



Three Stories for Christmas

Three short stories by three fabulous Choc Lit authors to read over the festive season

Extracts taken from the Choc Lit Love Match and Kisses & Cupcakes anthologies

*Pink Biscuit Type Things by Kathryn Freeman
Raspberries by Jane Lovering
Fairground Attraction by Evonne Wareham*



A delicious selection of fiction!

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Pink Biscuit Type Things

KATHRYN FREEMAN

'This is no job for a man,' Josh muttered as he stood at the kitchen table, trying to force sugar and butter together. How the devil were two solids ever going to mix? 'Mags, are you absolutely certain you need these flipping things tomorrow?'

'You're not supposed to swear in front of me. Mum says.'

'Your mum's not here. If she was I wouldn't be making flaming cupcakes, would I?'

'Is flaming a worse swear word than flipping?'

Eight years old and she had him running round in circles. Goodness knows what she'd be like at eighteen. 'I'll let rip a few more before I get these blasted things in the oven. And before you say anything, blasted, flaming and flipping are all good, solid expressions of displeasure that grown ups can say in front of children, but children can't repeat. Ever. Especially to their mums ...'

'Okay.' Maggie pouted at the congealed mess in the bowl, which was looking even worse now he'd incorrectly added the flour. 'Are they really going to look like cupcakes in the end?'

'Probably not.' He glared at her. 'But you're going to be grateful for whatever comes out of the oven, yes?'

'Yes.' She scooped a bit of the stodgy mixture up with her finger and stared at it. 'Shouldn't it have chocolate in it? And when Mum makes them, she tells me to mix the wet ingredients together first, then the dry ones. Then you mix them all together.'

'Does she now,' he remarked sourly. 'Anything else I'm doing wrong here?'

'She uses oil, not butter.'

He stopped his mixing and passed the spoon over to her. 'Go on then, Miss Smarty Pants, you make them. I'm sure that's what the school expected you to do.'

'Maybe.' She stuck her bottom lip out a little and if he hadn't known her better, he'd have said she looked cute. Fair, curly hair escaping from a haphazard ponytail, freckles on her cheeks, a dusting of flour on her nose.

Truth be told though, she was a monster. Okay, that was a bit harsh, but the cute looks were highly deceptive. 'What do you mean, maybe? What did they actually say about the cupcakes?'

'We had to come up with our bestest cupcake.'

'Favourite. Best.'

'That's what I said.'

‘Come up with as in write down, or come up with as in slave over a hot stove and make?’

She didn’t answer. Instead she grinned at him in that cheeky, gappy way she had – the one that made him want to laugh and get angry in equal measures. He sighed. ‘Am I wasting my time here?’

‘Nope. I want to see what they taste like. I can take them in tomorrow as it’s my birthday. Plus Miss Baxter will like them. She’s my new teacher and she says cupcakes are her best food.’

‘Favourite,’ he mumbled, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck tingle. He had to will himself not to blush. How embarrassing would that be, Mags knowing he had a crush on her teacher? Still, he couldn’t stop himself asking. ‘So how are you getting on with this Miss Baxter, then?’

‘She’s cool. And pretty.’

Yes, he’d noticed that. Very pretty, he’d have said. Shiny blonde hair, a sweet smile and striking blue eyes that caused his heart to jig whenever she looked in his direction.

Mercifully the phone rang, putting a halt to his wayward thoughts.

He tucked the receiver carefully under his chin, causing minimal transfer of cupcake mess. ‘Hello, Taylor’s bakery. Purveyor of fine cupcakes.’

Behind him Maggie let out one of her priceless giggles.

Down the phone, he heard a deep sigh. ‘Evening, Josh.’

He waggled his eyebrows at Maggie. ‘It’s your mum on the phone. Do you want to talk to her or shall I tell her you’re really not bothered ...’

The phone was snatched out from under his chin by eager hands. ‘Mum. I’m making Coca Cola and marshmallow cupcakes!’

Before he had a chance to take her to task over her use of the word ‘I’, which surely implied a degree of ownership to the whole *making* process, she’d disappeared into the other room. It left him with the job of slopping cocoa powder, milk and Cola into the already dodgy looking mixture and then slapping the resulting goo into fifteen cupcake cases.

Heaven only knew how they’d turn out. Or their effect on the stomach lining should anyone dare to eat one.

Felicity Baxter, on early morning playground duty, tried not to ogle too openly at the tall man with the floppy brown hair and twinkling green eyes. He was the father of one of her pupils. Ogling was totally wrong.

Still, she couldn’t resist a few sneaky glances his way. There was something about the man that made a woman want to stare. Probably his smile, she mused as another one lit up his face, making her heart flutter.

The fluttering morphed into a thumping. He wasn’t dropping his daughter off at the gate as she’d seen him do every day since she’d begun working at the school a few weeks ago. He was striding towards her, Maggie at his side.

And carrying a plate of ... cupcakes?

'Hi.' A less than dazzling opening gambit. 'What have you got there?' An even more cringe-worthy follow-up remark. As if it wasn't totally obvious.

'I was told by Mags that you needed these today?' He stared down at the odd assortment of cakes, each sporting vibrant pink icing that looked as if it had been troweled on. 'They're meant to be cupcakes,' he continued in a deep voice that made her insides squirm. 'But calling them that might be against the Trade Description Act. I should probably say they're biscuit type things, topped with pink stuff.'

'They're Cola and marshmallow flavour,' Maggie chimed in. 'My two bestest ...' she received a dig from her father '... Favouritest things.'

He rolled his eyes at his daughter, though the boyish grin still hovered around his lips.

'Well, they look, umm, interesting,' she ventured. 'But you didn't need to actually make the cupcakes, Maggie. Just think up a flavour.'

'Oops.' She glanced up at her father, a wide smile splitting her face. 'But we had fun making them.'

'Which part was fun?' His left eyebrow arched. 'The part where the bag of flour fell on the floor, coating the kitchen in white? Which, incidentally, I had to clean up. Or maybe the part where I had to scrape sponge mixture off the bottom of the oven after the first attempt spilt everywhere? Oh, you were probably in bed by then, weren't you?'

Though his words were said with more affection than irritation, Felicity sensed an undercurrent of exasperation.

'Eating one was fun.'

He gave a despairing shake of head, but laughter danced in his eyes – his sparkly, clear, very green eyes. 'Well, let's see if Miss Baxter thinks so, too.' He raised the cakes a little higher. 'Please, take one. No, take the whole lot. It's Maggie's birthday today and I believe she wants you and the class to sample them.'

He pushed the plate towards her and Felicity had no option but to take it from him. 'Well happy birthday, Maggie,' she said to the grinning girl. 'And thank you for the cakes. I think,' she added to the father who gave her an almost identical grin.

'You won't be thanking us tomorrow morning when you wake up with gut rot.'

Just then the bell sounded and the children scampered to line up, Maggie included. Felicity was left standing with a handsome man and a plate of vivid pink biscuit type things.

'I guess I should let you get to work.' He glanced apologetically at her. 'Sorry about the gut rot comment. I'm sure you'll be fine but it might be advisable to put the lot in the bin rather than trying them, just in case.'

He gave her a slightly awkward half smile, half grimace and walked away before she could formulate a reply. For a few precious seconds she enjoyed

the sight of his broad back and denim clad lower half before letting out a wistful sigh and turning back to her class.

