everyone’s thrilled to have you back, but, well, I get the feeling your heart isn’t in it like it used to be.’

Silence filled the empty classroom. Carys heard the clatter of a metal bucket further along the corridor as the cleaner mopped the floor.

Suzie went on, ‘You rushed to come back to work, but perhaps events are catching up with you now.’

Maybe her friend was right. ‘Suzie, do you ever feel like teaching is too ... small?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Like there must be more?’

‘You’re not enjoying it?’

‘I enjoy it.’ She sat back in her chair and bit her lip. ‘I just don’t love it any more.’

‘Ah.’

‘To be honest, it’s not just my job. Everything feels small now.’

‘You mean Willowbrook?’

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‘Partly. But also my life.’ She looked around the classroom with its miniature chairs and desks. It *was* small, always had been, and she knew it was her who’d changed.

She felt like Alice in Wonderland when she’d eaten the cake that made her grow until her head hit the ceiling. Willowbrook had always been home, but now – her fingers touched the scar on the back of her neck – she was suffocating in sympathy, pity and concern. ‘I need a change,’ she told her friend, with a dawning sense of realisation.

Suzie’s eyes widened. ‘What kind of change?’

Carys didn’t want to be defined by the accident any more. She wanted to make a fresh start, to live her life in the fullest possible way, making the most of each precious second.

But to do that she knew she had to leave Willowbrook.

‘An escape.’ She grinned, lighting up at the thought. ‘An adventure.’

2

Carys

‘**W**hat?’ Liberty’s eyes became round circles of chestnut brown as she stepped out into the back garden.

The air smelt fresh in the June sunshine and the distant drilling of a woodpecker carried through the trees.

‘But you can’t leave,’ Liberty continued. ‘Why would you want to? This is your home.’

Guilt hit Carys head-on. She’d known it would. ‘It just feels ...’ she bit her lip, hunting for the words to explain, but not wanting to hurt her friend’s feelings ‘... like the right time. I want to have new experiences, spread my wings.’

Avoiding Liberty’s gaze, she smoothed out the folded quilt she’d hooked over one arm. The pattern of brown and blue triangles in a line looked like a long arrow against the cream background. Liberty made the most beautiful quilts. Modern, vibrant and colourful.

‘But we did that! We went to America. New York, LA, the Grand Canyon – wasn’t that enough?’

They’d spent a month doing the road trip they’d always dreamed of but never thought they’d be able to do because of Liberty’s fear of flying. Liberty had made huge changes to her life while Carys had been in hospital. She’d

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become braver and bolder, and flying was just one of the fears she'd conquered. Carys was filled with awe for all her friend had achieved. But now she needed a change too. A drastic one.

'It was great,' Carys agreed, 'but I've caught the travel bug. I want to see more of the world, have more new experiences.'

She was sure this was the best thing for everyone. If she left, Liberty and Alex's relationship would have the chance to blossom. Her heart pinched with a tiny nip of envy that she made herself ignore. She stepped around a cluster of sky-blue hardy geraniums.

'Here?' She pointed to the spot in front of the oak tree where Liberty liked to photograph her quilts before posting them in her online shop. Carys's job was to hold up the quilt – although Alex sometimes helped with that too.

Liberty gestured for her to move to the left. 'Where will you go?'

She shrugged. Anywhere. 'I've applied for a few house-sitting jobs in Scotland, the Isle of Wight and some other places.'

She unfolded the quilt and Liberty's phone clicked as she took several shots. Magpies clacked high up in the trees, and a couple of squirrels chased each other across the garden fence. Charlie barked and bounded after them in a frenzy.

'House-sitting?'

Carys peeped around the side of the quilt. 'You know. Where the owners are away and—'

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‘I know what it is,’ Liberty interrupted. ‘But why that of all things? Why not teaching? You’ll be alone, Car, and you hate being alone.’ She stepped forward to take some close-ups and zoomed in on the triangles, the stitching, the binding.

Above them, a blackbird launched into song.

