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The Christmas Surprise

Written by Jenny Colgan

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Jenny
COLGAN

the Christmas Surprise



sphere

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Chapter One

Christmas was over. The baubles had been carefully wrapped, the tinsel packed up, the great tree that stood in the middle of the little village of Lipton, nestled amongst the rolling Derbyshire hills, taken down, its hundreds of white lights coiled away and stored in the old timbered attic of the Red Lion pub.

The snow was still there; a cold Christmas had given way to an even colder January. At the Rosebury home where eighty-seven-year-old Lilian Hopkins lived, the snow made all outdoor walks and activities moot. Most of the residents played chess, knitted furiously, arthritis allowing, or watched television. Since the death of her erstwhile boyfriend Henry Carr on Christmas Eve, Lilian mostly looked out of the window, a small smile

occasionally passing across her face. Henry had been the love of her life, her childhood sweetheart from the war years, who had comforted her when her brother Neddie had been killed at the Front; who had held her hand and made plans for the future after he was called up, who had kissed her fiercely down behind the churchyard where the wild roses grew. He had been her first and only love; her old, neat face and tidy bobbed hair never betrayed the depth of feeling that had once burned there.

Meeting Henry again had been bittersweet: astonishing, wonderful and a strong reminder of time passed that could not be found again. But she had held his hand and been with him to the very end, and that was more, she knew, than many could say of the love of their life.

Further down in the village, the little mullioned windows of the sweetshop were cheerily lit up against the dark and cold, the boiled sweets in the window display glinting and glowing, the bell above the shop tinging every time someone else gave up on their New Year's resolution and slipped inside for some warming peppermint creams, or marshmallows to float in hot chocolate.

And in the tiny back room of the little sweetshop, in the little sink installed there for washing hands and making tea, Rosie Hopkins was being violently sick.



It had been, at least for Rosie and her boyfriend Stephen, the most wonderful Christmas ever. Stephen had proposed on Christmas Day. There had been tearful goodbyes to Rosie's family, who were visiting from Australia, all promising to be back for the wedding, or at the very least insisting that their honeymoon should take place in Oz, which had made Rosie smile. It was hard to imagine Stephen lying on a beach taking it easy with a beer. Stephen was more of a striding about the moors with a stick type person, Mr Dog lolloping ridiculously by his side (he was a tiny mongrel who always seemed to make people laugh. Rosie and Stephen were both very sensitive about people making fun of him).

They had gone back to work, Rosie to the sweetshop of course, which rang with the cheerful noise of children with Christmas money to spend, and Stephen back to teaching at the local primary school, which had two classes in its nicely restored building.

The year was bright and crisp in their hands, freshly minted, and they were too, everyone so excited by their news and enquiring into their plans for the wedding and the future.

Tina, Rosie's colleague at the shop, who was also engaged, was delighted at their news. Rosie apologised for upstaging her, and Tina said, don't be ridiculous, they were going for a hotel wedding, whereas presumably Rosie would be after the full massive affair in the big house,

Stephen being gentry and everything, and Rosie had shivered slightly and thought that Stephen would hate that. His mother was something of a snob and very concerned about lineage, and she would want to invite everyone in the surrounding counties who was in Debrett's. Rosie found the whole thing madly intimidating, being particularly concerned that they'd make her wear family jewels that she would lose or break or something. The idea of that many people looking at her filled her with nerves anyway. She and Tina were very different.

Stephen hadn't really mentioned the wedding itself, beyond referring to her as 'the wife' – not that she had ever thought he was the type of guy who would have a lot of input into invitation design and all that – and she occasionally fantasised about them just slipping off somewhere really quiet and doing it, just the two of them, at Gretna Green or a little room somewhere.

Then she thought of her mother's face – and, worse, her great-aunt Lilian's – if they tried to slope off somewhere, and how her nieces would react to her retraction of the fiercely extracted promise that they could be bridesmaids (although Meridian, who was three and something of a tomboy, had made her agree that she could be a boy bridesmaid, and Rosie had decided to attempt something along the lines of kilts). Well, they would have to put on some sort of a do. But for now she was revelling in the very sense of it, of being newly

affianced, of waking up every day next to the man she loved so much and still couldn't quite believe was hers. Let the snow fall, she thought. Everything in its own time.

That, of course, was before she started throwing up in the sink.

Tina, on the other hand, was having so much fun selecting stationery, choosing flowers and colour schemes and favours, and censoring speeches. Her wedding would be held at the Hyacinth, the local fancy golf hotel that served overpriced non-ironic prawn cocktail and usually had groups of loud red-faced men propping up the corner of the bar and complaining about foreigners. She was having a sit-down dinner for a hundred in the main banqueting hall, with a black and white theme for the guests, a choreographed first dance (Rosie couldn't imagine what her charming but straightforward fiancé Jake would think of that) and just about every girl in the village as a bridesmaid.

But Rosie did love twirling the beautiful ring around her finger (they'd had it resized to fit; it was extremely old and belonged to the slenderer fingers of an earlier age, or, Rosie imagined Stephen's mother thought, a more refined breeding) and caressing the dull patina on the gold, which could not dim the deep shine of the four stones, so fashionable in their day, that went with the colour of her eyes. It was by far and away the most

valuable thing she had ever owned, and she was terrified of losing it. Stephen laughed when he saw her constantly fiddling with it.

