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The Xmas Factor

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Chapter 1

September

It's never too early to start planning for Christmas. If you prepare your 'to-do' lists well in advance, and take them with you everywhere you go, you'll beat the rush and leave the competition standing!

'Sorry, sorry. So sorry.' Sweating slightly, Beth stepped from the heat of the September sunshine into the gloom of the village hall. The rest of the committee was already there, of course, on stacking chairs ranged round the splintery trestle table, papers fanned efficiently in front of them. The wooden floor felt slightly gritty under her sandals (probably due to badminton on Wednesday nights) as she made her way over to take the only chair left vacant.

'Well, you're here, that's the main thing.' Irene smiled briskly, formidable in her chairwomanship, with only a hint of disapproval. 'And just in time for coffee.'

Right on cue, a clinking, over-laden tray nudged cautiously around the swing door from the kitchen, followed by the tiny, tweed-clad figure of Mrs Godfrey. Beth forced herself not to watch the old lady wobble slowly towards them, her snowy hair, as always, so tightly permed that it looked as if she had a cauliflower strapped to her head.

Just three months ago, at Beth's very first VEG (Village Entertainments Group) meeting, she had instinctively leapt up to offer the minute octogenarian a helping hand – not a

mistake she would make again. Not after the ticking off she'd received. It didn't seem to matter that half the coffee ended up in the saucers, or that the heavy-duty crockery, with its distinctive blue rim, was dwindling faster than dew on the village common on a midsummer morning. Mrs Godfrey had apparently been making teas and coffees for the committee since the late 1950s, and was not going to relinquish her role any time soon, thank you very much. She regarded Beth now with sulky suspicion – although according to Jacob that was the way she behaved towards anyone who had moved into Milton St David in the last forty years.

Once the tray was safely deposited on the table, Beth wrenched her full attention back to matters arising. The agenda was always more of a starting point than anything to be too strictly adhered to and this time, item three – the mooted Safari Supper – had provided a springboard for a debate about the merits of various TV chefs.

Beth knocked back the tepid brew from her half-empty cup, and glanced round the table. To her right, the Ancients – stalwart, creaky widows, for the most part, who inhabited some of the prettiest and most significant houses in the village. Immaculately coiffed at all times, they dressed in serviceable tweed winter and summer alike but, despite appearances, were the real powerhouses in the community, and because they had lived there for years, could provide precedents for almost every decision the committee ever came to – and inclined to revisionism that would make Stalin blush.

To Beth's left, the incoming professional mummies – she'd dubbed them the Village Fates – a terrifying and highly competitive bunch. Glossily groomed and expensively highlighted, this lot had abandoned careers 'outside the home' and were now channelling all their considerable ability and energy into their domestic lives, their pretentiously named children and, their real goal, making the little village of Milton St David

desirable and chic, in an interior-decorating-magazine kind of way.

Not for the first time, Beth found herself positioned between the two factions, and leant back in her chair to make the most of it. Like Switzerland, she remained resolutely neutral. Neither side seemed to want to claim her and, so far, being the new girl on the block she had only been entrusted with washing-up and selling raffle tickets, despite Jacob's gentle urging that she 'get stuck in' to village life. Although she was of an age with the Fates, the fact that she had a 'proper job' with a doctorate to boot, no children and no desire to listen to them drone on and on about nanny misery and the pros and cons of three-wheel buggies meant she had nothing in common with them. She was so busy preparing for the imminent arrival of a new year's influx of students in college that time for 'a quick tennis four and a bite of lunch' was mercifully out of the question. Her marriage seven months ago to Jacob, moreover, meant that they bracketed her with the older set along with him. Didn't they know sixty was the new forty?

The Fate that had befallen Beth today was Tamara Sinclair – all leggy and alluringly tousled. She turned to Beth, sniffing, looking rather like an Afghan hound. 'Mmmm. Nice perfume. Very spicy.'

Beth felt herself flush. Rumbled! The aroma from the morning's cookery orgy must be clinging to her clothes. 'Er, yes,' she improvised, 'that's it. Jo Malone. I absolutely adore it, don't you? It's the nutmeg and ginger fragrance.' Tamara had a definite look of respect, and Beth turned away smiling. And a dash of suet thrown in, she laughed to herself.

