Mistletoe Magic in the Highlands

Also by Bella Osborne

The Library
The Girls
The Perfect Christmas Village

Mistletoe Magic in the Highlands

BELLA OSBORNE



An Aria Book

First published in the UK in 2024 by Head of Zeus,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Bella Osborne, 2024

The moral right of Bella Osborne to be identified
as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of both the copyright owner
and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events
portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (PB): 9781837930043
ISBN (E): 9781837930029

Cover design: Gemma Gorton

Typeset by Siliconchips Services Ltd UK

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

For my nieces Emma Taylor-Smith and Mollie Smith.
Luv ya x

1

Liv looked at her newly inflated boyfriend and his perpetually surprised expression.

'Thank you,' she said to her sister, Charlotte, and her best friend, Abigail, who were struggling to control their laughter after a tad too much Prosecco.

'We thought we'd get you the perfect boyfriend. He's silent, low maintenance and wipe clean. We've called him Plastic Stan,' said Charlotte coyly. Liv did have a disastrous track record when it came to men, so the birthday gift wasn't completely unjustified – although still quite embarrassing. Even still, she was glad to be at home. With only a week until Christmas, Liv had decided a takeaway was considerably better than sharing her evening with umpteen office parties and a multitude of Christmas decorations – which was often the downside of a December birthday. In Liv's mind, Christmas celebrations could properly start *after* her birthday.

'If you do *this*…' said Abigail, fiddling around the back of Stan. 'There's an extra surprise.' With the flick of a

not-so-discreetly hidden switch, Stan's nether regions began to vibrate. The girls returned to hysterics as Liv frantically tried to turn him off – which was surprisingly harder than with real men. When it came to the human variety, Liv seemed to have a knack for instantly turning them off. At last she found the switch and the inflated doll stilled.

'It had very good reviews on the internet,' said Abigail, who was in full make-up and dressed for a night out.

'I don't think I'll be using that feature, Abi, but thanks anyway,' said Liv.

'That cost extra, you know,' said Abigail, looking a little hurt and quite flushed from the alcohol.

'It was um… very thoughtful,' Liv said, choosing her words carefully.

'We also got you this,' Abigail said, producing a large box.

'If this is a lifetime's supply of batteries…' began Liv, which was met by two shaking heads. 'Shame,' said Liv, opening the box. Inside were several presents all individually wrapped in birthday paper. It was a small gesture, but it meant a lot to Liv that they used birthday paper and not Christmas wrapping – as so many did and which drove her slightly potty. Her argument was that you'd never wrap a present for a June birthday in Christmas paper so why do it with hers?

Twenty-five felt like a bit of a milestone. It was making her reflect on her life and compare it to others – something she knew wasn't the most healthy thing to do. Abigail was already happily married to a lovely man who doted on her. They were both dentists and had just bought a large four-bedroomed house on the fancy side of Blackburn.

Her sister was only a couple of years older, but by twenty-five already Charlotte had her own place and an amazing

job that allowed her to work with the world's biggest musical artists and travel all over the world. Liv once overheard a friend describing her as a lot like Charlotte, only shorter and not as pretty. Unhelpfully, that was also how Liv thought of herself. Liv was living in Charlotte's spare room in Brownhill, just on the outskirts of Blackburn. Or as Charlotte liked to say, bordering the Ribble Valley, as that sounded posher.

Liv felt she was a bit of an 'also-ran' compared to her sister, and always had. On the plus side, she did have her own company. Although that sounded more glamorous than the reality, which was that it was just her and her laptop trying to improve the visibility of small businesses online. But at least she was her own boss and could go to work in her pyjamas; not many people of twenty-five could say that.

After a few minutes of unwrapping, Liv had a pile of all her favourite things: chocolate, bath bombs and books.

'Thanks, you guys are the best.'

After a gushy group hug, the girls nestled on the sofas with topped-up glasses of Prosecco, with Stan taking pride of place next to Liv.

'Aww look at you two,' Charlotte said. 'The perfect couple.' She winked.

'Actually,' Liv said, concentrating on the bubbles in her glass, 'I am dating someone.' She'd planned to stay quiet for a bit longer but she couldn't resist an opportunity to shut Charlotte up.

