

Prologue

'But it's *August*!' said Carmen into the phone, putting down her book. 'August! It's almost sunny outside! I have sandals on! Ice cream vans patrol the land! I put sunblock on last week and almost needed it! How can I possibly get my head round what you're asking me?'

'I'm just saying,' her mother's soft voice came again, and Carmen sighed. They had the same tussle every year. 'It's just useful to know early, that's all. And of course Sofia . . . '

Carmen screwed up her face.

'Yes, she's popping out yet another sprog and overpopulating the world, blah blah blah, I know.'

'Carmen June Hogan. Be nice.'

'Come on, Mum. She's already got three. She's just being greedy. Anyway, I don't know what I might be doing at Christmas. I might be going away.'

'Who with?' Her mother sounded sceptical.

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'I could meet someone between now and Christmas! And they could whisk me off to Barbados! Or LA!'

She could almost feel her mother smiling down the phone.

'So you're not coming home for Christmas because you'll be in LA.'

'I could be in LA.'

Carmen couldn't, she thought to herself, be the only person in the world who was both nearly thirty and who still turned into a stroppy teenager when confronted by her mother.

But it *was* only August. She just didn't want to think about the summer being over, or about another Christmas – sleeping in her old bedroom, which was full of ridiculous junk now that didn't belong to her: sewing machines and what-not. Reading all her old paperbacks on the shelf: the Follyfoot series, C. S. Lewis and *The Dark Is Rising*, seeing as it was Christmas.

Then it would be everyone making the hugest fuss of Sofia's noisy, bratty children and giving them so much stuff (which always had to be wooden and expensive) that they could barely tear the wrapping from one gift before they dived to the next.

With every passing year too, Sofia's gifts to the rest of the family got more and more lavish and expensive, making it more and more apparent who in the family was doing well – and who was still sleeping under her Spice Girls duvet and handing out discounted gifts from the shop she worked in.

Her mother ploughed on regardless.

'I mean, Sofia wants to show off the new house and won't want to travel . . . I thought we'd all go to hers and I'd cook . . . ?'

Sofia worked as a lawyer in Edinburgh, a hundred miles away from their dying industrial west-coast Scottish town, and was doing very nicely, thank you, with her handsome international lawyer husband and babies and Range Rovers, blah

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blah blah. Carmen still worked in the department store she'd had a Saturday job in when she'd been at school. The store was shabby, and getting worse all the time. Literally nobody in the family ever brought this up, which made it worse.

As if sensing her thoughts, her mother's voice lowered. 'And how is Dounston's doing?'

Carmen understood, although she hated the tone.

'Well … we'll be doing better by Christmas,' she said, and both of them desperately tried to believe it.



Carmen hung up without satisfactorily settling the question of Christmas – or rather, by refusing to commit, knowing full well her mother would go ahead and count her in anyway. And of course nothing else *would* come up and she would indeed be back there again, either at Sofia's new place – whatever it was like; for sure she would have the worst bed in the place – or under her old Spice Girls duvet on the twenty-fourth which made her feel lower than ever. She looked around the staff room.

Her best mate at the shop, Idra, had just come in and was eyeing up the floral mug which belonged to their supervisor, Mrs Marsh, that was never to be used on pain of death.

'Don't even think about it,' said Carmen.

'I am going to *pee* in it,' said Idra, incandescent. 'She's putting me back on fricking hats.'

Carmen groaned sympathetically. Hats were next to the door, the idea being that when you tumbled in out of the freezing cold from the rapidly emptying high street, the very first thing you would need was a hat.

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Unfortunately for whoever was manning the till there, it meant gushing blasts of freezing air mixed with the petrifying ferocity of the air heater above making you sweat whatever you wore. Although these days, that door was opening less and less.

Carmen measured her days in books. She kept a paperback under the desk for quiet periods, when she had remade as many window displays as one could usefully do in one day, and dusted, polished, straightened and checked the samples. When she had first started working at Dounston's, they had always been so busy, and she'd kept her reading for the bus and lunchtime. Now, she could get through a novel every three days, and it kept getting faster. It was very, very worrying.

'She hates me the most,' said Carmen on the topic of Mrs Marsh, as she looked at the next week's rota. She had the most inconvenient possible combination of shifts – an early followed by a late followed by an early and a late on the same day – that somehow still left her short of full-time hours and therefore enough money to get through the month without squeezing everything and everyone and having absolutely no fun at all and taking home all her mum's leftovers on a Sunday night.