Why was it all the best men were already taken? A fact she knew from bitter experience. Sometimes they didn't even tell you they were taken, either. Not until they'd hooked you right in and made you fall in love with them. She'd been there, done that and still suffered agonies of heartache, guilt and anger several years later.

But maybe Maggie's dad wasn't married. She hadn't actually seen Maggie's mother. Could he be a single dad?

Her class settled into an unruly line and several pairs of interested eyes gaped at the plate she was holding.

'Cool, are those the cakes you brought in, Maggie?'

Maggie nodded. 'Yep.'

'Did your mum make them?'

'No, she's away. I made them myself.'

Well, that certainly put an end to her daydreams. Still, Felicity couldn't resist a smile at Maggie's reply. She wondered what Mr Sexy Eyes would have said if he'd heard his daughter taking all the culinary credit.

Josh kicked himself all the way back to his car. Gut rot? Really, why the heck had he said that to the delicious Miss Baxter? He'd certainly lost his touch with women. Thirty-four and single – his last relationship over two years ago. It didn't exactly scream ladies' man.

His mobile phone went off as he slipped back into his car.

'Did I miss Mags?'

'I'm afraid so. She's lining up now but don't worry, in her excitement over the cupcake debacle she didn't realise you hadn't phoned.'

On the other end of the phone, Lauren let out a deep, forlorn sigh. 'I'm such a bad mother. I abandon my daughter for months at a time, palming her off onto a hapless male ...'

'Thanks.'

'And now I can't even phone her on time to wish her a happy birthday.'

She sounded so low, Josh's heart went out to her. 'Firstly, you're the best mother I've ever met. Secondly, you've not abandoned her. You're away serving your country. It's a job you enjoy, true, but also one that's noble, courageous and makes your daughter proud.'

'That's kind of you—'

'I hadn't finished. Lastly, I'm not hapless.'

'Oh, yes, sorry about that.' She let out a soft laugh. 'It was only my frustration talking. You're fantastic to look after her for months at a time. I'm truly grateful, you know I am.'

'Yes, I do,' he replied quietly. 'But equally I'm truly grateful for the opportunity to take care of a girl I happen to love and adore, so we're even.'

There was silence at the other end and Josh could imagine her wiping her eyes. Heck, he felt like crying himself.

'Tell me something silly or stupid to stop me from bursting into tears,' she mumbled finally.

'I fancy Maggie's teacher,' he blurted. 'There, I think that happily fills both your criteria.'

'Oh my God, the new teacher? The apparently awesomely clever and looks-like-a-princess, Miss Baxter?'

He felt his cheeks redden and shut his eyes. Thank God she couldn't see him. 'Yes.'

'And does she? Look like a princess, I mean.'

'She doesn't wear a tiara, but she is like a male fantasy version of Cinderella.'

'Wow, you sound like you've got it bad. Does she know you fancy her?'

'Of course not.' He quickly crossed his fingers, wondering if she'd seen him gawping at her. 'Anyway, it's not like anything's going to happen.' But it didn't stop him wondering whether she'd be interested, though considering his track record, the probability was pretty low. Before Lauren could ask any more questions – knowing her as he did her mind was probably buzzing with them – he got in one of his own. 'How are things with you, anyway? All those men, so little time, eh?'

'All these men and nobody of interest, more like. Look, will you tell Mags—'

'You called, of course I will.'

'And tell her—'

'You love her. Yes, already done. Don't worry, she knows, just as she knows you'll phone again the moment you get the chance.'

'Okay. Right. I'd better go then. And Josh—'

'Thank you. Yes, I know that, too and it's no problem. When I'm not cooking, the pleasure is all mine.'

He ended the call, his eyes wandering over to the playground, and to the lovely Miss Baxter. *Would* she be interested? Did he dare to find out?

It was the end of the school day and Felicity found herself on gate duty again. The joys of being a new teacher.

Speaking of joys, Maggie's dad was heading purposefully towards her. *Compose yourself. He's just another parent.* 'Is there a problem, Mr Taylor?' she asked, finding it odd that he'd come to her and not to his daughter who was still in the playground, giggling with her friend.

His smile was a little tense. 'No, no problem.' He hesitated, the pause so long she wondered if he'd forgotten why he'd come up to her. 'How were the biscuits-masquerading-as-cupcakes?' he finally asked.

'Good thank you, but I'll know better when I've made it through the next twenty-four hours.'

Another tight smile, this time accompanied by a raking of his hand through his hair, which settled disarmingly over his forehead. 'I hope you don't mind me approaching you like this, at school, but I was wondering ...' he trailed off and cleared his throat. 'I was wondering if you fancied a drink sometime?' He must have seen, and misunderstood her look of shock because he hastily added. 'I've cleared it with Maggie's mum.'

He'd done what? Got *permission* to ask another woman out? Maybe she'd got this wrong. Maybe he and Maggie's mum were estranged.

'I hope you don't mind me asking, but do you still live with Maggie and her mum?'

He blinked. 'Well, yes, sort of. At least I do for half the year, but don't let that put you off, please. I am let out for good behaviour.'

His smile licked at her insides but Felicity hardened herself. She had no intention of being the other woman ever again. 'I'm sorry Mr Taylor, but I have no interest in having a drink with you.'

Clear, green eyes blinked again and a slight flush crept up his neck. 'Well, that put me in my place. I'm sorry if I've embarrassed you.'

Shoulders held rigidly straight, he went to find his daughter. When the pair of them returned through the gate, Felicity deliberately avoided his eyes, turning to talk to one of the parents. Only when she'd mentally counted to thirty did she dare to glance back. Had she unconsciously given him *I fancy you* signals? Or did she have *woman who's prepared to sleep with a married man* tattooed on her forehead?

'I see you're eyeing up Maggie's uncle. I can't say I blame you.'

The mother she'd been speaking to smiled, nodding over in the direction of Maggie and her... 'Sorry, what did you say? Isn't that Maggie's dad?'

'Oh no, her father upped and left years ago. Maggie doesn't remember him. She lives with her mother but Lauren's in the Navy so when she's at sea her brother comes to take care of Maggie. Josh Taylor. He's a writer, so I guess he can work anywhere.'

Felicity's heart began to thump. Oh God, had she just turned down the chance of a drink with a very sexy, funny, *single* man?

'Excuse me, I just remembered I need to tell Maggie ... umm ... something.'

Without stopping to think she ran over to where Maggie and her *uncle* were getting into his car. 'Mr Taylor, can I have a minute? Please.'

He paused, his usually dancing green eyes guarded. 'Mags, be a good girl and wait in the car a second.'

After checking she was safely strapped in he moved away so they were out of earshot. 'Look, if this is about me asking you out, I repeat: I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you.'

'I thought you were Maggie's dad.' The words tumbled out of her. 'Which I don't believe was an unnatural assumption as every day since I started here

I've noticed you drop her off and collect her. Plus you answer to Mr Taylor. *And you live with Maggie's mum.'*

For a moment he didn't move, didn't speak, didn't change his stiff expression. Then understanding slowly dawned on him. 'You thought I was *married?* To Maggie's mum. My sister.'

'Yes.'

Some of the tightness left his face and he gave her a slight smile. 'God forbid.' There was an awkward silence and Felicity had a terrible feeling he was going to leave it at that. Simply walk away from her. But then he coughed. 'You noticed me every day, huh?'

She flushed scarlet. 'Yes.'

'And now you know I'm not married. That I am, in fact, very single?'

Her pulse quickened. 'Now I know that, I'd love to have a drink with you.'