'What?! When? *Who?*' Charlotte cried, putting her glass down and leaning forward. Abigail joined in an almost synchronised motion.

'A few weeks now,' Liv said with a wince. She braced herself for their reaction.

'*Weeks?*' was the chorus of disbelief.

'Why didn't you tell me?' Charlotte asked, looking more than a little put out.

Liv reached for her hand. 'Because after last time I didn't want to call it too soon.'

'I understand,' said Charlotte.

Abigail made exaggerated puffing sounds. 'After the last arsehole I don't blame you! To have told you how much he loved you only to ghost you – boy was that harsh. He deserves to have his balls roasted on a barbecue. Oh, how about we order a barbecue chicken pizza?' Abigail looked around but nobody seemed keen.

Liv didn't need the recap. She had taken quite a few months to get over how awfully Pierre had treated her and what a blow it had been to be ghosted. The initial shock of Pierre not replying to texts or calls and then blocking her from his socials had been quickly overtaken by a feeling of worthlessness. How boring and insignificant must she be that he could so easily cut her from his life? If she was being honest, it was still playing on her mind. But she had put herself out there again and was trying hard to move on.

'It's early days but it's good so far,' Liv said.

'Tell us more about him,' said Charlotte. 'Where've you been hiding him for a start?'

'Well, we met online.'

'What's his name?' asked Abigail.

'Fraser,' said Liv, feeling a squirm of something in her gut at the sound of his name. They were still getting to know

each other but there was something about his messages and their connection that made her feel this could be the start of something special. After her last dating disaster she was trying to be cautious, which was difficult given Fraser ticked all her boxes.

'Tell us more,' urged Charlotte.

'He's from Scotland. He's a chef with his own restaurant. We both like reading, Mariah Carey and holidaying in Spain. He had a bad break-up so he wants to take things slowly, but he's kind and caring and he sends me the cutest messages.' Just talking about him was giving her all the feels.

'Photos! We need photos,' demanded Charlotte.

'Not dick pics though,' added Abigail quickly.

'He's not like that,' Liv said. In between Pierre and Fraser there had been two men who had quickly introduced themselves and sent her a close-up of their favourite body part. Why men thought that was attractive was beyond her.

Liv got her phone out and opened up the dating app they'd been using to chat. He'd had an issue with his phone so they'd not exchanged numbers yet. But the app was fine and at the start it had actually been reassuring that she'd not had to give out any personal details other than her full name – Olivia Bingham. Only people she was close to got to call her Liv, although Fraser was fast approaching that status.

They messaged every night and whilst she'd been keen to talk on the phone, he'd admitted that he wasn't much of a talker – so the messaging worked just fine. That little bit of anticipation as she waited for a response was oddly exciting. She was chatty, some might say gobby, so it was probably best that they didn't talk directly. The messaging

meant it was a more balanced exchange. There were also frequent exchanges during the day. Some encouraging her if she was feeling a bit down, some flirty, and others were quite funny. It wasn't a conventional relationship but after what she'd been through this felt like a safer way to get to know someone. And while she didn't like to think of herself as superficial, he *did* look hot in his profile picture. She'd initially been attracted by his auburn hair – a very similar shade to her own. He had the most stunning blue eyes she'd ever seen and a well-groomed beard.

Fraser had a sort of ruggedness about his features, not that she'd studied his tiny picture for hours on end. Okay maybe a couple more hours than was healthy, one of the many dangers of working from home. She was keen to show him off to her friends and was speedily navigating the app. For some reason Liv couldn't get his details to come up. She also couldn't seem to find their lengthy message thread. The app was likely playing up so she refreshed it and waited impatiently for it to reload. Still nothing. His profile, along with their messages, was gone.

An icy sensation crept over her and settled in her gut. 'What's wrong?' asked Charlotte, quickly sensing all was not well.

'It's gone. His picture has been deleted and all of our messages,' Liv said in a small, defeated voice.

'Ghosted again?!' said Abigail with a hiccup.

The phrase shot alarm through her. This couldn't be right. It couldn't have happened *again*. Could it?