'Order!' Irene tapped her cup with a spoon and looked down at the sheet in front of her with ill-concealed disdain. 'Well, that's the, er, Safari Supper taken care of. We've never done anything like it before, of course, but it might just work. We'll see, shall we? If we put a little mention in the newsletter,

perhaps you can write that, Alison, to explain exactly what's involved? Personally, I think it's better to stay with the tried and tested. Our whist drives are always very popular.'

The Fates sat back, exchanging amused glances but triumphant that their idea had been accepted, albeit slightly railroaded by the Ancients. Irene cleared her throat and plunged on. 'And now what about the Mistletoe Meet? I think it should be resurrected after four years' absence. How about you?'

Silence.

Irene gazed round the room but all eyes were averted. Beth looked around. Now this was interesting. Normally the Ancients and the Fates were jockeying for position to seize control of functions.

'It used to be such fun and it would be good to have something to bring the village together at Christmas again. Who's willing to take the plunge?' Her eyes swept the group, who studiously avoided them. 'Beth, perhaps you'd like to take on the mantle this year?' There were some suppressed gasps around the room from the Ancients, but Irene's voice was warm and coaxing. 'It would be just the thing for you. Help you get to know people. And you'd have plenty of assistants. Wouldn't she, everyone?' Vehement nods and smiles all round. 'So I'll put you down for that, then. I'll just run through the details with you later. I think we've got the lists from previous years. I'll look them out so you can get cracking.'

Hang on – this was beginning to sound serious. What the hell were they talking about? 'Sorry, what are we talking about here? I mean, mistletoe – it's got to be something at Christmas, right?'

Irene used a tone of voice that she probably reserved for the feeble-minded. 'It's a village tradition, dear, which has slightly fallen by the wayside. But perhaps Jacob wouldn't mention it under the circumstances. It's on Christmas Eve. It's always on

Christmas Eve. Has been for the last hundred and forty-odd years. I know it sounds like a hunting thing – gosh, awfully non-PC these days – but the reason it's called that is lost in the past. It's just a lovely party and a chance for everyone to get together. One of our proudest village traditions and it's always a wonderful occasion – isn't it, ladies?'

This was sounding a bit too much like coercion, and it wasn't as if Beth didn't have enough to do. Christmas was, without doubt, a hectic time of year at work. The entire History of Art department would be frantically marking, interviewing and advising and she would barely have time to get Jacob a present let alone organise anything like a party. 'Well, perhaps I could lend a hand. But I don't know *really*. It's a terribly busy time for me at the university …'

Irene smiled pityingly. 'It's a busy time of year for all of us, dear, and you working wives must find it hard to fit everything in, but we thought it might help you settle in to the village.'

Beth faltered. God what a fuss they were making. Honestly, organising a Christmas party couldn't be rocket science, could it? Drinks, a few sausage rolls, party hats. It couldn't be harder than a do for her college tutees. It might even be fun – and wouldn't Jacob be incredulous? He'd teased her unmercifully about the bottle of warm Chardonnay and bowl of peanuts she'd thrown together for their friends when they'd announced their engagement, saying clearly her talents lay in Renaissance art and she'd better not give up her day job. What *would* he make of this? Oh go on, it would be a laugh. She was aware of every eye on her. 'Mmm, maybe.'

'Oh, but everyone would help – wouldn't you, ladies?'

Vigorous, even frantic nodding again.

'Oh all right them. If I must.'

She was vaguely aware of a warm feeling sweeping through the room.

'Right, well that's that decided.' Irene crossed something off

her list. 'I'll pop by later on today with the details, Beth. Thank you very much. I'm sure you'll make a fine job of it.'

Beth looked sceptical. 'Well, I wouldn't bet on it …'

But the committee were off nattering again, although this time they seemed to be in perfect accord: 'You can never start too early for Christmas,' Mrs Godfrey muttered darkly, and the Ancients and Fates together nodded their heads sagely in agreement. Beth lapsed into silence the better to overhear the new stereo of conversations on the subject of the festivities. '… goose fat's the only thing …', '… thought we'd try guinea fowl for a change …', '… sprouts are no good any more, with no frost in December …'. Goody. Tips. Beth covertly made a couple of scribbled notes on her pad.

