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Heart of Winter

Written by Emma Hannigan

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Emma
Hannigan

*The Heart
of Winter*

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Wicklow County Council

*Attention: Mr Joey Craig
Huntersbrook House
Wicklow
Ireland*

Dear Mr Craig

We are delighted to inform you of our decision to grant your commercial licence as requested. From this date forward Huntersbrook House has permission to operate as a commercial venue. Please note our terms.

- * Licence to serve alcohol must be gained by applying to the address at the foot of this notice.*
- * The owners may host events on the grounds. Insurance for such events may now be applied for using this document.*
- * Huntersbrook House may host paying guests in an overnight capacity.*

We will forward all relevant documents to enable full registration of your home as a business.

Kind regards

M. Brennan

Wicklow County Council

Huntersbrook House

PIPPA SHOT THROUGH THE MAIN GATE OF HER childhood home, Huntersbrook. Almost instantly she passed the gate lodge to her right. The two-bed bungalow with its painted wooden-framed windows and immaculate hanging baskets reminded her of the cottage from *Hansel and Gretel*, minus the cauldron witch and cruelty, of course. It blended in so well, she found it hard to remember it hadn't always been there. Grandma had built it a few years ago as her own oasis, away from the hustle and bustle of the main house. Sadly, she'd passed away before she could really make it her own. Still, Pippa mused, as it had transpired it was a good thing. Her parents Holly and Paddy had taken up residence there a couple of years ago and seemed to have found it quite easy to mould it into their permanent home.

It was still weird to Pippa that none of them actually lived in Huntersbrook House any longer. The stunning Georgian residence had been in the Craig family for generations. But the downturn in the economy had forced them to rethink things. Rather than letting it go, they'd come together as a family to save it.

As she zoomed up the drive she remembered her mother's finger-wagging the last time she'd come home. 'Do you absolutely *have* to drive that fast, Pippa? What difference will it make to your journey from the gate to the front door? Seconds? You need to slow down, my girl. Just look at the wonderful scenery that's

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on offer if you choose to glide down the driveway toward the house.'

Pippa grinned triumphantly as she glanced back at the dust cloud she'd created. She knew she was being a bit of a brat, but she'd always had a problem with doing as she was told. Her mother was right about one thing though, Huntersbrook and the surrounding land was pretty spectacular. After the muggy, traffic-jammed chaos of Dublin city, this really was like a slice of heaven on Earth. Not many houses boasted such an expanse of unspoilt land, bereft of freshly constructed housing estates or even purpose-built shopping centres. The rolling fields as far as the eye could see were a joy.

Grinding to a halt at the back of the main house, Pippa jumped out of her car and stood onto the side, leaning on the door. Craning her neck, she tried to squint across to the right and into next door. Her sister, Lainey, had married Matt from next door and was now living in the farmhouse with her baby son, Ely, and father-in-law, Jacob. Their houses were very much separate, but close enough for Lainey to feel as if she hadn't really left home. That was one of the many differences between the sisters. Pippa would get on a plane train or jet-ski at the drop of a hat if she thought it would lead to an adventure of any kind. While Lainey had always been a home-bird and was perfectly content living a stone's throw from Huntersbrook.

As she walked in the side door to the kitchen Pippa was greeted by a happy screech from Ely.

'Hello baby nephew!' she said scooping him into her arms. 'Hi Lainey,' she said rushing to kiss her sister on the cheek. 'I thought you might still be across the path in your lair.'

'Joey said to be here for ten,' she said. 'It's almost ten fifteen now. I've made scones and the coffee and tea are waiting for boiling water.'

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‘Organised to within an inch of your life as usual,’ Pippa teased. ‘Where are Mum and Dad? I didn’t notice any sign of life at the gate lodge just now.’

‘Might that have been because you careered by at a thousand miles an hour?’ Lainey asked.

‘Who, me? Drive too fast? Nah,’ she said. ‘Have you seen them this morning?’

‘Last I spotted, Mum was wrestling with an apple tree she bought. Dad is pottering in a shed, I’m guessing. Do you know what Joey’s up to?’

‘Not a breeze,’ Pippa said picking a tasty sugary bit from a scone.