His face relaxed and the flashing grin returned in force. 'How about tomorrow evening? We could meet for that drink and if you haven't regretted your decision after the first hour, maybe we could move on to dinner?'

Felicity knew they'd be having dinner. 'I'll look forward to it.'

With a nod and another stomach pulverizing grin he turned back to his car. Just as he was climbing in, he spoke again. 'Oh and if you're really unlucky, I'll bring you a few cupcakes for dessert.'

* Ends *

About the Author Kathryn Freeman



Kathryn was born in Wallingford, England but has spent most of her life living in a village near Windsor. After studying pharmacy in Brighton she began her working life as a retail pharmacist. She quickly realised that trying to decipher doctor's handwriting wasn't for her and left to join the pharmaceutical industry where she spent twenty happy years working in medical communications. In 2011, backed by her family, she left the world of pharmaceutical science to begin life as a self-employed writer, juggling the two disciplines of medical writing and romance. Some days a racing heart is a medical condition, others it's the reaction to a hunky hero... With two teenage boys and a husband who asks every Valentine's Day whether he has to bother buying a card again this year (yes, he does) the romance in her life is all in her head. Then again, her husband's unstinting support of her career change goes to prove that love isn't always about hearts and flowers – and heroes can come in many disguises.

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Raspberries

JANE LOVERING

BANGKOK

I heard the letter box rattle and left the stove to retrieve the glossy blue square of card that lay on the doormat like a tiny reminder that I was stapled to my life here in Yorkshire while others travelled, and saw the eyes peering into the slotted gap through which the postcard had come.

‘Hello?’ I addressed the gaze.

The eyes vanished but were replaced with a mouth. ‘Sorry. You’re the last house on the round and I could smell the cooking. Being a postman isn’t much of a job, but there are compensations.’

‘Like sniffing people’s hallways?’

‘You make it sound dirty.’

‘Well, it’s hardly normal.’ I opened the door to reveal the postman, tousled ginger hair and ridiculous shorts, crouched before the front door. ‘I’m baking cakes. For the cafe down the road.’ I regarded him sternly. ‘That’s my job. Yours, apparently, is being a postman. Now, for *my* job, this is proper behaviour. *You*, on the other hand, have some explaining to do.’

He stood up, brushing dust off pale, lanky knees. ‘Before we go any further, you might want to read your postcard.’ A finger waved at the little slice of Far East view between my fingers. ‘If you’re going to insult Her Majesty’s Postal Service providers and their behaviour, you should at least be in possession of all the news.’

I flipped the card over, my heart starting to pound as soon as I saw the familiar handwriting. ‘It’s from my boyfriend. He’s a travel writer and he and his agent, Meggie, are checking out the possibility of writing a book about a world tour.’

‘I know.’ A half-ashamed cough and pretended interest in the dandelions creaking their way through the concrete of my garden path. ‘Look, postcards, they’re one of the perks of being a postman. That, and watching some total bastard with a snap-closing letter box and a dog with more than the requisite number of teeth, getting his tax bill.’

‘You’re quite an unusual postman, aren’t you?’ I read the three-line message scribbled on the back of Bangkok’s Grand Palace.

*Here in Bangkok. Meggie thinks the book is a go, so might not
be back until after Christmas. Love, Simon*

‘Oh.’ The backwash of disappointment made me temporarily forget the oddness of the delivery. I’d thought having a boyfriend would mean cosy Christmases laughing around an over-decorated tree, not another solo dinner and pretending to offer the sprouts round to *Doctor Who* and the *Downton Abbey* cast.

‘It’s been said, yes.’ Another wide grin. ‘Bangkok, hey? Nice. Do you like travelling too, or is it just him?’

‘I wish I ...’ but I closed my lips over the words. Over the resentments. ‘I’m saving his postcards. It’s a bit like travelling ...’ I waved a floured hand to indicate my wall, covered in idyllic images of places I’d never been to. ‘It’s nice of him to remember.’

‘Back to the cakes then.’ An inclination of the head which sent a lick of auburn hair flopping from under the brim of the Post-Office-issue sunhat. ‘And I’m heading back to the depot with nothing but a rumbling stomach and industrial grade sunburn.’ A wide-mouthed grin, which made him look like an albino Kermit the Frog in a bad wig, and he was gone, loping down the path and flinging a leg over a bicycle that looked as though it were only one evolutionary step forward from a penny-farthing. I turned the postcard over between my fingers. Simon had explained that opportunities to email would be few and far between on his tour of some of the more undeveloped areas of the world, and it was fine, really it was, that he kept in touch by postcard. At least he was thinking of me. But I *had* hoped he’d send more than three basic, informational lines; this was less like a declaration of love and more like a school essay. *But at least he was thinking of me.*

THE MALDIVES

*Sun hot, sea unbelievably blue. Hope the cafe hasn’t closed
due to outbreak of food poisoning yet! Off for massage now,
hotels out here are amazing!*

‘He sounds okay.’ The postman didn’t bother with the nicety of the letter box this time, just coughed on the step and shoved the card into my hand when I opened the door. ‘You look a bit hot.’

The temperature in the kitchen was enough to melt plastic. ‘I’m working on a new recipe, white chocolate and lemon brownies. I’m on the third batch, just can’t seem to get the ratios right.’ I dusted down my front rather self-consciously; I’d got streaks of melted chocolate all over my T-shirt and looked as though I’d been attacked by the Milkybar Kid. ‘They’re all coming out too sweet.’

His mouth twisted. ‘Maybe you need a touch of fruit in there,’ he said, rubbing the back of his wrist over his forehead. ‘Everything could do with a taste of the exotic now and again.’ His pale skin was freckled by the midsummer sun and pink from the exertion of pedalling that antique bike through the Yorkshire dust and unaccustomed heat. ‘A bit of a change from the usual, if you like.’

I thought, tapping the postcard against my teeth. ‘Something like, maybe, raspberries?’

‘Yeah. Something to show that you ... I mean, that the brownies aren’t all sweet and gooey and just rolling over and putting up with ... I’m going to shut up and go now.’ And when I’d stopped considering the viability of mixing raspberries with white chocolate he was nothing but a blur of long limbs and billowing hair freewheeling down the long lane towards the town in a puff of dust.

MADAGASCAR

The next postcard didn’t arrive until autumn was starting to curl the leaves, the heating was on in the cottage and the kitchen was becoming an increasingly attractive place to be. I heard a cheerful whistle and a tap at the window – he’d come round the back. When I opened the door to him I saw the bike lying in the middle of the untrimmed lawn like a sleeping pony amid the last, late daisies.

‘Why do you only personally deliver postcards?’ I took the card. At last he was out of those shorts and into proper trousers, which covered his freckled knees and made him look taller, more official. ‘When it’s bills you’re like a ninja. I turn around and there they are on the mat, not so much as a rattle or a cough.’

‘It’s only because I can’t bear to see your face when it’s bills. If I want that kind of horror I’ll go home and watch *Britain’s Got Talent*. But if you prefer, I’ll hand them over in person, you know, in case you want to faint or scream or something. Er, that’s at the bills, not

at me ...’ He tipped his head to one side and sniffed heartily. ‘Ah. See you took my advice about the raspberries. Good.’

‘Would you ...?’ I was aware of the chill in the air, the contrast between the snappy cold outside and the sweet warmth of the kitchen behind me. ‘Would you like to come in and try one? As you contributed, and everything ...’