'Now, about Burns Night …'

The rest of the meeting passed in a blur for Beth. So much for Jacob's assertion that she'd have to be patient and wait for people to get used to her after they married. It looked as if she'd be Madame Chair by next week. She glanced at her watch – he said he'd be home early that afternoon. Maybe they could take the dogs out together before getting back to her desk and her symposium notes – that way she wouldn't have to handle them herself – and she could tell him all about it. As the meeting came to a close, Beth, keen to get away, was buttonholed by Stephanie Jackman, eager to bore on about her little Inigo (and her tribulations with finding just the right nursery for him). Extricating herself and hoping she'd made the right noises, Beth made for the door, not before bestowing on Mrs Godfrey her most genuine smile – and was curiously touched when the old lady squeezed her arm in such a warm way. She strode out of the hall and, safely out of earshot, murmured, 'Milton St David – I've arrived!'

As she walked up the drive, five brisk minutes later, Beth's steps slowed. Jacob's car wasn't there and she could hear the dogs barking and hurling themselves at the kitchen door from

here. Oh God! She'd have to take them out – there was no putting it off. If she waited until Jacob arrived, they'd probably have eaten her alive. When they heard her put her key in the door, they would go completely crazy and that would be it. Maybe she could hide for a few minutes in the garden. Beth tiptoed along the path that ran by the side of the house, crouching as she passed the kitchen window, so they wouldn't see her. She was almost there when her mobile rang and the dogs went into a redoubled frenzy at the noise.

'Hello?'

'Bloody hell, Beth. I thought hunting was illegal – sounds as if you're in the middle of a pack of blood hounds.'

'Oh don't, Sal!' Beth made her way down the garden, blocking her free ear in an effort to hear over the howling. 'It's the demon doggies – just the usual two, but they make like a crowd. I managed to escape earlier, although I had to bribe them with doggy chocs to get them in from the garden – Jacob doesn't understand why they're getting so fat – and I ended up late for my meeting and all covered in dog hair.'

'I thought that was compulsory attire in Mingbury St Bollocks,' said Sal sarcastically. 'Anyway, what meeting? Term hasn't started yet, has it?'

'Er, no. It was a sort of a "village get things done" kind of meeting.' Beth could almost hear Sally's eyes light up and pulled a face in anticipation of her next question.

'What, you mean a pressure group or a political thing?'

Sitting down heavily on the wooden swing under the apple tree Jacob had made years ago for his daughter, Beth had a nasty feeling her old friend wasn't going to let this go, and she tried to change the subject. 'Nothing really, just a local thing. So what are you up to?' she hastened. 'How are rehearsals? Is that Camden High Street I hear in the background?'

A peal of gloating laughter from the other end of the phone. 'You've done it, haven't you? You've gone and joined the WI.

Well, your old gentleman will be pleased. They'll teach you to make Victoria sponge and apple pie. You'll be a proper wifey before you know it…'

'You're just jealous! It was actually a meeting about local issues,' Beth exaggerated, suddenly embarrassed about letting down the townie sisterhood. ' A kind of action group with a bit of welfare on the side, you know, rural bus services and so on. Anyway, there's this traditional village do on Christmas Eve, and it's been going on for hundreds of years – bit of a get-together for the locals – and I volunteered to organise it this year. And what are you doing for Christmas, my hard-bitten urban-decayed old mate, while we rosy-cheeked bumpkins are frolicking at the Mistletoe Meet? Want to join us for a bit of country Christmas? All feet up in front of the fire and chilling? It'll be a blast.'

For once Sally sounded impressed, for a while at least. 'Ooh, that sounds rather nice actually. Rather picturesque and wholesome. I'd be there like a shot, but sadly I'm doing panto in Bolton and when I'm not I'll be snuggling up with my bloke. I can just see you as Lady Bountiful, handing out alms to the peasants while your doting, doddery old hubby looks on proudly—'

'Oh bog off! You just wish it was you.' Beth laughed. 'He'll be home soon to ravish me – again – I expect. With age comes experience, so I can't waste my time talking to you. I'll have to go and wrestle with the hounds of hell before I slip into my négligé. Wish me luck!'

