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Creature Comforts

Written by Trisha Ashley

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TRISHA ASHLEY

Creature Comforts

AVON

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Prologue: Halfhidden, West Lancashire, 1993

That evening, Baz Salcombe's old Range Rover, which was mainly used by his teenage son, Harry, and his friends, passed through the stone gateposts of the Sweetwell estate and paused briefly in the blackest of shadows by the turn to the Lodge, before pursuing an unsteady course up the dark, tree-lined tunnel of the drive.

The road beyond the first sharp bend first hunched itself up and then dipped deeply into a hollow, but either the driver had forgotten that or was recklessly convinced that the car would fly over it, for it suddenly leaped forward with a roar – then the brake lights flashed and it swerved, flipping sideways into the trees with an almighty crash.

The ominous sound, together with the incessant blaring of the jammed horn, carried as far as the Lodge and set off a cacophony of barking from Debo Dane's Desperate Dogs Refuge. Judy Almond, her friend and housekeeper, who was starting out for the local pub to collect Debo's niece, Izzy, stopped dead with the car keys in her hand, heart racing.

Tom Tamblyn was halfway down the woodland path that led to his cottage by the Lady Spring when he heard the crash, but Dan Clew, Baz Salcombe's gardener, was first on

the scene, for he'd been so close by that he actually felt the resonance of the impact through the soles of his feet. Arriving at a run, he found the crumpled car lying on its side in a thick tangle of old trees, wheels still spinning and the headlights blazing out at a crazy angle.

The uppermost doors had burst open and, to his great relief, he saw his son Simon climb out and then stagger up the bank, where he slumped with his head in his hands. A girl was screaming hysterically and even before Dan had fished out a torch from his pocket and investigated, he guessed it would be Cara Ferris, the local vet's daughter.

Cara, her face masked with blood from a deep cut, was already frantically scrambling out of the back seat and it looked as though she'd had a lucky escape, for a branch had impaled the car from front to back, as if preparing to spit-roast it.

Dan moved the torch beam to the front and could see at a glance that his boss's son, Harry, had taken the brunt of the collision and there was nothing to be done – and the girl slumped next to him had a bad head injury and didn't look in much better shape. He paused for a moment, looking over his shoulder as if to check for any sign of other rescuers, before reaching in and gathering up her small, slight form.

Tom Tamblyn was just in time to see Dan lift the unconscious figure out of the front of the car, before laying it down on a bit of flat turf next to the drive.

'Is that young Izzy Dane?' Tom gasped, still panting for breath, for he was somewhat beyond the age of sprinting up steep paths. 'Eeh, she looks bad – and you shouldn't have moved her with that head injury, Dan.'

'Thought I'd better in case the car goes up – there's an

almighty stink of petrol,' Dan said shortly, looking up. 'She was in the front with Harry and they had the worst of it – my lad and the Ferris girl were in the back and got themselves out.'

He nodded at Izzy. 'If you think *she* looks bad, you should see Harry.'

'Like that, is it?' Tom got out his own torch, took a look inside the car, and came back, shaking his head.

'Poor lad,' he said. 'But he's in the passenger seat so . . . are you saying young Izzy was driving? She's not old enough to have her licence yet.' He took off his old tweed jacket and laid it over the still figure on the grass, after checking her airways were clear and she still had a pulse.

'She was in the front next to Harry – it's clear enough what happened.'

'Your Simon always drives them back from the pub, though, doesn't he?' Tom said. 'On account of being teetotal.'

'Not this time.'

'This is all Izzy's fault!' Cara exclaimed hysterically, the wadded hem of her T-shirt held to her bloody face. She'd scrambled up the bank and was sitting next to Simon, who was still slumped with his head in his hands. 'I'm going to be scarred for life – and Harry?' Her voice rose shrilly. 'What's happened to Harry?'

'It was Howling Hetty's ghost that did it!' Simon slurred, looking up with a face as milk-pale as any wraith, and then he threw up copiously into the grass next to him, narrowly avoiding Cara.

Tom blanched and said uneasily, 'Nay, never say you've seen her!'

'Of course he hasn't! Simon, pull yourself together and

ring for help, if you haven't already,' Dan snapped. 'What's the matter with you?'

'Teetotaller or not, he's drunk,' Tom said, fishing a mobile phone the size of a brick out of his trouser pocket and dialling 999.