‘Thought you’d never ask.’ He smoothed a hand over his ginger curls, which did nothing to tidy them, just bounced them around on his skull a bit, and walked into my kitchen, where he instantly made everything look smaller and a bit doll’s-house cutesy, with his bony limbs and outdoor freshly-freckled face. ‘Couldn’t hint any harder without actually breaking in.’

‘My name’s—’

‘Caroline. Ms – liking the Ms thing, by the way. Not too much “spinster and ashamed”, more “independent woman” – Caroline Cooper, Westerling Cottage, High Grimham, North Yorkshire.’ He did a sideways shrug. ‘Postman. Sorry.’ He held out a cartoonishly long arm. ‘I’m Hugh.’

I felt I should return the ‘knowing’ favour. ‘Ah. And you like chocolate – otherwise you wouldn’t have been sniffing through my letter box – but nothing too sickly. Something with a bit of fruity bite to it, yes?’

‘That’s *exactly* what it would be like if Delia Smith did séances.’ He stood in the cottage kitchen, his skin almost translucent under the fluorescent lighting. ‘Aren’t you going to read your postcard?’

Almost reluctantly I looked down at the picture which glowed up at me. A beach, sea bluer than anything that could truly exist in nature. Trees speckling down to the water’s edge and white, white sand. I turned it over to read the message.

Meggie thinks we should stay here and start writing. Might not be back until Spring – but I’ve not forgotten Christmas. Buy yourself something from me, and don’t forget to send my parents a card!

Hugh sniffed. ‘Don’t suppose that Meggie is short for “Paul” is it?’

‘No.’ I stared down at the message again. Simon had never been the perfect boyfriend, always a little too manipulative, too self-interested, but he professed to love me. Which was nice, because a fifteen-stone girl who spent most of her time in the kitchen and lived in the back of Yorkshire beyond didn’t get that much attention otherwise. ‘Margaret.’

‘Ah.’

I shook my head quickly to dispel the image of sexy, golden-limbed, blonde-haired Simon and the exotically dark, model-slim Meggie splashing through shallow blue waters, hand in hand. ‘We met at a party I was catering,’ I said, rather distantly. ‘He complimented my profiteroles.’

Hugh’s eyes slid south of my face. ‘Well they are quite spec—’

‘And then he came to visit me up here and things kind of ... well. Anyway.’ I cleared my throat and put the postcard down on the window ledge, carefully picture-uppermost. ‘Brownies.’

I slid one of the most recent batch on to a plate. Hugh’s eyes followed my movements as though he was worried that this was all a bad joke and I was going to whip the plate away and, from his expression, he seemed to think I was going to feed it to the dog or something. ‘Here.’

I couldn’t believe the way he received the plate, like a little boy being given a present he never dared believe Father Christmas would ever deliver. ‘Wow,’ he said, and took a bite. ‘No. This is just ... wow.’

His bluey-green eyes flickered and I watched as he took in each separate taste, each new texture: the vanilla-purity of white chocolate, the fresh sweetness of the raspberries and the sharp bite of the lemon. 'If you like I'll give you the recipe. You can get your wife to cook you some. Or make them yourself,' I added quickly, in case he was gay or widowed or relentlessly feminist or something.

He licked the last crumbs from his fingers and grinned that Kermit grin again. 'Look at me. I'm a six-foot-three ginger postman. In the dating pool I come underneath men with pit bull terriers and Jedward in terms of demand. That's why I sniff through letter boxes. It might not be human contact, but it's better than nothing.' He sucked at his teeth. 'And those are good. A little bit of sharpness isn't a bad thing. Right. Better go.'

'I thought this was the end of your round.' I felt ... I don't know, something that wanted to keep him talking. Not just because he liked my brownies, but because of the loneliness that had echoed around his self-description. An echo that had bounced back off my own heart. A cottage in the wilds and a boyfriend who hadn't even asked if I'd like to accompany him to exotic places gave it plenty to rebound from, after all.

'Yep, but if I don't get the bike back by five they come looking.' Hugh licked his lips again, as though trying to remove every last molecule of brownie. 'Armed. No one makes off with a Post Office bike and lives.' A momentary hesitation. 'May I ... I mean, would it be all right if I ...' A longing look cast at the pan of brownies and an almost guilty expression in those lovely moor-sky eyes.

'Course.' I tipped a handful into a brown paper bag and handed it over. 'Enjoy.'

The bike squealed an arthritic protest at being forced into action again, and this time the downhill freewheel was punctuated by a trail of crumbs as Hugh availed himself of some sweet comforts on his way back to town.

ANTIGUA

Autumn had rounded out into early winter. Snow peppered the lawn, frost condimented the tops of the bare trees, and I heard the whistling squeak of the bike brakes and the crunch of the tyres on the track in the clear air. I was looking out for him, as I did most afternoons now, and I beat him to the door and opened it to a hand raised to knock and an outthrust oblong of cardboard.

'Morning, Hugh.' He'd had a haircut since yesterday, which had tidied the reddish mop into a neat, business-like shape and he was wearing a crisply ironed shirt under the postal jacket. *He's got a girlfriend* my inner voice whispered, and I felt a momentary, unexplained heart-sink. 'You look very smart today.'

A grin, and it was the untidy ginger muppet underneath it all. 'Yeah, well, had to make an effort. Today's the day I present the thesis for my PhD. Hello, Doctor Hugh Williams; goodbye postal route 457! Well, hopefully, and providing they accept my thesis and the job offer holds good and they still allow big gingers into the United States of America. They've already got Damian Lewis, so they can't rule me out on that count. I ... kind of ... meant to mention it before, but ...' He looked down at the floor and long fingers fiddled with the edges of card. 'Somehow I never really thought it would happen. It's a bit odd now, come to think of it, all that time and study and now ... this is it, last round and then that's me, done. Anyway.' He thrust the postcard at me. 'You might want to sit down to read this one.'

I already felt as though I'd been punched. He was going? To America? And he'd been studying for a doctorate? 'You ... a thesis?' I moved into the hallway and then down to the kitchen, with Hugh coming behind me.

'"A Cultural Deconstruction of Human Personality Types Portrayed Through Food." I took the postie job to help fund me.' Hugh pushed me down into one of the kitchen chairs

and, without prompting, put the kettle on. ‘Although it was the uniform that really swung it. Read the card.’

Megs has dumped me. Coming home on Wednesday 12th, 5.30 a.m. Thought you might like to pick me up from airport. Bought a mobile, so text on this number when you get to Heathrow.

Simon

I looked around my little kitchen, the windows darkening as the Yorkshire winter night came crowding in, and thought of Simon’s assumption that I’d drive down to London to collect him, after he’d left me here with nothing but postcards. *And* I hadn’t missed the allusion to his and Meggie’s relationship. ‘Bastard.’

‘Really? Thought you’d be pleased he’s coming home.’

I sighed. ‘I thought I would be. But it looks as though Simon is just keeping me around because I’m a nice, sensible, *sweet* thing to come back to. White chocolate *without* the raspberries,’ and I sniffed.

‘You’re not going to cry, are you?’ Hugh asked anxiously. ‘I mean, I don’t have a problem with it, but I’d like to hug you and I don’t want to ruin the shirt. Not that the cleanliness of the shirt has a bearing on my degree, but—’

‘Hug me?’