The sound of baying was almost deafening when Beth swung open the front door and picked up the fresh wave of Christmas catalogues, all still addressed to her predecessor. She paused only to drop them and her bag in the hallway beneath Jacob's hanging jackets in various shades of mottled green and brown. The fragrance of the ginger and nutmeg that Tamara had noticed at the meeting permeated the air. She hadn't had

time to clear away her cooking properly before going out, but she'd have to now, before Jacob came home. How to tackle it?

She sidled towards the kitchen. 'Good boys,' she could hear the quaver in her voice, and picked up the leads. 'Walkies.' She flattened herself against the wall and reached out to flick open the door. This must be how the SAS feel on a raid. Flash and Jig-Jag stormed past, a torrent of black fur and wildly thrashing tails, and she hurled herself into the kitchen and slammed the door behind her before they had time to realise she'd trapped them in the hall. At least they were out of the way for a bit.

In the larder, covered in clingfilm, sat three large ceramic bowls, her morning's work, each containing a subtly different mix of Christmas mincemeat. Compare and contrast. One contained unblanched almonds and fresh orange zest. Another glacé cherries in with the dried fruit. The third was, as far as Beth could surmise, more adventurous with chopped walnuts and finely minced dates. In fact, since she'd started collecting mincemeat recipes she'd realised that, really, you could go on for ever. But Beth, acutely aware she was a virgin to this Christmas-planning thing, had decided to approach the challenge of the festivities in a way she could understand: as if it was an academic thesis, and she was determined to go on experimenting until she found the very best.

Even by the standards of any of the published guides to running a successful Christmas, Beth realised she was starting a bit early. But the Christmas cards were in the supermarkets already and, for someone who'd always stayed with friends since her mother died, a mere fifteen weeks to C-Day didn't feel like a very long time. She ladled the mixes into the jars she'd sterilised, slapped little paper discs on top, folded more clingfilm over the top of each, then stashed them in a corner and arranged packets of cereal as camouflage. She wasn't sure she wanted Jacob's teasing about her over-zealousness when he

found them. There – she'd sample them baked into pies in a week or so. Once she'd got the hang of pastry.

In the hallway, the dogs were whining with renewed urgency. Urgh! Suppose they needed a wee! Beth opened a window in the kitchen to let the spicy air out and sidled back into the hallway, where the dogs surged back at her, breathing wet canine approval and anticipation all over her linen skirt.

After a few tentative gestures, she managed to slip their leads on and grabbed the keys before they had a chance to haul her out of the front door. Damn! She'd forgotten the whistle again – although she never remembered which sequence of peeps meant what. Her shoulder yanking in its socket, she tried to keep up with them, belatedly realising she hadn't changed her shoes either. These lovely little beaded sandals were not the thing for racing through the long meadow grass down by the river.

Down the lane past the old church the dogs dragged her. The meadow, which ran alongside the pretty little river, was about the only place in the village that Beth could let them roam free and burn off their energy. Now, once she was out of sight of any houses, she gave up even pretending she was in charge of the dogs. But already there, thigh deep in the long sweet grass, was the last person Beth wanted to see in her present predicament. Jenny Williams looked in her element, *her* six dogs racing off obediently to retrieve the tennis balls and dummies she threw for them in long, elegant, accurate arcs. Any infraction on the part of her dogs earnt an instant slap or an alarming growl. It was perfectly clear who was top dog here. Flash and Jig-Jag gave voice as soon as they saw their pals and Jenny glanced round – too late for Beth to make an escape.

Jenny was very much of Jacob's vintage. That would have been fine, except that it also meant that she had been a contemporary of Becca's. And Jacob's first wife still cast a long shadow in these parts. Quite an achievement for someone who

had been dead and buried in the churchyard for the last four years.