'She told me I looked like a tramp,' said Idra.

'What were you wearing?'

'I literally took off my cardigan. For, like, ten seconds.'

Carmen laughed, then fell silent as the person they were talking about glided noiselessly into the room. Decades of working on shop floors had taught Mrs Marsh to glide despite being a heavy woman, constantly on the lookout for miscreants, pilferers, time-wasters, malingerers and basically anyone who looked like they might actually be enjoying themselves shopping in a department store.

She was silent on her tiny feet – always clad in smart black

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court shoes, however much they must pinch and contribute to the varicose veins spreading up her legs year on year like slow-growing ivy, just visible through the American Tan tights. Her midriff was solid and her large bosom was trussed into something from the Larger Madam section of the lingerie department which rather made her look like she only had one very wide breast which could also function as a shelf in a shop emergency.

Carmen and Idra agreed that Mrs Marsh's idea of perfection was a completely empty, perfectly clean and tidy store with absolutely no customers in it messing things up, letting their kids knock over glassware, dirtying the polished floors with their muddy shoes or disrespecting lift etiquette (Mrs Marsh remembered the days when the lifts had an attendant, and mentioned it often). Having nobody in the shop was just about the way Mrs Marsh liked it.

The awful thing was, as they had seen for the last few years, it looked like Mrs Marsh was finally getting her wish.

One by one, the other shops had moved away from their unimportant regional satellite town – BHS, Next, Marks and Spencer, WH Smith – and had all fallen like ninepins.

Dounston's, where generations of local brides had made their gift lists and chosen material for their wedding dresses, where mothers-to-be had bought their prams, where families had bought their china and sofas, their material, their white goods; Dounston's, which stocked school uniforms in August and fancy perfume at Christmas, and toys in the wonderful toy department that made children gasp every year as they came to queue for a photo and a small present from Santa in the grotto: Dounston's was widely predicted to be next on the high street casualty list.

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It didn't seem possible to Carmen that something so solid, so intertwined with the life of the town and its citizens – with its stained-glass window depicting the ships the men built up the road on the Clyde, and its coffee shop selling French cakes and scones and disdaining the very concept of something as fancy as a latte – would ever shut its doors. It was the heart of the town.

But the town seemed finished. Dead. The high street was nothing but charity shops and mobility scooter hire shops and money-sending places and the occasional doomed enterprise by the council to sell local paintings or craft.

People wanted the town centre to work but not quite enough to pay for parking when the out-of-town retail park didn't charge you *and* was all shiny and had a Wagamama's.

People wanted the town centre to work, but not really enough to pay £17.99 for a bone china mug with a shepherdess on it when they could get something perfectly serviceable for under a fiver on Amazon. Or to traipse all the way into town for three metres of pink ribbon only to find there wasn't any pink ribbon in stock and they'd have to have burgundy even though they wanted pink and actually it would have taken two minutes to click on the precise shade of pink they wanted on that online store and get it delivered the following day.

Carmen got it. She was as guilty as anyone else at convenience shopping, even when she was in town every day. Plus who used napkin rings these days? How many scatter cushions could any sane human even buy in their lives? And bridesmaids didn't make their own dresses any more, from the big swathes of purple and pink satin (sateen if you were economising). They ordered them from overseas, from where they arrived, late and ill-fitting, and they would have to come in, red-faced, asking for

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advice on adjustments and hemming and buying the odd spare zip at the very last minute.

But only three days after the Christmas chat, it happened. They were summoned. Idra loudly protesting that she should have poisoned that bloody mug, as Mrs Marsh, who must have been past retirement age – Idra reckoned she was ninety – was taking a certain pleasure in telling them they were all getting their jotters or, in her smart poshed-up elocution voice, 'sadly being made redundant'.

She looked around through her wide glasses with the pastel rims and patted her short, sprayed-down hair.

'*Some* of you, I'm sure, will get excellent references and find another job without any trouble at all,' she said, looking pointedly at her favourite: bloody suck-up Lavinia McGraw.

At this, Carmen and Idra glanced at each other and Carmen got that awful feeling when you know you're going to laugh at something incredibly inappropriate.

Because it was awful. It was devastating. A disaster. And she had seen it coming. Everyone had seen it coming. And she had done absolutely nothing about it. No point blaming Mrs Marsh now.

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