‘All right then, since you ask.’ And I was enveloped in a massive embrace, punctuated by a ribcage and elbows and parenthesised by two enormously long, freckled arms. ‘My mum died when I was nine,’ a conversational voice said over my head. ‘And since then, no one has fed me home-made cake. My dad brought us up but he’s not much of a baker, dad. He can fry things like no one’s business, but you can’t fry cake. No cake, until you.’

‘Oh, *Hugh* ...’

‘And I meant to ask – your Simon, he’s been all over, but how about you? Have you ever travelled, Caroline? Specifically, have you ever been to America? I understand they have some amazing recipes out there, particularly hot on the brownies ...’

I looked around my lovely, cosy kitchen, then down at my chunky body in the Cath Kidston apron that wasn’t fooling anybody into thinking I was really a size 12, and then at the postcard which still lay on the table scribbled with Simon’s cool assumption that I’d be there, running his errands while he jetted around with whoever took his fancy. ‘I think I’d like America very much indeed,’ I said, reaching into the apron pocket.

Hugh took a small step back and looked down at me. ‘What are you doing?’

I pulled out my phone. ‘Texting him.’

‘Oh.’ His long-limbed embrace slackened a little. ‘Oh. I thought ...’ I held up the phone to show him the message I was sending to Simon. ‘P? Why are you sending him a P?’

‘It’s an emoticon. You know, like a smiley face?’

‘Doesn’t look all that smiley.’

‘No.’ I closed my eyes, raised my chin and moved my body further against his. ‘It’s a raspberry.’

* Ends *

About the Author Jane Lovering



Jane was born in Devon and now lives in Yorkshire. She has five children, four cats and two dogs! She works part-time and also teaches creative writing. Jane is a member of the Romantic Novelists' Association and has a first class honours degree in creative writing.

Jane writes romantic comedies which are often described as 'quirky'.

Her debut *Please Don't Stop the Music* won the 2012 Romantic Novel of the Year and the Best Romantic Comedy Novel award from the Romantic Novelists' Association.

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Jane's novels are available on all eBook platforms and many are also available in paperback.

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Fairground Attraction

EVONNE WAREHAM

She found the corpse quite easily.

She very nearly fell over it.

It was a dark mound, almost indistinguishable in the even darker shadow between a silent carousel and the side of the ghost train. Mercifully, it was too big to be the body she had dreaded finding. And from the groaning noise when her foot connected with something soft, it wasn't actually dead.

It was moving.

Alexa stepped back, conscious of her heart kicking up a notch. *Probably just some drunk, sleeping off a skinful.*

A sudden blast of 'Jailhouse Rock' and a flash of neon, right behind her, spiked her heart rate even higher. She swung towards the source of the commotion. The closest of the fairground rides had lumbered into motion, spinning into a twisting frenzy. When Alexa dragged her attention back from flashing lights and screaming occupants, her corpse was struggling to sit up. Automatically, she put out a hand to help. Livid green light spilled over his face.

'Dom?'

'Lexie!'

'Oh God.' She hauled on his arm. He came to his feet in a rush, to tower unsteadily over her. 'How badly are you hurt?' Recalling herself abruptly, she let go of him, alarmed at the impulse to run her hands over his body, to check for injuries. She hadn't set eyes on Dominic in three years – not since he disappeared undercover with the Significant Crime Unit. 'What are you doing here?'

'What are you doing here?'

Their voices clashed.

Dom shook his head. 'If I tell you'—his mouth twisted—'I'll have to kill you.'

The shiver that crawled down Alexa's spine had nothing to do with the chill of the November night. Standing here in the half dark, the tired old joke didn't sound so tired. *Or such a joke.* He was already turning away. Her hand went out, of its own accord. 'Are you hurt?'

'Someone barged into me, that's all.' He was looking back, towards the lights of the fair. 'Get out of here, Alexa. We shouldn't be seen together.' He stepped away. 'Go!'

Alexa went, hunching her shoulders as she headed towards the noise and the crowds. *Where it's safe.*

This whole trip to the fair had been a foolish impulse. An absurd compulsion she should have resisted. And now ...

She made it to the corner of the ghost train before temptation became too much. One last look over her shoulder. Dom was only a dark shape behind her. Her mouth went dry. He was hurt. He was limping – or was it just a trick of the light? As she swayed, drawn back to him, despite herself, he melted into the darkness, indistinguishable from the other shadows.

She hesitated for only a second before turning back to lights and people. Her mind, as well as her heart, had powered into overdrive. She'd never quite got over that betrayal. *Dominic. Dominic. Why are you here?*

*

'Superintendent wants a word.'

Alexa raised her hand, to let the messenger know she'd heard. She flipped her jacket from the back of her chair and slipped it on, glad she'd taken the time to braid her hair, and apply a trace of lip gloss, before leaving home. The Superintendent's office was at the end of the corridor. In the split second between knocking and getting the command to enter, she suddenly knew what she was going to find inside.

He was lounging, completely at ease, in the visitor's chair. The Superintendent waived her forward. 'Alexa, I think you might remember the Chief Inspector?'

Alexa went through the business of shaking hands and taking a seat as quickly as possible. *Nothing but pain in holding that dangerous hand for any longer than necessary.* He was a Chief Inspector now. That figured. Ambition was his middle name. Whatever it took to climb the ladder.

She shook off clouded memories, and concentrated on what the Superintendent was saying to Dom. 'Inspector Bryce will be your local liaison for the duration of the operation.' Slowly the older man's eyes shifted, taking them both in. 'I'll leave the arrangements to you.' Alexa held her breath. *Does he know something? Suspect?*

Dominic – no, Chief Inspector, safer to think of him that way – was pressing a card into her hand. 'I have your mobile number. I'll be in touch.'

And that was it. She was dismissed. Realisation came quickly, as she made her way back to her desk. *He doesn't want any liaison officer.* He doesn't want to see you, any more than you want to see him. The half hope, half fear, that he might have asked for her faded, more or less happily. *Happily. Definitely happily.* She looked down at the card. She'd expected a phone number, or an email address. There was neither, just Dom's stark black print.

Gio's. 11 o'clock.

Alexa's breath hitched sharply, as the past flooded back.

*

Does he know something? Dom considered the Superintendent's face. The expression was polite, but the eyes were cool. Assessing.

'I realise this operation is on a need to know basis.' The Superintendent tapped the file – the very slim file – on his desk, mouth turned down. 'I trust

that you will still make sure that Inspector Bryce is kept up to speed. She is one of my most valued officers.'

'I'm sure she is.' Dom shifted slightly, to take some pressure off his leg. Aggravated by the stupidity of last night's fall, his knee was already sending out veiled threats of pain to come. 'As you will appreciate ...' He paused. He knew what was in the file. *Almost a big fat zero.* Their polite exchange was a game of bluff, in which he held all the winning cards. This visit was merely a courtesy call – a warning to the local force to stay out of the woods and let the big boys play. 'There is no need for liaison, as such.' He dredged up a smile, to soften the words. 'I'll advise the Inspector if anything relevant occurs.' *And nothing will. Lexie, my darling Lexie, is not coming within a million miles of this.*

*

The bell tinkled somewhere over Alexa's head. It had been heralding customers for at least three generations. Gio's Ice Cream Parlour was a local institution. At this time on a November day, it was almost empty. The morning coffee crowd was sticking to the warmth of the shopping mall. At a window table a couple of teenagers had their heads together, giggling over a mobile phone. Alexa's eyes lingered just long enough to confirm they were both blonde. An elderly man pored over the newspaper crossword. A forgotten cup of tea had gone cold on the table beside him.