A brief, not unfriendly nod from Jenny, then back to her dogs – first things first. Beth's lack of control loomed even larger by comparison. To let her two off the lead or not? Would they ever come back? Could she face the humiliation if they didn't?

Jenny was characteristically direct. 'Well, are you going to let them off or aren't you?'

Beth decided to come clean. Although she barely knew Jenny, she was predisposed to like her, formidable though she was, for two reasons. The first: because she was the only woman in the village as tall as Beth. The second: because she was the only person in the whole village never to have called her Becca, either by mistake or by design. 'Yes, I think so, but I forgot my whistle. I'm not sure if I dare risk it.'

Jenny tutted. 'Wouldn't make much difference if you had it. You have to know what you're doing, y'know.'

Ouch! 'Is it that obvious?'

A sideways glance. Was that the hint of a smile on Jenny's fine aristocratic face? 'Yes, perfectly. But the dogs have to know too. And those two are thoroughly spoilt and ill-disciplined. They need some good basic training. You too probably.'

Yes, it definitely was a smile. Beth was encouraged. 'Do you think we could ever learn?'

Jenny whistled her dogs in and gathered up her clobber, then coolly assessed Beth. 'Certainly. Provided you don't mind putting in some hours.'

Silence. Did she dare to ask? 'Well, would you …?'

'Of course I would. I'd be delighted, in fact. But you'll have to fit in with me.'

Beth was nodding fervently. Jenny went on. 'Right. You could start by wearing some jeans and a pair of waterproof shoes or boots. And wear a jacket with pockets. I'll be free

tomorrow. A bit earlier, please.' She passed through the gate ahead of the dogs, surging round her long legs then opened the boot of her muddy Volvo, which was a signal for the dogs to sit quietly and wait for their names to be called before they leapt neatly in, one by one. 'Bring your whistle next time too.'

With a casual wave, Jenny pulled away, leaving Beth quietly delighted and getting horribly tangled up in the leads while the dogs sniffed happily around. To her delight, Jacob's car was parked outside when the dogs dragged her home. They hastened in through the front door to see him.

He must have arrived soon after she'd left because he'd had time to make a cup of tea for himself, but as usual he'd forgotten to take it upstairs and it was stone cold already, abandoned by a stack of papers on the kitchen table. There was a bunch of flowers beside them. He hadn't put them in water so she quickly dumped them in the sink and turned on the cold tap. She scrutinised – lilies. At least she hadn't had to train him out of chrysanths and pinks – that had all been taken care of under the previous regime. The dogs rushed upstairs while she made him another cup and she could hear his delighted voice as he greeted them and asked them, in turn, about their day. At the top of the stairs, she paused in the gloom and watched through the door of his study, delaying the pleasure of the moment when he would spot her and come striding out. He was crouching by the door, his hair dishevelled and his glasses swinging on a cord round his neck as he fondled Jig-Jag's silky black ears. The collar of his striped shirt was awry, and Beth felt a wave of almost protective tenderness sweep over her.

'Fresh tea, darling?'

He glanced up happily, eyes creasing at the corners, then sprang to his feet and covered the corridor in just a few long-legged paces. 'Sweetheart!' He took the steaming mug from her hands and placed it on the small table then folded her into his arms and held her close. Beth allowed herself to be

engulfed – there weren't many men who could make her feel protected but, tall as she was, Jacob still topped her by half a head. She'd been able to bring her high heels out of storage once he'd appeared on the scene – not that she'd had much use for them since moving out to Milton after their marriage only seven months ago now. Milton didn't do high heels. It was all Tods and Le Chameau.

Whatever had distracted Jacob from his tea was completely put aside now, his attention solely on her with the intensity that had so fascinated her from the start, and he urged her downstairs so they could exchange news. Sitting down at the table, he pulled her onto his lap and nibbled at her neck just where it was most sensitive and expected her to concentrate as he reported, between kisses, the latest from his department, Modern History, where the faculty was also bracing itself for the new intake of students. She looked at his long sinewy hands, still tanned from their delayed honeymoon in Italy, as he stroked her thigh. She could feel herself becoming aroused. Thank goodness she had already exercised the dogs.