‘Hey, get away,’ Lainey said slapping her hand. ‘I’m putting them in a basket and we’ll all sit and have them nicely once Joey arrives. I can’t bear the way you pick like that.’

‘I get it from Mum,’ Pippa said shrugging her shoulders. She put a wriggling Ely down so he could continue playing with his wooden bricks on the kitchen floor.

‘That’s not a good thing,’ Lainey said crossly. ‘It’s so rude to pick food like that. Besides, remember the saying Grandma used to recite? “Little pickers wear big knickers”,’ said Lainey smugly.

‘Well my knickers haven’t changed size since I was sixteen,’ Pippa said slapping her own backside.

‘Don’t I know it,’ Lainey sighed. She looked down at her own figure. Instead of losing the post-baby weight after Ely’s birth last year, she’d kind of filled in around her saggy tummy. Even though her mother and Pippa shared that annoying picking habit, neither of them ever put on weight. She, on the other hand, seemed to put on half a stone by even being in the same room as a calorie.

‘I wish I had your metabolism,’ Lainey said wistfully. ‘I try so hard. I’m good for a week and then I seem to lose the run of myself and eat my way back to square one.’

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‘Don’t be too hard on yourself,’ Pippa said. ‘You grew a person inside you. That has to have a totally nasty effect on your body, right?’

Lainey stopped short and stared at her sister. With her dark sleek ponytail trailing down her slender back and her stick thin legs in her painted-on-tight jeggings, she could easily pass as a model.

‘We can’t all look like you,’ Lainey snapped.

Pippa threw her head back and whistled before bursting out laughing. ‘Touchy touchy! Jaysus, someone got out the wrong side of the bed this morning. How about I go into the pantry and pull a black sack over my head and sit in the corner rustling?’

In spite of herself, Lainey’s scowl turned into a grin. ‘Shut up, Pip,’ she said swatting her arm playfully. ‘I suppose I’m a bit over-sensitive. Mum didn’t help by telling me yesterday that I look “good and solid”.’

Sadie, who’d been their housekeeper for over forty years, came through to the kitchen from the hallway.

‘Ah now Lainey,’ she said gently. ‘I couldn’t help overhearing you just now. Your Mum didn’t mean any harm with that remark. I was there. She was trying to say that you’re toning up with all that walking you’ve been doing.’

Lainey sighed. It was typical that everyone would take Holly’s side. Nobody seemed to recognise that she treated *her* differently from the others. She’d never dare make a remark like that about Pippa. Even if she did, Pippa would probably drop-kick her, Lainey mused. Maybe that was what she needed. To be more forceful with her mother. Maybe then she’d treat her with a little more respect and little less disregard.

‘Your mother loves the bones of you three,’ Sadie continued. ‘Even though you girls and Joey are grown-ups now, she still sees you as her babies.’

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‘Huh,’ Lainey said unable to let the comment slide. ‘When I was a baby she handed me over to Grandma. She was too delicate to cope with me and yet now she expects me to be unfathomably capable in everything I do.’

‘Your mother would walk over hot coals for each one of you,’ Sadie said firmly. ‘I remember the time you had chicken pox, Lainey. You weren’t more than four or five. You had the worst dose I’ve ever seen. You scratched and cried and your mother stayed awake for four nights on the trot bathing you in bread soda baths.’

Lainey busied herself with setting the table. Not for the first time, she felt Sadie had a rose-tinted image of what had gone on during her childhood. Lainey and Holly had been like sandpaper rubbing off one another from as far back as she could remember. No matter what Sadie or anyone else recalled, Lainey knew the truth. Holly had been there physically while Lainey was small, but mentally she’d been in a dark and clouded place where nobody, least of all her daughter, could reach her.

The sound of a car pulling up on the gravel outside made Lainey sigh with relief. She was uncomfortable with this conversation and didn’t want to get into anything negative with darling Sadie.

‘Here’s Joey,’ Pippa confirmed. ‘This better be good. I don’t appreciate being hauled out of bed at the crack of dawn at the weekend.’

‘It’s half ten, Pippa!’ Sadie said with a giggle. ‘Although knowing you it was dawn before that pretty little head of yours hit the pillow.’

