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HOUSE PARTY

'A slow burn romance with multi-layered characters and sizzling chemistry, *House Party* left me absolutely breathless. Clear your schedule to read this in a single sitting'

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'Such a fun, sparkling, swoonworthy romance full of memorable moments'

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ALSO BY CHLOE FORD

Work Trip

HOUSE PARTY

CHLOE FORD



An Aria Book

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To the New Year's Day babies who ring each birthday
in with fireworks.

ONE

In hindsight, spending Christmas Day alone in my flat might've been the smarter choice.

Instead, I'm sat on an uneven, wooden footstool that Mum foraged out of the garage this morning. She changed her mind at the last minute and decided to invite Granny after all, and Granny *cannot* sit on the uneven, wooden footstool. And of course, nobody ever has enough dining chairs for Christmas lunch. I mean, unless you're rich, which the Tycers are not. It's especially unfair since I'm one of the tallest people in this room and my knees are almost up to my chest. But according to Mum, I don't count as a guest in this house, even though I don't live here anymore.

Worse still: I've been bullied into wearing a ridiculous sweaterdress Mum bought with a giant Rudolf on it (adorned with a red bobble for the nose), along with a fragile paper hat from one of those corny Christmas crackers. I'm sweating my tits off, due to the combined heat of the oven in the open-plan kitchen and the radiators cranked right

up. And now I'm having to watch my eccentric cousin, Dylan, stuff his face with another Yorkshire pudding, while his mother and my auntie, Maeve, harass me *yet again* regarding the whereabouts of my ex-boyfriend.

"I liked Adam," she says. The brass on this woman is astonishing. I've long thought it should be studied.

"That's nice," I retort, forking another carrot into my mouth.

"And he couldn't make it this year… Why was that again?"

Dylan gives me a pitying glance from under his light, curly fringe. His family always comes to ours for Christmas, but Mum can only stomach her sister's company for so long. Why must we suffer this meal every year? None of us enjoy it. And yet we do it anyway. I take my rage out on the turkey, cutting it with force.

"Mum, leave it," Dylan warns, giving her an imploring glance.

I catch his eye across the table and offer him an appreciative smile. He's well versed in my aunt's linguistic assaults. He's only a year younger than me, but, aside from our ages, we don't have much in common. He's never been in a relationship that's lasted more than a few weeks, he bounces around from job to job, and he makes wild, unpredictable decisions. During his mid-twenties, he was in crippling credit card debt, so what did he do? Got *another* credit card and took off to work in the Bahamas for a year.

But Auntie Maeve isn't done yet.

"Well, we just want to know what went so wrong, don't we, Martin?"

Uncle Martin is far too many sherries down to care

about Adam, but he nods anyway. He subscribes resolutely to a 'happy wife, happy life' mantra. "Yes, dear," he quips.

"I did warn her that you wouldn't want to talk about it," Mum finally chirps. And yet the expression on her face is one I recognise right away. She has never gotten to the bottom of it all either, and she too would like to know the whole story. As *if* I'm suddenly going to give them the entire rundown over Christmas dinner about how my shitty ex broke my stupid heart.

How fucking festive.

I sigh, dropping my fork. "And that's because it's incredibly difficult to talk about it. Honestly, I…" I pretend to choke up. Anything to get them off my back. I fiddle with a section of my curly hair, which has fallen over my shoulder, for extra effect.

Aunt Maeve reaches across the table and places her hand over mine. "Go on," she says softly.

"Well, you see… We were on this boat, travelling to the US for a long holiday and…"

Dylan looks confused.

"The boat hit an iceberg and, Adam… Well… He drowned." I finish in my usual dry style, dipping a roastie into the gravy and stuffing my face so I literally can't talk for at least two minutes.

Dylan hangs his head. I can see he's highly amused. Maybe we've finally found something to bond over. Maybe this is the year Dylan and I become friends.

Nah, I think.

I just haven't been single at Christmas in a very long time.

"Did Adam really drown?" Aunt Maeve asks, using the

same hand she touched mine with to cover her heart. She's aghast, the colour drained from her cheeks.

Mum scoffs. "Don't be daft, Maeve. That's the plot of *Titanic*."

"Oh, that's *very* bad taste, Hattie, very bad," she tuts. For absolutely no reason whatsoever, she looks like she's about to burst into tears. She loves to play the victim, especially after one of her notorious interrogations. Basically, she's a more vicious version of Mum.

I shrug, my mouth still full of potato.

"It's no laughing matter really, your being single," she says. "There's a reason there aren't many children in this house. Your mum and I left it too late."