'I'd better go down to the Lodge and tell them . . .' Dan stopped, glancing at Izzy, still lying unconscious on the grass.

'No need, they'll have heard that damned horn and be here any second,' Tom said. 'The whole of Halfhidden will have heard it.'

And he was right, for the sound echoing urgently up and down the valley was a siren for a disaster that had ended one young life and would forever change those of the other occupants of the car that night, but most especially Izzy Dane's.

Chapter 1: All Fools' Day, 2012

'Izzy – just the girl I need,' Harry said as I came level with the Range Rover, heading towards the steep path up through the Sweetwell woods to the Lady Spring and beyond it the Lodge, where I lived with my guardian, Aunt Debo, and her friend and housekeeper, Judy.

He was leaning his tall, skinny frame against the open door of the car, as if he might fall down if he didn't – and going by the sparkle in his green eyes, he'd drunk more than enough for that.

'Who, me?' I asked, pausing uncertainly.

My recurring dream reran its usual course, a brief video clip of a golden evening and four young lives full of hopes and aspirations.

Harry and his friends had seemed so grown up and sophisticated to my sixteen-year-old eyes. They were all about to go their separate ways: Harry to medical school, and quiet, unassuming Simon to study horticulture at a nearby college, while Cara, who'd grown as tall and thin as a beanpole, had only days before been spotted by a top modelling agency and, much to her parents' dismay, was poised to turn down her place at Oxford.

I always wished I could hang on to the dream long enough to see exactly what madness made me get behind the wheel of that car, but instead I usually woke suddenly, jerked right out of the past, just as I'd been summarily ejected from Heaven when I was in a coma in hospital after the accident . . .

For once, however, the picture dissolved as slowly as morning mist in the sun and I swam back up into wakefulness and the rattle of the ceiling fan in my Mumbai hotel room . . . *and* the unwelcome memory of the previous night's phone argument with my fiancé, Kieran.

Well, I *assumed* he was still my fiancé, though that might change once we met up at his parents' house in Oxford on Monday and I laid on the line exactly what I intended to do next and, more importantly, where I wanted to do it.

It was ironic that our relationship had gone pear-shaped only once we'd finally decided the time was right to stop working abroad and settle down together in the UK. And last night, when I'd told him I'd already invested some of the small legacy left to me by my father into commissioning stock for the online retro clothes shop I was going to set up, he'd been furious, even though I'd never made any secret of my plans.

He was even angrier when I added firmly, 'And don't count on the rest, because I'll probably need all of it to bail Aunt Debo out. The kennels are having a *huge* financial crisis.'

'Your aunt's affairs are always in financial crisis,' he'd said dismissively. 'She overreaches herself taking in all those dogs that are too vicious to be rehomed, so there's no point in throwing good money after bad.'

Then he'd claimed that we'd agreed to use my legacy as

part of a deposit on a house, even though we'd never so much as discussed it. And at that point I started to wonder if he'd ever taken in a single thing I'd said to him.

Until we'd visited his parents in Oxford the previous year, he'd certainly never mentioned to me that he had any intention of going back there to live and work. He seemed like an entirely different person once we'd set foot on UK soil . . .

'Look, I've got to go and pack. We'll discuss it all on Monday, when I'm back,' he'd snapped finally, then put the phone down on me.

I felt angry, confused and very upset. Why, over the course of our three-year engagement, had I never realised that the laid-back, good-natured, popular and cheerful Kieran I'd tumbled headlong in love with existed only as long as everyone else was falling in with his plans? But then, we'd spent most of our engagement on separate continents and even when we had managed to make our vacations coincide, we'd spent them on romantic breaks in exotic locations, watching the sun coming up over the Serengeti, or setting over the Taj Mahal, so I suppose it wasn't really surprising that we appeared to have entirely misread each other's character.

It was unfortunate that I could never sleep on planes, since the long flight back gave me way too much time to think. Appropriately, it was due to arrive in the UK on 1 April, All Fools' Day.

I was jammed between two large, sweaty, heavy-drinking businessmen in suits, who sprawled thoughtlessly, legs wide apart and arms akimbo, as if the seat between them was empty. I might have spent the whole journey bolt upright, with my feet together and arms clamped by my sides, except

that although small and skinny I have *extremely* sharp elbows . . . and also an unfortunate habit of kicking intruding ankles very sharply.