Joey arrived in looking very smug.

‘What’s happening?’ Pippa asked, attempting to grab the A4 envelope he was carrying.

‘Ah-ah, all in good time,’ he said slapping her hand away. ‘Mum

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and Dad are on the way. They're having a healthy discussion about an apple tree,' he said. 'They're getting battier by the minute, you know?'

'We know,' Pippa said. 'They were never exactly "normal" but the passing of time is certainly taking them to a whole new level of insanity,' she grinned.

'I'm getting out of here before I swat one of you with a tea towel,' Sadie said. 'Anyone would think this place is flanked by dotty geriatrics. I'd challenge any of you to a game of Scrabble and beat you. My mind is as sharp as a razor and your parents are babies in comparison to me. So be careful who you're labeling as past it.'

Sadie disappeared, tutting and muttering about the youth of today.

Lainey laughed. 'That'll tell you, Pippa. Jeez, I have to hand it to Sadie, there are no flies on her!'

'Quick one before the folks arrive,' Joey interjected, glancing back to make sure there was no sign of them. 'I need a bit of girly advice here.'

'Ooh excellent,' Pippa said leaning in.

'Turns out I'm ninety-nine per cent sure I'm about to be promoted at work.'

'Hey that's amazing, Joey,' Lainey said rubbing his arm. 'Good for you.'

'Yeah, thanks. I'm stoked. But it's kind of a bit awkward. It's going to mean a fair bit of social stuff. Skye isn't really wired for sound when it comes to fancy-schmancy outings. Would you two be a little bit mindful of her over the next while?'

'In what way?' Lainey asked.

'Well, help her out with stuff to wear and all that kind of malarkey.'

'I'll do that,' Pippa said instantly. 'Oh I'd love to give her a

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makeover. I tried a few times when we shared the flat, but she never seemed that interested.'

'Hold up a second,' Lainey said looking concerned. 'Skye is beautiful just the way she is. She's admittedly quite bohemian in style, but that's part of who she is. I'm not sure she'd be too happy with either of us barging in and telling her what to look like.'

'No and I don't expect you to do that,' Joey said attempting to back track. 'It's just that our social calendar is going to fill up quite a bit and these corporate do's are a different kettle of fish from what she might be used to. Just keep an eye, that's all I ask.'

'Sure,' Pippa said looking as if it was a perfectly reasonable request. Lainey wasn't so sure. She was probably overthinking things as usual, but she couldn't help feeling slightly protective of Skye.

'Joey,' she ventured. 'Mum and Dad are about to walk in, but being the elder lemon here, don't forget the reason you feel in love with Skye to start with. You love her because she's different. Am I right?'

'Yeah. Sure,' he said. 'Forget I said anything. It was literally just a thought and I only suggested it so she wouldn't feel ill at ease. Maybe I'm on the wrong page. I'm only a man after all,' he said bumping her shoulder and smiling.

Holly and Paddy arrived in amidst hugs and kisses. By the time they were all seated at the table with a cuppa and a fresh warm scone, they were all begging Joey to put them out of their misery and tell them why he had called them all to a family meeting.

'It's really good news,' he announced. 'We've been granted a commercial licence! We're good to go as far as the authorities are concerned. Huntersbrook House, the venue, can officially open!'

Joey raised his coffee cup high in the air. 'A toast to Huntersbrook House and her bright future.'

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‘To Huntersbrook,’ they all chimed, grinning widely at each other.

Lainey smiled as she clinked cups with each of her family members. None of the gripes and cribs really mattered once they could all pull together when necessary. She glanced over at Pippa and Holly. Her mother had her arm around her sister and was kissing the side of her head affectionately as she smiled in delight. Lainey adored Pippa, but she couldn’t help noticing that her mother had never been that affectionate with her. As if to bridge that painful gap, she scooped Ely from his high chair and spun him around in the air, making him giggle loudly.

‘Wee,’ she said. ‘Huntersbrook is going to be a destination to be reckoned with, baby boy!’

They all clapped as Ely joined in, bashing his chubby hands together, lapping up the good humour.