

It's Beginning To Look A Lot Like
Christmas

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Christmas*

HAYLEY DUNLOP

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Penguin
Random
House

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For my children, Elliott and Maisie.

And for myself.

Prologue

Date: 1/12/2025

From: KarmaChamelia@hotmail.com

To: Livvin_mybestlife@hotmail.com

Subject: Another bloke bites the dust

Hey Livvie,

Who knew it was possible to hate two blue ticks so much?

Yep, you've guessed it: yet another bloke has gone and done a runner and left me on read for over thirty-six hours now.

I hate this. It feels like all I ever email you about these days is seemingly decent men who end up ghosting me.

The latest one's called Billy, though telling you his name is pointless as he'll probably never come up in conversation again. But seriously, Liv, he seemed so bloody nice.

I got a good vibe from him the moment I saw him. Even his first-day mugshot that I uploaded to the intranet's staff directory caught my attention as he was actually smiling, rather than trying to look all cool and aloof like so many other new starters here.

We were getting along great. And spent the whole day (and night...) together on Saturday. But, since

Sunday morning, I've heard n-o-t-h-i-n-g from him. Zilch. And now, on this freezing Monday night at the start of December, I find myself on my sofa weeping along to those American made-for-TV Christmas movies in an attempt to distract myself from those chirpy little checkmarks. I've stared at them so much I can even see them when I blink, as if they've seared themselves onto the insides of my eyelids.

I know I used to make fun of you for watching these cheesy festive films on Channel 5 on Sunday afternoons when you should've been doing your homework, but I'll admit there is something about them that seems to make me forget about All Of The Shit. Despite the fact they're all pretty much the same, I can't help but invest in the tropey character arcs, gasp when they tell me to gasp (OMG, he's secretly SANTA?!) and swoon when they tell me to swoon.

As ever, the one I'm watching as I'm writing this email features a seemingly carefree and career-focused single woman who's despatched to a picture-perfect town for some obscure December work assignment. After spending mere days there, she concludes – of course – that her life in the big city she was perfectly content with the previous week is now utterly meaningless compared to the small-town simplicities presented to her by a kind-hearted local fellow.

I've watched so many of these identikit films over the last few years that I've even devised my own bingo-based drinking game to play as I watch them. I must admit I never thought ticking off Christmas movie clichés with nothing but blankets, cushions and a sticky shot glass for company would be my

life's greatest joy just a couple of years off my 40th birthday.

I just wish that... fuck, what is it that I wish? I have no bloody idea. Except for one thing, of course. But that's the only thing I can never have.

Right, I'd better go. I'm out with Elle after work tomorrow, which, as you know, means I ought to bank as much sleep as possible while I've got the chance.

Missing you, as always.

Love,

Me xxx

Chapter 1

☑ Story opens in city

I knew the table would be sticky, but I rested my forehead on it anyway.

‘The absolute fucker.’

Elle’s instant summation took me by surprise – especially since I’d only given her a ten-word overview (I-slept-with-Billy-but-haven’t-heard-from-him-since) of my predicament – but I couldn’t deny its accuracy.

I cocked my head to the side and looked up at her out of one eye.

‘Huh, don’t hold back, Elle.’

‘Sorry, Mally, but I just can’t believe it. I thought he was one of the good ones.’

‘I know, right? But apparently not. I can’t figure out what the hell I’ve done wrong this time.’

I peeled my face off the surface and took my time dragging my wine glass towards me to avoid Elle’s commiserative gaze for as long as possible. I drained the liquid slowly but determinedly as her anti-Billy castigation continued. I’d been relying on Elle’s venomous take to exorcise any remaining fondness I had for him, and I hadn’t been disappointed so far.

‘Elle?’

‘Mmm?’

‘We’re going to need more alcohol.’

‘On it.’

Elle called over the waitress in Val Taro, our favourite West End wine bar that was possibly the only undiscovered drinking hole left in this corner of London’s theatreland. It was handily located in the basement underneath our office on Orange Street, a narrow and distinctly un-orange road between Trafalgar Square and Leicester Square.

Setting the world to rights in here after a rough day of office politics always made me feel like my life had morphed into an episode of *Ugly Betty*. Albeit without the chaotic yet loving family waiting for me at home.

We were sitting in our usual discreet spot – tucked away yet with our seats on the small, circular table angled outwards so we could keep an eye on new arrivals and ensure we weren’t overheard by any mutual colleagues. The walls behind us were adorned with Blu-Tacked theatre posters, curly-cornered wine charts and vintage Campari mirrors. Dusty strands of fairy lights were strung around the bar as a reluctant nod to the time of year.

‘Hey, can we get another bottle, and two carbonaras?’ Elle asked.

I’d been about to order a pizza. But with the wine – and Elle – in full flow, I knew there was no point in objecting.

The Italian waitress of the family-run business smiled and nodded, placing a shallow wooden bowl on the table containing some odds and ends of crisps. I smiled back at her and passed her my unopened menu while Elle continued talking.

‘I mean, I could see you were getting close to him, but I didn’t want to say anything as I knew that would’ve freaked you out. It seemed like it was all happening naturally.’

‘That’s how it felt, too.’

The ease with which Billy and I had hit it off had felt like a big deal, since the only other thing that seemed to come naturally to me was watching telly from a horizontal position.