Which left the high counter at the back of the shop.

It was standing at the end, in all its glory.

Gio's Special Sundae. Ice cream, brownie crumbs, secret chocolate sauce, a frilly splodge of cream, a maraschino cherry, a scattering of nuts and flaked white chocolate. The sauce glistened, dark and rich. Her mouth was already watering, dammit!

At least there was only a single long handled spoon, waiting in the saucer.

He was sitting next to it, balanced on one of the high stools, right leg extended stiffly in front of him. He was limping last night.

'Is this an attempt at bribing a police officer?'

Dom was shaking his head. 'A gesture of inter-force co-operation.' He indicated the ice cream. 'Go ahead, knock yourself out.'

A man who knows all your weaknesses. What's a girl to do?

Alexa lifted the spoon, and let the first mouthful melt on her tongue. Rum and raisin. He'd remembered. *All your weaknesses.*

He'd turned away from her, hands flat on the counter, one each side of a thimble-full of double espresso.

Why are you here? What's going on? What happened to your leg? The questions lingered in the air un-uttered. She took a spoonful of the sundae, then another.

'I can't tell you what this is about. And the fair last night. You need to forget about that.' The command was low-pitched, aimed only at her. She slanted a glance sideways.

'I do?'

'Yes!' This time it was explosive. *Not so cool, then.*

'Someone attacked you.'

He shrugged. 'They pushed past me. I lost my balance. Nothing sinister.' Alexa licked cream off her spoon, and waited. 'Why were *you* there?' His voice had softened, to a spine caressing whisper. 'She went missing seventy miles away, Lexie.'

Alexa drew in a short, sharp breath. His perception stabbed, just below the ribs. *Katie Jones, schoolgirl, fifteen years old, missing from home for five days – six, now.* Briefly, nausea threatened. Alexa's hand hovered, about to push the ice cream away. With another breath, she settled herself and raised the spoon again. 'Everyone in the county knows about the November Fair. Teenage girls like fairgrounds. Thrill rides and bad boys.' *And you're sitting next to yours.* 'It was worth taking a look, *in my own time.* Okay?' she demanded.

'Okay.' He held up his hands in surrender. 'Just don't go back. Please.' She turned, and for the first time she caught his eyes, full on. Deep, dark blue. Shadowed. 'Promise me, Lexie.'

She could *feel* the tension in his body.

She swallowed. 'If it means that much to you.'

He tapped the counter. 'And not just you. That applies to your colleagues also. The local force has no place in this.'

'Leave it to the experts?'

'Exactly. I don't want anyone blundering into an operation that's been months in the making.' His voice had gone hard, clipped. 'Stay away from the fair, and make sure everyone else does too.'

She finished the last spoonful of ice cream. Her tongue had gone too numb to taste. She pushed away the glass and slid off her stool, stepping back. 'That's your definition of liaison, is it? Get out of my way?'

'Yes, it is.' He hadn't turned to look at her. 'Do your job, Inspector Bryce, and let me do mine.'

She stood for a moment, considering the long line of his back. Then she swung on her heel and headed for the door.

Dom held his breath, until he heard the jingling of the bell that said she was gone. Gio glided over and topped up his coffee, without being asked, clearly thinking he had just witnessed a lovers' tiff. *Had he?*

Dom ran his fingers slowly around the rim of his cup. He and Alexa. Lovers. *Ex-lovers.* They'd both moved on. And up. He was proud of her. *Do you have any right to feel that way?*

A jab from his knee had him cursing and knocking back his coffee, before easing carefully off the stool. Gio took the money at the till as Dom cautiously tested his leg. Except for the aftermath, this painful stiffness in his knee, the incident at the fair had been nothing. A couple of kids who'd brushed past him

in a hurry, looking for a place to do what kids do, compounded by bad light and uneven ground. Proof, if he needed it, that he shouldn't be working in the field any more. But the fair was safe. The operation was not compromised. Everything was going according to plan. But Alexa had been worried. *About you.*

He squelched the flicker of warmth around his heart. *This isn't about you.* She'd be concerned about any fellow officer. And any operation that might be going pear-shaped on her patch. *Just keep telling yourself that.*

He set his teeth and hobbled to the door. For him, this operation was the end of a chapter. Closure. A tiny concealed gun, at almost point-blank range, could do that. He was moving on, to something new, and he'd come to terms. That was what life was all about. Change ... and grow. This field job was absolutely his last. *And it's going to go down like clockwork.*

*

The fair completed its week's run without incident. Alexa stayed away and advised her colleagues to do likewise. She tried to ignore the lift of her heart when Saturday came and went. It had all been a bluff, a diversion. Whatever Dom was doing, it had nothing to do with the fair.

He was still in town. She'd spotted him, walking towards her favourite bench, the one overlooking the sea, and quickly changed direction. She'd been too busy to worry *too* much – after months of painstaking work her team had collared two gangs of scrap-metal thieves and closed down a party of vicious doorstep fraudsters, who'd been targeting vulnerable old people. In amongst arrest warrants and paperwork the missing schoolgirl, Katie Jones, had turned up, holed up in a B&B down the coast with the boyfriend she wasn't supposed to have. It had been a hectic week.

Now, on Sunday, Alexa could relax.

Just out of the bath, Alexa hitched up her towel and glanced at the clock. 6 p.m. *Sunday night, and all's well.* By now the fairground would be an empty field again, rides and wagons packed and gone, leaving only flattened grass and blowing litter. She scrunched down the spurt of annoyance that Dom hadn't seen fit to trust her with the truth about the job. *Not your problem.* She was going to settle down, with a glass of wine and the Sunday night telly. But first she had to deal with the caller who was leaning on her doorbell.

'Come on, Ally.' The letterbox rattled. 'Let me in. This flippin' landing is freezing!' Laughing, Alexa hitched the towel more firmly to open the door. And stepped back in astonishment. The voice had been her best friend, Sophie, so why had Nell Gwyn just minced into her living room, offering her an orange? 'Ally, you should be ready by now!' Nell, who was most definitely Sophie, complete with an appalling black wig, was inspecting her, lips pursed. 'Unless you're planning to go as *Julia Caesar!*'

'Go? Where?' Dangerous foreboding clutched at Alexa's chest. *I think your evening by the TV is about to go up in smoke.*

'Oh Ally – you didn't forget!' Sophie brandished two squares of white card. 'The McAllister party. At the fair?'

Alexa saw her whole life flashing before her – or at least, several recent chunks of it – Sophie, exultant about scoring tickets to some swish party, to celebrate the wedding anniversary of a local bigwig, disappointed that fiancé Carl would be in Hong Kong on the crucial date. Planning a girls' night out instead. Alexa sank down on the sofa. '*That's* tonight?' Horror mounted. 'It's fancy dress. And it's at the fair?'

Sophie sighed, exasperated. 'I *told* you. McAllister paid for the fair to stay over. Special marquees, catering, dancing, a charity auction – the works. The guy is loaded.' She rolled her eyes. 'I can't *believe* I'm having to tell you all this. You never listen to a thing I say.'

'Well, more than half of it is about *shoes*,' Alexa defended herself, as she jumped to her feet, mind racing. 'And I have been kind of busy – you know, fighting crime. Keeping the streets safe. All that stuff.' She'd heard about the McAllister event, in amongst the regular pandemonium of the police station, but it was a matter for traffic and uniform. She'd never even thought about the venue. 'What the hell am I going to wear?'