Why house-sitting? It was a good question. ‘I want a change from teaching, and I thought that would be a good place to start. I don’t need qualifications, there are no upfront costs, and it would give me space to think. Decide what I want to do next.’ Liberty finished snapping pictures and Carys was relieved to give her arms a rest. She hugged the quilt to her chest.

‘This isn’t because of Alex, is it?’ Liberty asked.

Carys tensed. ‘No, of course not. You two have made me feel so welcome.’ And yet it had been her home first. She should have been the one welcoming Alex. But it wasn’t his fault that Fate had had other plans for her. She gazed around at the woodland, annoyed with herself for getting tearful. She blinked hard.

‘But?’ Liberty prompted.

That was the trouble with having a best friend who knew you inside out: she heard the unspoken words before you did, knew when you were holding back.

Carys wished she could hide behind the quilt again. But it would be pointless. Liberty knew her better than anyone. ‘I know this will sound ungrateful, but since the accident everyone’s been so ... careful around me.’

Charlie trotted back to them.

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‘Careful?’

‘Always checking I’m okay, asking how I’m feeling. Mum, everyone at work, and in the village ...’ She bent to pet the dog, which nuzzled against her leg. Even he had been super-protective of her since the accident.

‘Only because they care.’

‘I know,’ she said quickly. ‘But . . . I’m fed up being treated with kid gloves. I wish I could disappear. Become anonymous.’

‘You?’ Liberty giggled. ‘Honey, I hate to break this to you, but you have too much energy to disappear.’

Carys thumped her arm playfully, then became serious. ‘I keep thinking that if I went somewhere no one knows me, or about the accident, I could start again. You know, a fresh start. Maybe.’

She bit her lip, waiting for her friend’s reaction.

This was about her life, her plans, her future. But she also wanted her friend’s blessing.

‘I get it,’ Liberty said finally. Her voice was tinged with sadness.

The blackbird trilled, then, with a flourish, hit a high note and stopped. She could hear other birds singing too, but they weren’t as exuberant as the blackbird.

‘I thought you’d understand. Lib, I know it’s a shock, but I need some time away.’

Liberty plucked a loose thread from her sleeve. ‘Ignore me. It’s just ...’ She swallowed, as if the words were stuck in her throat and didn’t want to come out. She looked down and rolled the thread between her thumb and forefinger

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until it made a tiny ball. 'I already lost you once, Car. I'm scared of losing you again.'

Carys released a breath she hadn't realised she was holding. 'Not going to happen,' she said firmly. 'Wherever I go I'll be on the phone to you regular as clockwork.'

They'd always told each other everything. Personality-wise, they were chalk and cheese – Liberty was quiet and preferred to blend in with the background while Carys liked to think of herself as bubbly – but their friendship was rock solid. They were like sisters. Family.

Which was why leaving would be so hard.

But just as every child had to grow up and leave home, Carys knew she had to do this. She had to leave Willowbrook.

'It won't be the same, though, Car. We've always been there for each other.'

Carys felt a rush of love for her friend. 'Hey, you're brave and badass now. You don't need me any more.' *And you have Alex*, she thought.

Liberty blinked, her eyes shimmering with tears, which made Carys well up too. She nodded at the quilt. 'Have you got enough pictures now?'

Liberty glanced at it, as if she'd forgotten about it. 'Just a few more by the shed. It'll bring out the brown tones really well.'

Carys followed her over. 'Here?'

'Yes, but let the top corner drape forward to show the backing fabric. That's it.' As Liberty took more photographs, she asked, 'Why don't you look for something in a city? It might be more ... you.'

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Carys tilted her head and considered this. 'I could, I suppose. Nothing like that has come up so far, but you never know.'

Liberty's head whipped up and she put her phone down. 'You've started looking already?' It was clear from her tone that she felt betrayed.

Carys shuffled her feet. 'Yeah,' she admitted sheepishly. 'When?'

Carys had to tell the truth. 'Two weeks ago.' She'd just wanted to explore her options, see what was out there. This was a big decision, not one to be rushed into, but the more she'd trawled through the adverts, the more excited she'd felt. 'There's one more thing,' she added.