"Good God, Mum!" Dylan retorts. "You can't say those things these days."

"Why not? She should know. I'm doing her a favour!"

It's official. All Christmas joy has been lynched from my body. I could've been watching *Elf* or *Love, Actually* in peace, tucking into a fruit-bowl-sized serving of those pigs-in-blanket-flavoured crisps.

I sigh. The baby chat isn't new to me. We've all heard Mum bleat on about how she wished she'd had more than just one child, how time really gets away from you. Sometimes, I feel bad for her, but it isn't something I want to worry about at Christmas. Especially the first Christmas at which I've been single for over *nine* years.

"Excuse me," I say, rising from my arse-chewing stool. "Think I'm going to grab some fresh air."

"Oh, don't make a scene, Hattie," Mum berates.

Me? I'm the one making the scene?

I give her a look and she relents, shrugging glumly as if

this wasn't her plan for the day and we're all ruining it for her.

I lock myself in the loo to discourage anyone from following me. I stare at my reflection and pull the paper crown from my head, balling it into my fist. The worst part about all of this is that while I'd love for everyone, myself included, to forget about Adam, that won't happen. Adam was a part of my life whether I like it or not. I run my fingers through my hair, careful not to frizz it up. It plonks back exactly the way it was: frothy. Mum used to say if I had dyed my hair black when I was a kid, I'd have been the spit of Tracy Beaker. Not exactly the vibe I was going for. Although I'd love to tell a few people to bog off right now.

I take a few deep breaths then stride out towards the back garden, grabbing my coat in the hall on my way.

Once I'm outside, sitting on the frozen garden furniture, I breathe in that fresh, winter air for all of two minutes before I hear the door open and close.

"Brr, it's sharp out here," Dylan says, rubbing his hands together. He draws a long puff from his vape. It's a festive one – apple and cinnamon spiced, or something similar. I don't mind second-hand steam so much when it smells divine.

"Thanks for sticking up for me in there," I say.

He shrugs. "Mum's a right nosy bitch. She's been wondering about your break-up for weeks." He shakes his head. "I'm glad you didn't give it to her." He turns and gives me a conspiratorial grin. "Welcome to the Black Sheep Parade. We march at dawn."

I snort. The thing about connecting with other *tragic* people when you feel particularly lost yourself is that you

find yourself oversharing. It's like I want him to know I qualify to be in his tragic club. So, I tell him, "He thought he could do better."

Dylan makes a face. "Adam said that? What a prick."

"He didn't say that *exactly*. He said something along the lines of, 'You don't fit in with my new friends.' His new finance-bro crowd."

"Well, what a relief."

I laugh. "*Right?* Anyway, how's your recent venture going?"

"Which one? The dog-walking business or the clothes brand?"

"Both of those are new to me. You started a clothes brand?"

"Well, technically, it was just briefs."

I nod to show him I'm listening.

He shakes his head. "That's all there is to it really. I got bored and am now thinking of becoming a travel blogger."

I can't help the teasing smile that works its way onto my lips. "Thanks, Dylan."

He frowns. "For what?"

For helping me realise I have at least a little bit of my life together, even if it isn't quite all of it. "Just for cheering me up," I say.

We sit in silence for a bit, and I work over all the stuff I need to do before the gallery opens again after the Christmas break. Truthfully, it isn't all that much. It's part of the reason I love the job: the simplicity of it. Right on the sea front, it's owned by a lovely local couple who pay me to manage it. Adam always thought it was too 'provincial', and I could do more with my art degree.

I mean, he hated that I did an art degree full stop. What sort of business was I going to get into with that?

Hopefully, none, was always my first thought. Business always sounded boring to me.

But I've found myself in the art business and so far, I'm enjoying it. He belittled me for it, as if having wealth, or aspiring to wealth, was the only route to happiness. He didn't like that I wanted to "rot away in that little shop", as he so eloquently put it.

But I love art, and I especially love art that's associated with the sea or the seaside. Ever since we moved down to the south coast from the city, when I was fourteen, I've always loved the freedom of the beach: the seagulls, the sound of the waves crashing against the pebbles at high tide, the way you can taste it, hear it, breathe it. And anyone who can capture that beauty is my kind of artist.

But now I do occasionally wonder if there was some truth in what he was saying because, for example, he isn't at his parents' place for Christmas, moping outside and wishing the time away.

Well, at least I don't think he is… *Pfft*. Who am I kidding? I checked his Instagram this morning like an idiot. He's skiing in the French Alps. It's as if I'm chasing that gutless feeling it gives me whenever I go looking for updates.