After a few mutterings and dirty looks, to which I responded with sweetly smiling apologies for my nervous tics, they gave in and subsided in opposite directions away from me and I was left to my unwelcome reflections.

The previous night's argument with Kieran, unsatisfactorily conducted over a patchy phone line, only added to the feeling of acute cold feet I'd recently been developing about our relationship. Now I suspected there was more than a hint of frostbite setting in around my toes.

It wasn't that I didn't still have feelings for Kieran – a vision of his blunt-featured face with its slightly wonky, rugby-bashed nose, under a mop of sun-bleached fair hair popped into my mind and slightly weakened my knees, if not my resolve – but did he love me enough to change his plans, rather than assume it would be the other way round?

I suspected not.

When we first met, it felt so right that I thought falling in love with him must be part of my preordained destiny. Even though my best friends, Lulu and Cameron, teased me about my conviction that I had a near-death experience and went to Heaven while I was in a coma after the accident, and was sent back only because I had some important purpose to perform in life, I *knew* it was real. Since then I just had to tune inwards to the voice of my guardian angel from time to time to check I'd taken the right turning . . . only with Kieran, I think I must have fallen for him so hard that I misread the message.

My path through life had appeared clearly marked till

then, for after studying Textiles and Design, I'd accepted a job with the Women's World Workshops Foundation, which sent me on assignments all over the world, though the majority were in India. The pay was minimal, but the job satisfaction immense: discovering the skills and artistic heritage of each area and finding ways of utilising them in the making of beautiful garments, the sale of which could transform the lives of the local women involved in the scheme and, through them, those of their families and even their whole communities.

And all the time I was amassing a huge portfolio of colours, designs, patterns, ideas and contacts, ready for the day when I would finally go home for good to Halfhidden, the small village in west Lancashire where I grew up, and set up my own business selling retro-inspired clothes.

Yes, the way forward had unrolled in front of me like an inviting magic carpet . . . until I literally bumped into Kieran in Pakistan, where he was working as a doctor for a medical charity and I was helping some enterprising local women to set up a co-operative making woven jackets.

It seemed like sheer serendipity that we should have been in the same place at the same time . . . though not so serendipitous afterwards, since we rarely managed more than snatched days together whenever we could make our leaves coincide.

Perhaps if we'd spent more time in each other's company, we wouldn't still have been engaged.

I'd always believed that Kieran was a wonderful doctor who loved his work as much as I loved mine – it was just that until a few months before, he hadn't mentioned that he'd always intended joining his family's GP practice in

Oxford. When I discovered this, he'd suggested that I could just as easily set up my business there as anywhere else.

But although Oxford was a lovely city, it wasn't *my* city. I'm a country girl, used to living on the edge of moorland, a short drive from endless expanses of beaches, not a hemmed-in-by-dreaming-spires one.

And then, Kieran's parents were a bit of a shock, too. Miranda, his overbearing mother, and Douglas, his sarcastic, know-it-all father, not only assumed I'd fall in with Kieran's plans, but had already started to look for a house for us. Miranda was even trying to take charge of my wedding, checking out reception venues at stately homes within easy reach of Oxford. That was the last straw.

'I think you're being very ungrateful, when my mother's taking all this trouble,' Kieran had said, when I'd rung him, furious. Then he'd added that since I was always banging on about *my* destiny, I should realise that joining his parents' GP practice was *his*.

We'd had so many arguments recently and that last one had reached a sort of crisis point, so that although I intended going straight from the airport to Oxford, as we'd arranged, I resolved that when Kieran arrived the following day the discussion was not going to go the way he so clearly expected it to.

Suddenly my inner voice was telling me, loud and clear, to go home to Halfhidden and that I was needed there – not only by Aunt Debo, but also by my friend Lulu.

Lulu had been living in France for years, in an increasingly abusive relationship with an older man called Guy, who'd turned out to be an alcoholic – and since he had his own vineyard, that gave him rather a lot of scope. He hadn't been

physically abusive to her, but instead sapped her spirit and self-confidence over the years with the drip, drip, drip of criticism. Cameron and I had both worried about her, but there wasn't a lot we could do.

