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The Little Italian Hotel
The Year of What If



The TIME HOP COFFEE SHOP



PHAEDRA PATRICK

HEAD OF ZEUS

An Aria Book

First published in the US in 2025 by Park Row Books,
part of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.

This edition first published in the UK in 2025 by Head of Zeus Ltd,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed
in this novel are either products of the author's imagination
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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

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

ISBN (PB): 9781035914814
ISBN (ePub): 9781035914821; ISBN (eBook): 9781035914838

Cover design: Jessie Price

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Popson Street, Bungay nr35 1ed



Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited,
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

HEAD OF ZEUS LTD
5–8 Hardwick Street
London, EC1R 4RG

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For my fabulous friend, Mary McGuigan
'Live Forever' xx

MAPLE GOLD COFFEE COMMERCIAL SCRIPT
2005

VOICEOVER: 'Maple Gold is here for endings and new beginnings . . .'

The scene opens with a young woman, Greta, standing on the pavement, waving as a car pulls away. She's holding a small cardboard box.

GRETA (WHISPERING): 'Bye Mum.'

She turns to face a pretty white house, straightens her back and smiles bravely. She's ready to enter a new phase of her life—moving into her first home.

The front door is ajar, and she enters a hallway, then a sitting room. We can see there are more, bigger boxes sitting around the place, sealed and ready to unpack.

VOICEOVER: 'It's here for the good times and the even better ones . . .'

Greta looks apprehensive but takes a moment to take in her new surroundings. She switches on the kettle and opens a cupboard, disappointed to find it empty.

She spies her name written on the side of the box she carried in and opens it. Inside is her old teddy bear and a jar of Maple Gold coffee, a gift from her mum. Greta takes the jar out, becoming

misty-eyed as she makes herself a cup of coffee. Wrapping her fingers around the cup helps her to feel more at home.

The doorbell rings, and she opens the door to find a group of her new neighbours gathered outside. They present Greta with flowers and another jar of coffee as a welcome present. It's Maple Gold, of course. They all laugh, and she invites them inside for coffee.

A CAPPELLA GROUP (SINGING): 'You're always at home with Maple Gold.'

Chapter 1

Now

GRETA PERKS LOVED three things in life more than anything—her family, the thrill of performing, and a fine cup of coffee. When she could combine all three, it was as satisfying as a frothy cappuccino on a cold day. But recently, a happy home life and sparkling career seemed to be slipping through her fingers.

'I wish you could stay longer,' she said, glancing between her husband, Jim, and their daughter, Lottie, as coffee cups clattered in the background. 'Tonight's important to me.'

She'd volunteered to be the guest speaker at Brewtique's monthly Coffee Lover's Night Out, talking about her acting career. It had been a while since she'd last performed in public, and her nerves were jumping around like frogs in a pond.

Jim offered her a smile. 'I wish we could, too. But I promised Lottie I'd get her back to school.' He passed Greta a shopping bag like it was a peace offering. 'Just brought a few things you might need . . .'

'Talent show rehearsal,' Lottie muttered, not looking up from her phone. 'Total waste of time.'

Greta and Jim shared a glance, a silent understanding of the challenges of raising a fifteen-year-old together while living apart.

'A talent show? Sounds fun.' Greta gave Lottie's arm a quick reassuring rub. 'What are you doing? A show tune, or a monologue? Perhaps even a Shakespeare sonnet?'

Lottie shrugged a disinterested shoulder.

Greta's spirits dipped a little. 'Well, whatever you do, I bet you'll be great,' she said.

'We'll grab a burger afterward, then I'll drop her back at your place.' Jim opened his mouth slightly, as if wanting to say something more. 'Stay safe returning to your car tonight, okay?'

Greta nodded, hoping for a word of encouragement, perhaps a 'good luck,' 'break a leg,' or even a quick hug. But Lottie was already heading toward the door.

Jim's fingers lightly brushed Greta's arm, but didn't linger. Then he turned and followed their daughter outside.

Through the window, Greta watched as her family dashed across the road without her. She smiled brightly and waved, even though her stomach was twisting.

'Drop her back at your place.' The words stung like a paper cut.

She and Jim were over four months into a trial separation, with just a few weeks left until their self-imposed New Year's Eve deadline. At that point they'd agreed to make a final call on the future of their marriage.

It didn't seem as clear-cut as Greta had hoped. What had once felt like a simple decision—to try to rebuild their marriage or let it go—now felt tangled with uncertainty. After almost twenty years together, was she still in love with Jim? Was he still in love with her?

Greta peeked inside the bag, her mood lifting when she saw Jim had brought her herbal throat lozenges, a new notebook, and a spare pen.

Outside, the wet, grey pavement was the same colour as the inky November sky, and she suddenly craved a rich mocha.

Greta turned to face the room. In half an hour, the place would hopefully be buzzing with people. She was determined to deliver an entertaining talk, even if it wasn't exactly her kind of coffee shop.

She preferred cosy spaces where she could curl up with a good book, sipping coffee from mugs the size of plant pots. The type of place that served homemade rocky road and had a corner dedicated to board games.