Half an hour later she was lying in his arms on the bed, their bodies bathed in the afternoon sunshine, satiated and relaxed. 'Now come on,' he urged, stroking the side of her breast with his hand, 'I want to know about your day.'

She rolled towards him and hooked one of her legs over his. 'Panning out quite well so far thanks.'

He laughed and patted her bottom. 'Now what's the latest from the trenches of the VEG? Were rock buns thrown? Have the young upstarts overthrown the oligarchy?'

It was so typical of Jacob to remember that she had a meeting that day. She fixed him with a teasing look, keen to impart her news from the front. 'I have made progress! My onslaught on the established hierarchy of Milton continues unopposed. And today I definitely got the vote of confidence when Irene almost begged me to take on the Mistletoe Meet. How about

that, Jay? She said it would be a good way of getting to—'

But Jacob was not reacting as he should. Beth had been anticipating gasps of admiration but, instead, he pulled away from her, a frown creasing his forehead. 'Is everything all right, darling?' she said, unsure of what was going on here. 'You look a bit gobsmacked.'

'Er, no, no.' He shook his head, though the frown hadn't quite disappeared. 'I'm sure you'll do it beautifully. It's just – well, I wouldn't have thought it was quite your thing, a party for the village worthies. It's an awful lot of bother at a busy time of year. I'm sure Irene would understand if you changed your mind.'

Beth felt affronted. Was this a slight on her organisational skills? She was about to retort, but paused for a moment and bit her tongue. He'd have to eat his words when he realised her skill with pineapple chunks on cocktail sticks. She pretended to reflect on his suggestion, then – ever so delicately – changed the subject.

The rest of the day was spent poring over her notes for the new term's lectures. She was already making inroads into *Uccello and the Birth of Perspective* but she'd need to get to the library to check something out. Jacob came out of his study at about six and after pouring himself and her a glass of Merlot, took the phone into the sitting room to make his weekly fatherly calls to Noel and Holly.

Beth discreetly left him to it and started preparing the roast chicken. Becoming a stepmother of adults meant she didn't have to get too involved, but secretly she had to confess that the way in which Jacob spoke to Holly drove her mad. The girl was petulant and spoilt at the best of times, but listening to her father's efforts to placate her as she milked the Daddy's-girl act was enough to turn Beth's stomach.

Over supper he filled her in on their news – Noel was in love, and Holly in debt, despite her 'marvellous new job on a

top magazine' – and later she joined him in bed where he was reading, glasses perched on the end of his high-bridged nose. 'Oh, I forgot to tell you,' she said as she tucked her feet under his legs to warm them, 'Jenny Williams invited me out to exercise the dogs with her tomorrow. With any luck she can show me what to do with that flaming whistle.'

Jacob closed his book and reached out to pull her close so she could nestle in against his square shoulder. 'Jenny! I haven't seen her for ages. She's one of a kind, she really is. An amazing woman. I didn't realise you knew her so well.'

'I don't really.' Beth played with the edge of the navy cotton quilt cover. 'I see her out with the dogs of course, just to say hello to. But she's so nice and straightforward. What you see is what you get. And she clearly knows what she's doing …' She chatted on about the dogs' recalcitrant behaviour for a while. 'Oh they were embarrassing!' She paused. Dare she ask? 'Did, er, did Jenny get on well with Becca?'

There was silence, interrupted only by Jacob's gentle breathing as he slept. Beth smiled. Perhaps it was better he hadn't heard her ask.

Next morning, after Jacob had left for the faculty, Beth was ready for action. In jeans, walking boots and an old T-shirt, and the whistle hanging round her neck, she was just about to attach the dogs' leads when the phone rang. The barking was interrupted only by excited whining and she strained to hear what the caller wanted.

'Hello? Sorry, you're calling about what?… The cottage? Oh really? To rent? How odd. I didn't think it was in a fit state.' She hadn't the time to argue the point now. 'Oh, OK then. Hang on, I'll get a pen.' She rooted around on the hall stand. 'I'll have to contact the owner and she's away a lot of the time. When did you want it? Christmas? Well, yes, you can never get started too early, can you? I'll just take your details and someone will get back to you … And you are?'