*

'You don't look too bad, considering we had to improvise. It's a good thing you have a figure like a boy.'

Alexa grinned. Only Sophie, whose double F magnificence was spilling dangerously out of Nell's drawstring blouse, would consider a respectable D cup to be boyish. Her friend was offering an orange, and the tickets, to door security, dressed as a clown. Three more clowns stood in the tented foyer. Security guards. Alexa's grin faded. The hair on the back of her neck lifted slightly. *A lot of muscle for a silver wedding party.*

But this was *some* silver wedding. The site was artfully lit for mood and safety. Rides were already in full swing, overseen by attendants in more clown costumes. Decking had been laid down over uneven grass, waiters moved among the guests with canapés and drinks. Soft drinks, Alexa noted with approval. Responsible citizenship in action. She'd expect no less from a man with McAllister's reputation. Alcohol and fairground rides could be a dangerous combination. Signs indicated that stronger drinks were only available in the marquee at the back of the ground, next to the tent where a charity auction would be in progress all evening. Mr McAllister also knew how to balance conspicuous consumption with a reputation for philanthropy. All the great and the good of the town would be here, willing to support some good causes as they partied.

Couples were dancing in a large cleared space, in the centre of the ground. A highwayman toasted them, on his way past. 'Scored your first century, have you, love?'

'Yes – Marcus.' Alexa recognised the masked figure as the manager of the local bank. 'Robbed any good customers, lately?' she enquired politely.

Marcus was laughing as his diminutive wife towed him away, towards the ghost train.

Alexa looked down at her outfit. A quick trip next door had yielded fifteen-year-old Noah's best cricket whites, fresh from the dry cleaners. With her own shirt and trainers and the waistband of the trousers folded over, they made an acceptable costume. Even better, the bat, held firmly under her arm, was a more than acceptable weapon. Should the need arise.

She scanned the crowd, waving Sophie off when a good-looking caveman invited her to dance. Everything seemed completely normal. Just people enjoying themselves. She snagged an orange juice and retired to a place by the dodgems to drink it. Rather more people dressed as clowns than might be expected, and one, two – her attention sharpened – *three* tall men, dressed as monks, black robed and cowled. And one of the monks with a distinct limp. Quietly, but with deliberation, they were moving towards the auction tent. Alexa drained the orange juice, abandoned the glass, and followed them.

The tent was almost empty. A notice beside the entrance confirmed that the big ticket items – an antique clock, a spa weekend, dinner at a Michelin star restaurant, a week's luxury car hire – would be coming up later in the evening. Right now, a very junior member of the local auction house was practising his skills on the more lowly offerings. And he was doing it rather well, Alexa thought, as she scanned the sparse audience, two of whom had clearly found the tent a convenient place for a snog-fest.

Having drummed up a satisfactory flutter of interest in an aromatherapy facial contributed by the owner of the new beauty salon in the High Street, and knocked it down at a respectable price, the auctioneer was moving on to a set of statues, donated by a local artist. Statues of spectacular ugliness, Alexa realised, as the helpers moved them into position. They could be offered as a set, or as individual pieces, he was assuring the audience, as the last one was moved into place. The sculptress, a rotund woman with a belligerent expression, was sitting in the front row. Two clowns stood either side of the dais that held the statues, scanning the crowd. The three monks, Alexa noted, keeping her head down, but her eyes up, were positioned at the very top of the sloping banks of seats, black habits melting into the gloom.

Having confirmed that no one wanted a whole set of statues, the auctioneer raised his gavel to start the bidding.

In an instant, the atmosphere in the tent changed.

Maybe it was a shift in the lighting, as spotlights high in the canvas homed in on the three hideous statues. Maybe it was the arrival of two more clowns, no longer figures of fun, but bulky and grotesque – garish face paint clogged in stubble and patchwork costumes failing to disguise broad shoulders. Maybe it was the sense – no more than a sense – of more dark figures materialising in the shadows, on the very edge of her vision. Instinctively, Alexa leaned forward, aware of a ripple of silent movement around her. *You're not the only*

one who feels it. Even the intertwined couple came up for air, looking groggily down at the circle of bright light below.

The bidding had already started to build. The auctioneer's head darted from side to side. Twenty pounds, fifty, one hundred. Alexa peered into the dimness of the seating. Three men were making the running on a gnarled representation – of what? Alexa couldn't decide if it was meant to be an animal or a human figure, crouched on top of a wooden block. The artist was preening, patting her hair and glancing round with undisguised glee as the bids mounted. She was the only one. Tension was thickening the air like fog. Alexa's breathing seemed to stop altogether as the auctioneer's voice cracked a little. He was knocking down the squat monstrosity to a bidder in the front row. All she could see was the back of a dark head.

'Going once, going twice—'

'Stop!'

A tall, cloaked figure, in an ornate Venetian mask, flanked by two Templar Knights, strolled down the main staircase. It was a show stopping entrance. People were straining their necks to get a better look. *How did he get up there?*

He'd reached the midpoint of the stairs. The auctioneer was poised, gavel raised and mouth open. 'Sir?'

'Recommence the bidding. I wish to bid on all three pieces – together.' The masked head came round, defying objections. The silence was absolute, pregnant and astonished. *This is what it must be like when someone stands up at the start of a wedding.*

Then the silence shattered.

A string of obscenities rose from the front row. The successful bidder was on his feet. 'I made the final bid, fair and square.'

'And I'm un-making it.' The masked man waved an imperious hand. 'Proceed.'

All hell broke loose.

The four bidders and their henchmen pitched into each other, with a few clowns added to the mix. Impossible to tell if the clowns were trying to prevent the mayhem, or contribute to it. One of the bidders had a Templar in a head lock. Alexa drifted sideways, into a patch of shadow, waiting for her moment. Cowled figures were materialising from the back of the tent, ushering civilians off the premises. A few didn't want to go, but were gently herded. The snogging couple was the last to leave.

Alexa waited quietly in her darkness, all senses alert. The monks seemed content to watch, until one of the clowns barrelled into a dark figure, and turned to throw a punch. In a second the monks were part of the chaos.

Alexa's heart jumped into her mouth as the limping monk, braced against the auctioneer's platform, felled a Roman centurion with a textbook punch. Her tense muscles relaxed. *He can take care of himself. He can still take care of himself.* Reassured, she assessed the rest of the battle and almost smiled.

In the centre of the chaos the sculptress had retrieved two of her creations and with protective presence of mind was dragging them under the curtains of the auctioneer's podium. She had her hands on the third, the biggest and ugliest, when a muscular green haired clown, blood running from a cut lip, broke away and lunged for it. Shouldered roughly aside, the woman lost her balance and sat down with a thump. With a massive heave the clown gathered the statue under his arm and staggered for the exit.

Of their own volition, Alexa's fingers closed around the cricket ball in the pocket of Noah's whites. The exit was to the side of the main area where the fracas was. The sculptress had struggled to her feet, giving chase. The clown was beyond the melee, alone, but already turning to backhand the woman away. *She's going to get hurt.*

It was a clear shot. The ball flew.

Alexa wasn't sure if she heard or imagined the horrible connection with the clown's elbow. His scream of shock and outrage was loud enough to stop the fighting in mid punch. The purloined statue, flying from the stricken clown's grasp, made a long, lazy arc, before hitting the ground. The sculpture went one way, the wooden pedestal, the other. Glittering between them, on the sanded floor, was a computer flash drive and a set of keys.