Brewtique, on the other hand, had industrial-style lightbulbs and blackboards showcasing quirky concoctions, such as rhubarb and custard lattes. A pink neon coffee cup on the wall cast an eerie pink glow on her face. The spindly branches of a Christmas tree on the counter looked like they'd been pecked by crows.

Her long-time agent, Nora, had applauded Greta for spotting Brewtique's Facebook post asking for local speakers. 'Putting yourself forward shows brilliant initiative, darling. Well-done,' Nora had gushed. 'You never know who might be in the audience. Any exposure could help give your career a little boost. Plus, it's a great way to plug your acting classes.'

A boost? Greta knew her career needed a defibrillator. If one human year equalled seven dog years, the same rule definitely applied to actors out of the spotlight. She felt like her career had been on pause for too long, and she was ready to hit Play again.

Greta missed the camaraderie on set, filming the iconic Maple Gold coffee commercials she'd starred in with Jim and Lottie a decade ago. Nothing compared to the soar of her senses when the director called, 'Action,' and everything clicked into place. She longed to find that spark again, not just for herself, but in the hope of pulling her family back together again.

If Greta was honest, she also missed the attention. Champagne on ice in a silver bucket, fans queuing around the block

for her autograph, and the occasional limousine whisking her to grand events had been cherries on top of the cake. Those memories felt almost unreal now, as if they belonged to someone else.

The students she'd coached since then seemed to enjoy her acting classes, but it wasn't the same. Guiding nervous amateurs through voice projection techniques or stage presence didn't give her the same buzz as stepping in front of a camera or an audience. Hopefully, tonight would rekindle some of that feeling, proof she still had something to offer.

The sound of dropped cutlery pulled her out of her thoughts. Greta turned to see Brewtique's owner, Josie, rushing around, a dusting of flour in her hair. Meanwhile, her young pink-haired assistant, Maisie, dawdled in a corner, glued to her phone.

'Need a hand with anything?' Greta called out.

'Oh gosh, no.' Josie shook her head frantically. 'You're the talent. I'm just running a bit late with everything . . .'

'Are you sure? I've already prepped for my talk.'

Josie bit her lip, tempted. 'Well . . . setting up the refreshment table would be helpful, while I get changed. I've just popped fresh brownies in the oven. Maisie knows to keep an eye on them.' She gave Greta a pointed look. 'She's *new* here.'

'Sure,' Greta said, catching her drift. 'Leave it to me.'

Greta set out coffee cups with vigour, arranged cookies on plates, and laid out napkins. Her pulse quickened when she saw the time. 'Maisie!' she called out. 'We need to hurry. There's only fifteen minutes left until showtime.'

The young woman barely raised her eyes. 'Didn't your family once star in some coffee ads or something?' she asked. 'One day, I'll get discovered like that. Want to see my latest TikTok audition?' She held out her phone.

'Yes, we starred in them.' Greta briskly polished a spoon on her apron. 'I'll look at your clip later. Now, please check all

the glasses. Some of these are scratched, and Josie said you're in charge of the brownies . . .'

When Josie reappeared wearing fresh clothes, she glanced out of the window and sighed. 'Looks like we've got a smaller crowd than usual.'

'How many are you expecting?' Greta asked, joining her.

'Six or seven. I've just checked my messages and had quite a few cancellations. Christmas is coming, and it's the *Strictly Salsa* final on TV tonight.'

Greta chewed her lip. Disappointment was part of an actor's life—the rejections, the scathing reviews, and the occasional inappropriate behaviour from a director she'd once respected. She hadn't expected a theatre-sized crowd, but *six*?

'An intimate gathering,' she said with a nod. 'I'll make it work.'

Josie welcomed the guests inside. When they were settled down around tables with coffee and cake, she launched into her introduction.

'Welcome to the monthly Brewtique Coffee Lover's Night Out. We've been fortunate to hear some incredible stories from our speakers this year—conquering Mount Everest, training guide dogs for the blind, and a brain surgeon who worked in war-torn countries. And tonight we've got the former star of the Maple Gold coffee commercials. Let's bid a warm welcome to our special guest, Greta Perks.'

No pressure, Greta thought, smiling brightly as she stepped forward.

'G . . . good evening, everyone,' she started, feeling woefully out of practice. 'Thanks for coming.

'I'm going to tell you a story about how I became the face of the Maple Gold coffee commercials. Yes, for ten years, I was the lady who made you believe coffee could make your life perfect.'

A few chuckles rang out, and Greta soon found her flow. She paced up and down, commanding the little coffee shop as if starring in a West End theatre production.

'Did you know that Maple Gold was born in 1950, as a humble roastery in the back streets of London? Over the years, it became a household name, beloved for its delicious blends and vintage appeal.' She leaned in, as if sharing a secret. 'And who wouldn't want to live in Mapleville, the idyllic town from the commercials? The sun always shone, the grass was emerald green, and the whole town thrived on cups of Maple Gold.'

She took out her phone and played the jingle.

When you wake at sunrise,
and open your eyes.
You're ready to start your day,
the Maple Gold way.
You're always at home with Maple Gold.