He doesn't want me anymore. He doesn't love me anymore. And I have moved on.

Sort of.

"What's on your mind?" Dylan asks. "You're grinding your teeth and it's giving me shivers."

"I keep panicking that I've wasted my twenties," I burst out. *Maybe I really do belong in this tragic club, eh? See,*

look how pathetic I am. "But so what if Adam doesn't want to be with me anymore? It's been a few months now and it's less sore. I'm ok. I'm enjoying having my own flat near the beach and being able to watch the TV I like without having to worry it will be too girly for him. I like cooking Thai and seafood in my own kitchen without having to think about all his undiagnosed allergies. And you know what? I like sleeping alone. He used to take up too much of the bed. You know?"

Dylan scrunches his face up. "Not really… but go on."

"What if he *stole* my twenties?" I say, my voice raising a pitch. "What if he never actually intended for us to be long term and I was just convenient? Hmm? And now I've gone and given him my entire youth? I'm going to be old soon, Dylan."

"You're twenty-eight."

"Yeah. *Right now*. But what about in two years? Next week will be the last birthday in my twenties."

My pulse is raising. Am I sweating? I can feel a lump forming in my throat.

Dylan looks restless, like he's regretting his decision to join me outside.

"I can't get those years back. And now all of the good men are gone!"

Dylan watches me, wide-eyed. "You do know I'm probably the worst person to be giving advice, right? I haven't got my shit together either. Hell, I don't even know where my shit is. How am I supposed to get it together? You've always been the golden child round here and now you're coming to *me* for advice?"

"I didn't ask for advice…"

"Maybe you need to let your hair down. Stop being perfect for ten minutes. Go and do something, or *someone*, recklessly. Screw rules. Screw that lot," he says, tilting his head towards the house. "Screw giving this final year in your twenties to someone else. Make it your own!"

I nod quickly. "Yes! This sounds right."

Dylan shakes his head. "Meh, it's most likely terrible advice."

"No! It's good. You're right. I need to take this year. I need to *own* it."

"What've you always wanted to do?"

"I want to see the seaside."

Dylan purses his lips. "Babe, you *live* in Seaford."

"I know, I mean *better* sea sides! Croatia, the Greek Islands, California and…" My eyes widen. "Shit! There are so many places I should go. Why haven't I been?"

"Didn't Adam hate travelling?"

"Yes! He only ever wanted to go skiing, and I wasn't invited."

I feel feral. He only ever wanted to go away with his mates, and his excuse was that I wasn't very good at learning new things (which I'm now convinced isn't true) and he didn't have time to train me while also getting out on the best slopes.

Dylan cups his hands around his mouth and blows to warm his fingers. "Are you coming to the family New Year's Eve party then?"

"Oh hell. I forgot they'd roped me into that too…" Panic sets in. But then I remember what I just said. "No! I'm taking back the final year of my twenties. New Year's Day is my birthday! I'm making plans for New Year's Eve,"

I proclaim, a little over-excited. "And you know what? I want to have another house party. I was meeting up with my friends after anyway at the pub. Might as well make a bigger deal of it."

"Isn't your flat more of a studio?"

I clap my hands at him. "You're becoming less helpful now, Dyl."

"I'm just saying. You being irrational is making me squirmish."

"*Squirmish?*"

"I don't know what it means, I just know that's how I feel."

"Ugh, maybe you're right." I lean back in the garden chair, the icy armrests sticking to my coat sleeves. "I should ask someone sensible first. I'll call Fliss; she'll know what to do."

"Good idea. Check in with someone sensible. Would you be open to signing a waiver that resolves me of all liability from giving advice?" he asks. He's being funny, but there's a nervous glint in his eye.

"No, sorry. You should've thought about that before you gave it to me."

"Crap. I better lawyer up."

I snort as I take my phone out to message my sensible person.

Fliss used to work for a high-end marketing firm in the city. Her mum is friends with mine, so we've always known each other by proxy. She's two years older than me so we didn't really cross paths as children, except for at family barbeques, and she was always too cool to hang out with me back then anyway. But recently, she's moved back to

Seaford and has been doing freelance work for the gallery's events. We've bonded over our shared love of fish 'n' chips and lunchtime cocktails on a Friday while staring out at the grey abyss that is Seaford seafront during winter.

Dylan blows out a long stream of apple-scented steam. "Come on," he says. "Let's get wasted before they ask us any more questions about our life plans."