She efficiently ran the self-catering holiday *gîtes* and B&B rooms in the small manor and outbuildings of the estate, while Guy occupied himself with the making and consumption of wine. I'd visited only once and, on the surface, he'd been jovial, charming and welcoming . . . though since Lulu, Cam and I emailed each other most days, I knew that he was jealous of any other men who might show an interest in her.

Cameron went out there every summer to teach watercolours at their annual artists' week, and Guy tolerated his presence because he was under the misguided impression he was gay!

Then, at the end of the last summer school, Guy had been off on a bender and Lulu had finally snapped, packed a bag, grabbed her passport and left with Cam.

Now she was living in a static caravan in the small paddock that had once been occupied by her pony, Conker, behind the Screaming Skull Hotel in Halfhidden, and trying to expand the Haunted Weekend breaks set up by her parents into week-long Haunted Holidays.

'I need you,' she'd told me during our last brief phone call. 'My brother, Bruce, and his wife, Kate, have taken over the pub and restaurant, leaving Mum and Dad to concentrate on the hotel side, and I'm sure they only handed over the management of the Haunted Weekends to give me a role. So my Haunted Holidays simply *have* to be a success. I need way more ghostly goings-on and you have a better imagination than I do.'

'Why don't you ask Cam's grandfather, Jonas?' I'd suggested. 'He told me all kinds of old legends and stories when I was little, so I'm sure he could come up with some ideas – especially if it brings more visitors to the Lady Spring, too. In fact,' I'd added, 'why not call a meeting and get other people from the village on board? This could bring visitors to the whole valley, not just the pub.'

'Great idea,' she'd enthused. 'See, I said you have lots of imagination!'

Now she was going to do just that, holding the first meeting on Tuesday evening – so if Kieran and I had the almighty falling-out tomorrow that I suspected was on the cards, I'd be back in time for it.

'I'm so looking forward to seeing you again,' Lulu had said. 'Do you know, it's been nearly four years? And Cam hasn't seen you for even longer. It's lovely that Cam has moved back here too, but it's not the same when it isn't the three of us.'

'No, you're right,' I'd agreed, and then suddenly I'd longed even more to be at Halfhidden again, that Shangri-La of my childhood. It was pulling me back and, despite what had happened in the past, it would always be the place where I felt I truly belonged.

I got off the plane in much the same sticky and dishevelled state I'd got onto it, though at least I'd sent most of my heavy luggage on to Halfhidden and only had one suitcase with me.

Kieran's father was meeting me, which made me feel a little awkward, anticipating the next day's full and frank discussion. I wasn't sure what would happen after that,

except I'd be going straight home, leaving the ball in Kieran's court.

There had been no getting out of it, though: Douglas had to be in London for some meeting or seminar the day before, and had stayed up to have lunch with friends before heading home, and he'd insisted on collecting me from Heathrow on his way back to Oxford.

'Rough journey?' he said, after failing to recognise me until I went right up to him. This lack of tact only hardened my resolve as we set off towards Oxford, and since I was thinking ahead to what I was going to say to him and Miranda when we arrived, it was a while before I noticed he was driving very fast . . . and also, unless he'd taken to using whisky as an aftershave, he'd been drinking.

And on that very thought, even though we were just approaching a sharp bend, Douglas recklessly swung out to overtake a lorry – straight into the path of a small blue car coming the other way.

There wasn't enough room to get past and Douglas jammed on the brakes, jerking me sharply forward . . . Then the weirdest thing happened. It was as if, for just a second, the fabric of time ripped open and I fell through, right into the Range Rover on the night Harry Salcombe died.

Then, equally suddenly, I was catapulted out again, into a gentle, familiar bright light, filled by a soft susurration of wings and a hint of celestial music . . .

I found I was now hovering above the car, which had spun right round and was facing back the way we'd come, while the small blue one was in a ditch. I could see myself sitting like a statue in the passenger seat, eyes wide with shock, and hear the thin thread of Douglas's voice, as if through water.

'Come on, Izzy, be quick – change places with me!' he demanded, pulling at my arm urgently, as if he could drag me across into the driver's seat. 'Izzy, come on, I'll lose my licence,' he snapped. 'Pull yourself together, you're not hurt.'

Then he sharply slapped my face and instantly I was back in my body and gasping with shock, partly at the blow and partly from once again being wrenched back from Heaven.