From the faraway looks on a few faces, it seemed like nostalgia was working.

'I locked eyes with my love interest, Jim, when he painted my garden fence in the commercial, and things went a bit further off-camera,' Greta said with a wink. 'We got married and then had Lottie, our own little star. We were such a happy family, on-screen and off . . .'

She paused as a twinge of sadness crept in, like how bitterness stays on the tongue after an espresso. A screech of metal chair legs against wooden floorboards made her flinch.

A woman in the audience called out, uninvited. 'Are you guys still working?'

Greta blinked, the question taking her by surprise. 'Yes, everything's going wonderfully,' she said, feeling guilty at embellishing the truth. 'Jim's still gracing the stage and screen,

Lottie's currently rehearsing for a school Christmas talent show, and as for me . . . well . . . I run some excellent acting classes, if anyone is interested?'

A few seconds of silence followed before more questions flew at her like arrows.

'How's Lottie?'

'Where's Jim?'

'How do you feel about Maple Gold replacing you with a different family?'

'Does Lottie resent you putting her on-screen at such a young age?'

'Those are some great, um, deep questions,' Greta said with a swallow. She grabbed her notes, hurriedly trying to recover her thread. 'I think my talk will cover most of them . . . Now, where was I?'

Then, suddenly, the shrill scream of the smoke alarm pierced the moment. Greta jumped and spun around to see smoke billowing from the oven.

Josie shouted out over the bleeping alarm. 'Maisie. Did you forget about the brownies?'

Maisie's head snapped up, her eyes widening when she noticed the grey clouds. 'Oops.'

A flurry of activity broke out.

Maisie darted behind the counter and yanked open the oven door, waving her arms as the grey smoke curled out. 'It's fine. Totally under control.'

Josie grabbed her oven gloves and pulled out the tray. The burnt brownies looked like steaming lumps of coal, and she tossed them into the sink.

Greta rushed over to help, spinning on the tap so the brownies spat and sizzled. She threw open the front door to let in some fresh air, then grabbed a tea towel and wafted it in front of the smoke alarm until it stopped. 'Is everyone okay?' she called out.

An elderly couple had already put on their coats and scuttled outside. The remaining four guests had drifted toward the buffet table, their focus now on cake rather than conversation. Greta followed them, trying to salvage what was left of the evening.

One man wrapped cake into a napkin and slipped it into his pocket. A couple of women wearing matching blue anoraks conversed loudly.

'I didn't recognise Greta at first, did you? She's put on quite a bit of weight,' one said.

'I know. Age isn't kind to some ladies,' her friend replied.

'Ahem.' Greta stood beside them and picked up a cookie. 'I'm forty-five and proud of it,' she said, biting it into it. 'Worth every extra pound, don't you think?'

The women paused with their cakes suspended mid-air, before nodding sheepishly.

Greta attempted to spark interest in her acting classes, but the attention was elsewhere, mostly on the kitchen, which looked like it had been trampled by a herd of buffalo.

She joined Josie at the door, wearily bidding goodnight to the guests as they filtered out.

'Sorry everything didn't go to plan. I can't thank you enough,' Josie said. She handed Greta a brown envelope containing her small fee. 'I'm not sure I'm cut out to run a coffee shop . . .'

Greta mustered a tired smile. After tonight, she felt the same way about performing in public.

She said goodnight, then called Lottie while trudging to her car, leaving a message on her voicemail. 'Hi, sweetheart. I'll be home soon. Hope your rehearsal went well.'

Rain pelted down, and Greta hunched her shoulders against the cold. The streets were empty and quiet, and icy droplets snaked down her neck, making her shiver. In the dark, she noticed a hunched figure approaching, and Jim's warning about

staying safe echoed in her mind. She tried to swerve, but the person bumped her arm.

Startled, Greta dropped her car keys and stooped to pick them up. When she looked up, a woman in a long, dark coat stood over her. Her face was part hidden by a voluminous hood, and long tendrils of her damp white hair hung down. With a quick muttered apology, the stranger handed a piece of paper to Greta and hurried across the road.

As she stood up, Greta's heart thudded in her chest. Under the dim street lamp, she uncurled her fingers and glanced at the flyer. It was probably just a pizza menu, but the vintage-style design caught her eye. It featured an illustration of a white rabbit and the words 'Looking for the Perfect Blend?' Beneath it was an image of a jar with the label 'Drink Me.'

She gripped the flyer tighter, unsure what it was even promoting. A strange feeling of curiosity rippled through her body. Looking for the perfect blend? In her life, she most certainly was.

She climbed into her car and tossed the flyer onto the passenger seat. Sitting there for a moment, she flopped her head against the steering wheel as the evening's events raced through her mind. Was she ever going to get her life back on track?

With a deep sigh, Greta turned the key in the ignition and waited for the engine to rumble to life. The light from the street lamps twinkled orange in the raindrops on the windscreen, and she released the handbrake.

It was probably just a trick of the light, but as Greta pulled off the car park, she could have sworn the white rabbit on the flyer gave her a wink.