'What?'

'I handed in my notice at school. Angela said I can leave at the end of term.' The head teacher had been very calm, almost as if she'd been expecting it.

Liberty's mouth fell open. 'But that's only three weeks away!'

Carys nodded sheepishly. 'It means I'll be free to start immediately if a job comes up.'

Charlie was sniffing around the grass and Liberty absently reached down to stroke him. 'You know,' she said quietly, 'I always thought this would happen.'

'What would?' Carys had never considered house-sitting before. She'd always loved working with children. Her job had been hugely rewarding – until now. Sometimes she wondered if the accident had left more damage than the doctors and their scans could detect. She wished

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she could go back to her old self, content and passionate about her job.

But since she couldn't, she had to move forward.

Liberty said, 'That you'd leave Willowbrook.'

'I'm not leaving. Just having a break.' She folded the quilt in half, then in half again, and ran her fingers over the triangles of warm brown and cream fabric. 'What's this design called, by the way?'

'You like it?'

'I love it.'

'It's a classic. Flying Geese.'

They paused a moment longer over the quilt. Then Carys asked, 'Why did you think I'd leave?' She'd only had the idea a couple of weeks ago. What had her best friend spotted that she hadn't?

Liberty smiled. 'Willowbrook is too small for someone like you, Car. You're brave, you dream big. You like adventure and excitement and ...' She shot Carys a cautious look.

'What?' Carys smiled, remembering their best times. The camping trip when they'd been caught in a storm and finished up in a pub, drenched but laughing. The surprise party Liberty had organised for Carys's twenty-first birthday when the whole village had turned up. The concert that had ended with Carys on stage duetting with the lead singer of their favourite band. 'Spit it out, Lib.'

'Drama,' she said, then added quickly, 'but I don't mean that in a bad way.'

This Christmas in Paris

Carys chuckled. She was lucky to have a friend who understood her so well. Drama was exactly what she was craving right now. And she wouldn't get it as long as she stayed here, where everyone would always remember the accident. The residents of Willowbrook were like her extended family – but, much as she loved the place where she'd lived all her life, she had to get away.

She had to find her own place in the world.

The next day Carys was scrolling through the new job adverts when one caught her eye.

Responsible person wanted to take care of Parisian café for four months from 1 September to 31 December ...

Carys's heart leaped. Christmas in Paris! She and Liberty had spent a long weekend there a couple of years ago and they'd had a magical time visiting the sights, Christmas shopping and enjoying delicious meals. Carys had loved practising her French, and the thought of living in the city for four months made her heart spark with joy. She read on:

Owners seek experienced person to manage the café and keep this successful business thriving. Must be good at managing staff and dealing with customers. Experience in the food industry is essential. Accommodation will be provided.

Sophie Claire

She clicked on the link for their website, expecting to see a traditional French café with a burgundy canopy and small round metal tables lining the pavement. There were a few tables outside, but no canopy and the building was a cheerful pastel pink that stood out against the grey and cream stone buildings around. The upstairs shutters were painted green, the slate roof had a blue tinge, and the street was cobbled. It was quaint yet sophisticated, quirky yet elegant, and the modern signage read ‘The Red Cat Café’. Carys’s eyes widened. Oh, the place was wonderful! So inviting, with big sofas in the enormous windows, golden lighting inside and— Were they bookshelves? She explored further and found pictures of a cake counter filled with mouth-watering *pâtisserie*. The menu also included snacks, such as *croque-monsieur* and *soupe à l’oignon*. Even if she didn’t get an interview, Carys had to visit the place.

She began to type an email.

A reply came back the same day.

Dear Carys,

Thank you for your application. We’ve received three hundred emails enquiring about the job in less than four hours and we’re frankly quite overwhelmed.

Her heart sank, and she braced herself for a polite rejection as she read on:

This Christmas in Paris

We need to find a manager very quickly. We're pleased to say your email was among the first thirty to arrive, so if you're free for an online interview tomorrow at twelve noon please let us know.

Her heart galloped with excitement. She had an interview!