*

Alexa sat on her favourite bench, looking out to sea. She didn't turn her head until he'd flopped on to the seat beside her. He had a black eye, and a lingering hint of smugness. She'd noticed it before in male colleagues after a successful ruck. 'What exactly was all that about?'

'It was *meant* to be an intelligence gathering operation.' Regret and exasperation, and the unmistakable tinge of triumph, coloured his voice and curled around her heart. And she had to admit, other parts of her anatomy too. He was resting his arms on his knees. His knuckles were skinned. She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her coat to stop from reaching out ... to do what? *Damned if I know.*

'It was a hide in plain sight thing?' She'd deduced that much. 'Auctioning off ... what?'

'Location and access to eight top-of-the-range cannabis farms. There were keys in all three sculptures. Very simple, very clever.' He shifted slightly. She'd turned her head, staring out to sea again, but she felt the movement, right down to her toes. 'Nothing tangible to connect buyer or seller,' he continued, when she didn't speak. 'The winning bidder would have added an agreed number of zeros to the amount. Even with the keys and the locations, there's no proof that anyone involved knew what was in the statutes. The artist certainly didn't. She was livid. Nice shot, by the way. Captain of the High School first eleven, right?'

'Mmm.' She frowned. 'Did I—'

'Break the clown's arm? No, he was only bruised. The statue took the brunt. It wasn't harmed either, just came away from its stand.' The soft laugh was

rueful. 'Our operation was supposed to identify the parties concerned, for further observation ...'

'And now it's all down the tubes.'

'Not entirely.' An edge of satisfaction. 'It was quite a ruckus – plenty of minor charges. And there's always a possibility that someone will grass – sorry about the pun.' He didn't sound sorry. 'The guy in the mask arrived late and thought he could re-write the rules. The other buyers are pretty hacked off about the whole thing.' He shrugged. Again she felt rather than saw the movement. 'No longer my concern. I'm out of that now. Moving on. Mopping up is someone else's baby.'

His touch, when he moved his hand, was feather light and brief. It fizzed into her arm like an electric shock. And brought her eyes up to his face. His expression was impeccably neutral. His poker playing face. 'I got roped in because they wanted someone who knew this area—' He paused, as if he was waiting.

Alexa's throat closed. Her mouth was parched. She swallowed, trying to get the words out. 'And ... the people?' It was as close as she could get to the real question.

He nodded, a short, clipped jerk of the head. 'I wanted ... needed ...'

The pounding of her heartbeat was affecting her hearing, but not so much that she couldn't distinguish the uncertainty in the words. Her breath stuttered as a wave of pain washed up through her chest. *Not pain, longing.*

This man, so self-possessed, self-contained ...

'It wasn't our fault, Lexie.' For a hideous moment she thought he was going to touch her face. *You'll never be able to hold it together.*

She shook her head. 'We ...' Her voice broke. It had just begun, the glorious early days of love, a secret too new to share with anyone else, endless blue skies and singing birds ... and a missing schoolgirl, a frantic hunt, a tragic outcome. 'We were distracted, too wrapped up in each other—'

'No.' This time he captured her hands. Her skin wanted to wind her fingers into his and never let go. Her mind was screaming. She tried to free herself. He kept his hold. 'We didn't take our eye off the ball, Lexie.' His grip tightened. 'We were working sixteen hours a day. She got every resource we had, and more. Hattie James died because she was targeted and groomed by a predator, not because of anything we did. Or didn't do. Hattie died.' His voice was soft with regret. 'But there were three more. Three others he had in his sights. They *didn't* die. We were too late for Hattie – it had gone too far before we knew what we were dealing with. But we weren't too late for the others.'

'And that makes it okay?'

'Yes. No.' His grip had softened, but now she couldn't pull away. 'It's never okay, if a child dies. But you don't have to carry that blame. Or go searching in the dark for every other missing schoolgirl.'

Something was constricting now in Alexa's chest. She'd waited for those words, for so long, from someone. *From him.* But it couldn't be that easy. 'You

walked away. You felt guilty too. You walked away.’ Her voice cracked, on the repetition.

He was nodding. ‘I know.’ This time he did touch her face. She gritted her teeth to keep from turning her cheek into his palm. ‘I did feel guilt. Who doesn’t, when they lose one? But I knew I had to come to terms. The special squad job came up ... I couldn’t reach you. You were on some icy planet of your own making. It seemed ... It seemed better to go, so you could grieve without the reminder. It was all I could do for you, my darling.’

The endearment shattered her heart. The tears started to flow. He’d hauled her into his arms – the warmth of his arms – before she knew what was happening. Then she couldn’t resist. *Didn’t want to.*

They sat like that, for a long time. When the tears subsided to sniffles, he offered her a handkerchief. She hiccupped a half laugh and accepted. ‘The copper’s answer to sobbing females.’

‘If it works, don’t knock it.’ He rested his chin on the top of her head. *How have you got so comfortable, settled here on his knees?*

Knees. She straightened up with a start. ‘Your leg. Am I hurting you?’

‘Not enough to make me stop.’ His arms were very firmly around her. ‘It’s put me out of an operational role.’ The words were flat, matter-of-fact. Only the tiny stiffening of his muscles told her about the pain, mental and physical. ‘That ...’ He stopped. She tilted her head, to look into his eyes. ‘That’s another reason I came back. They’ve given me a new role – office-based.’ His grimace said it all. *Coming to terms.* ‘I’m setting up a new unit, dealing with missing children. I need field officers, good ones, to go to the places that I can’t. You’re the best field officer I know.’

She took a deep breath. ‘You’re offering me ... a job?’

‘If you want it.’ He held her a little away from him. His eyes were clouded. She could feel his tension. ‘And anything else I have that you might want. Marry me, live with me, meet me for pizza every second Wednesday. It’s your choice, Lexie. Whatever you want. Just don’t shut me out of your life. Lying in hospital, with a bullet hole in my leg – I had plenty of time to think. Even without the auction surveillance, I would still have come back. I’ve lost so much. I’m not losing you too. I can’t live without you any longer.’

She clawed in a deep, tumultuous breath. *Work together, live together, love together?* The complexities would be horrendous. Suddenly she didn’t care. He was watching her with an uncertainty that pierced her heart. She lifted her fingers to smooth away the frown lines between his eyes, and felt him exhale as she snuggled into his shoulder.

‘Not pizza.’ She placed the flat of her hand on his chest to feel the rise and fall. Heartbeat. Heart beat for her. They would work it out. ‘I’d rather have an ice cream sundae.’

‘Two spoons?’ There was a distinct tremor in his voice.

‘Two spoons,’ she confirmed, turning her face up for his kiss.

* Ends *

About the Author Evonne Wareham



Evonne Wareham was born in South Wales and spent her childhood there. After university she migrated to London, where she worked in local government, scribbled novels in her spare time and went to the theatre a lot. Now she's back in Wales, living by the sea, writing and studying a PHD in history. She still loves the theatre, likes staying in hotels and enjoys the company of other authors through her membership of the Romantic Novelists' Association.

Evonne's debut novel, *Never Coming Home* won the 2012 Joan Hessayon New Writers' Award, the 2013 Colorado Romance Writers' Award for Romantic Suspense, the Oklahoma National Readers' Choice Award for Romantic Suspense plus was a nominee for a Reviewers' Choice Award from RT Book Reviews.

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