'It's like you've never had any jewellery,' he said, and Rosie had looked at him and blinked and said, well, no, she hadn't, nurses weren't really allowed to wear it, and he'd pulled her close and said he wanted to buy her all the jewellery in the world, and she reminded him that they didn't have any money and he'd laughed and said, oh no, they didn't, would fish and chips do for now, and she'd said, yes that would be fine.

So even despite the odd spewing moment, it took Rosie a couple of months to notice that she was feeling a little peculiar most of the time. She assumed it was just excitement at the way their lives were going, and even then she was busy in the shop and assumed it was nothing, and she couldn't possibly go to Malik's shop – the local Spar, which sold everything – and buy a pregnancy test because it would be round the village at the speed of light and everyone already had more than enough interest in their lives together, thank you very much, so she'd have to wait to drive into Carningford, the nearest large town, AND she hadn't mentioned it to Stephen in case he got unnecessarily worked up (proposing to her was, she sensed, probably enough of a gigantic upheaval in his life for one year).



It was late February when she snuck away one Monday morning, telling Tina she was going to check out some new Parma violets, and drove to Carningford at top speed. Then when she left the chemist's, with shaking hands, she realised that she couldn't wait after all and had to go to the horrible toilets in the shopping centre that were full of teenage girls shouting. She wondered how many people before her had done exactly the same thing, how many people had had their lives changed in this exact space simply because it was close to the chemist, and she looked at it and didn't understand what it meant, and read the instructions again and still didn't understand, and then finally accepted that there were two lines, clear as day, one straight, one a little wobbly; one was her and one was Stephen, and together they meant …

'Oh my God,' Rosie said, dropping down onto the loo seat. 'Oh my God.'

In the next booth over, a couple of teenage girls were talking loudly in a strange accent that was half local, half an attempt at a kind of London slang.

'So I says to him, awriight … '

Rosie fumbled for her phone and thought she was going to drop it straight down the loo. She wanted to wash her hands, but oh, she was here now, and what was she going to do anyway, she couldn't call outside.

'So I says to her, you backs off RAGHT NOW, innit . . . '

Stephen didn't keep his phone on in class; she'd have to call the office. She tried to keep her voice steady when Carmel, the school secretary, answered, although it was considered very odd to call a teacher in the middle of the day.

'You want Stephen? Is everything all right?'

Rosie thought again how, even though she didn't miss London very often, she had rather enjoyed its anonymity.

'Fine!' she trilled. 'All fine! Great, in fact! Just a little thing . . . '

'Because you know it's choir and he's a bit busy . . . '

'I'll be two seconds,' lied Rosie.

'I'sa gonna duff you up,' said the voice loudly from the next cubicle.

There was a silence.

'I'll just get him,' said Carmel.

Rosie rolled her eyes, her heart hammering in her chest.

'What's up?' said Stephen, when he finally got to the phone. 'Carmel says you're being duffed up!'

'She NEVAH,' came the voice.

'Uh, no,' said Rosie. A mucky toilet in a horrible going-downhill shopping centre with two screeching fifteen-year-olds – a reminder of what awaited them one day – wasn't exactly how she'd dreamt of this moment.

'Um, it's something else.'

'Good.'

'So AH says, YOU UP THE DUFF?'

'Who are you with?' said Stephen.

Rosie closed her eyes.

'Nobody. But listen . . . '

'An' SHE says, SO WHAT IF I AM, an I'm like, SLAG . . . '

'I'm up the duff,' said Rosie.

'Wha'?' said the girls next door.

'Mr Lakeman, I need go toilet, please,' came a small voice from Stephen's end.

'What?' said Stephen, who thought that saying 'pardon' was common.

'Um. Uh.' Rosie realised she was about to burst into tears.

'Um, yes,' said Stephen desperately.

'Yes?'

'No, I'm talking to Clover Lumb. I mean, yes?'

'UH,' said Rosie. Her hand was shaking as she held up the little stick. 'Yes. I mean. I think so. No. Definitely. Yes. YES.'

There was a long pause.

'Oh my goodness,' said Stephen. 'Miss Hopkins, you do not mess about.'

Rosie choked, half laughing, half crying.

'Plus, I was rather under the impression that I'd already sealed the deal.'

'That's right, I did it all by myself.'

Stephen let out a short. barking laugh.

'Oh Lord, I guess it was always going to happen sooner or later.'

'I did tell you we should get central heating.'

'This really is quite a lot sooner, though, isn't it?'

For a moment Rosie forgot all about the horrible toilet, the fact that it was freezing, the obviously earwigging girls next door, the whole new world that had suddenly flung itself open in her face. Despite everything to come, it was, as it so often was, just her and Stephen, in their little bubble, just the two of them, while the rest of the world faded away to white noise.

'BAD sooner?'

She could hear the warm smile in his voice, and everything around her suddenly became warmer too.

'Lord, yes. Awful. You can tell my bloody mother.'

'Well you can tell Lilian.'

They both thought for a second about Rosie's beloved great-aunt.

'No, we can tell her together,' said Stephen eventually. 'Anyway, order a lemonade in the Red Lion and it'll be common knowledge all over town in about fifteen seconds.'