‘Right, you need to tell me absolutely everything, right from the start. Then we can strategise.’



It took three hours (and the same number of wine bottles) to tell Elle about the office romance that had been bubbling away between me and Billy over the past few months.

I divulged every detail Elle asked for. How, after he'd joined *The Helix* – where Elle and I both worked – it'd started off with Billy and I sharing awful puns over Slack and had ended in a day-long pub crawl around the cosy drinking holes of Greenwich on Saturday. It'd been a nippy, zips-up day that had turned into a tipsy, toes-touching dinner, followed by a 'nightcap' at mine... and a swift breakfast the next morning before he had to leave for the airport to fly to his cousin's wedding.

I concluded my tale of woe with the visual agony of those two blue ticks that had tormented me for three days now. Three agonising days in which that floaty yet ever-so-slightly nauseating feeling of possibility had mutated into its ugly opposite: pure, all-consuming self-pity... and one actual anxiety vomit. Three days' worth of tears that my favourite custard cream-shaped cushion had dutifully absorbed as I filled my brain with predictable

yet comforting made-for-TV Christmas movies. Three days since I'd enquired via WhatsApp as to whether Billy had managed to source caffeine before his early-afternoon flight, since we'd run out of time for coffee back at mine.

'Run out of time, eh?' Elle topped up my wine glass and pushed it towards me. She was enjoying this way too much for my liking. Even back at school, she'd always gotten a kick out of taking the piss out of me. 'So, you sent him that message about coffee and then... nothing since?'

'Yup.'

'This feels off to me. Give me your phone.'

I hated it when she did this. The last time she'd got her hands on it she'd sent my brother Josh an offensive GIF that had ripped the piss out of his dedication to veganism. I'd managed to administer a swift deletion, but not before he'd seen it.

After twenty-five years of friendship, I was used to mopping up the messes Elle tended to leave in her wake. She'd always been the confident one who courted attention, and these days loved nothing more than gossiping in the office kitchen with her cliquey underlings in the editorial features team. I, meanwhile, loved nothing more than escaping to the work loos for some alone time every now and then to take a break from my busy internal comms role. Elle had put me forward for the job a year or so after she'd joined *The Helix*. Being invited for a selection day at one of the world's leading online publishing companies – when I hadn't even applied for the position – had been a unique experience, that's for sure. Especially since my limited digital presence meant I didn't have a clue what half the interview questions had been about. But, apparently, my 'obvious lack of journalistic ambition'

– as referenced in my formal job offer – had worked in my favour in the end. They’d wanted someone who was focused on the corporate duties outlined in the job description, not distracted by the lure of a ruthless editorial career.

Working with Elle had never been the plan after uni. In fact, I’d always intended to carve out my own path, bit by bit. But, in fairness to her, I was now on a much bigger salary than before. I owed her a lot.

I handed over my phone, metaphorical mop at the ready. Elle unlocked it and fired up WhatsApp, quickly finding the last message in the conversation with Billy:

Mally:

Has that flat white been acquired? xx

She started scrolling upwards.

‘Elle, come on – that’s private.’

I held out my hand to get it back, but instead she rolled her eyes and shut down WhatsApp before swiping through my paltry collection of apps. Defeated, my hand reached for my wine glass instead.

‘You know,’ Elle said, ‘it would take me like two minutes to set you up with a Hinge profile. I can do it right now if I could just figure out how to download apps on this piece of junk...’

My choice of mobile phone – a basic pay-as-you-go model from Argos and the cheapest smartphone in whatever the digital equivalent of their iconic paper catalogue was these days – was always a source of amusement to anyone who noticed it. Yes, it was clunky, but it ran all the apps I needed. And a dating app certainly didn’t fall

into that category. I reeled off my pre-rehearsed answer whenever this subject came up.

‘I can’t be arsed with it, Elle. The blokes on there are mainly on the prowl for one-night stands. And the ones who claim to be “open-minded” tend to dismiss anything you care about while trying to frame it as an “intellectual debate”.’ My over-exuberant air quotes brushed the wine glass and it started to topple. Elle swooped in to save it.

‘That’s a literal summary of all our male colleagues,’ she said, moving my glass out of harm’s way.

Except Billy. Or maybe I’d been wrong about him all along. It wouldn’t have been the first time I’d scared a bloke off by – as one ex had succinctly summarised – ‘expecting too much, too soon’. Although, in his case, it’d been my quite reasonable suggestion that I leave a mini tube of Sensodyne toothpaste at his place that had sent him running for the hills.

‘C’mon, Elle, let me have my phone back.’

She sighed and skidded my phone along the table towards me.

‘And he didn’t say anything about doing a digital detox while he was away or anything like that?’ she asked.

‘Nope, in fact...’

I looked down at the screen to review its tortuous insights.

‘...yup, look – he’s online right now. And only a couple of hours ago he posted a Reel of himself with one of those ironic unicorn inflatables. Argh, what am I even saying?’ I briefly re-introduced my forehead to the tacky table – it really could do with some Purdy & Figg. ‘I don’t want to spend my spare time obsessing over the online exploits of a man who’s treated me like shit. I’m thirty-eight years old, for fuck’s sake – I shouldn’t be reduced to this! I just

want to meet someone, Elle. Someone who I can meet at home after work and binge-watch telly with. Is that really too much to ask for?’

‘Strong life goals there, Mally.’

‘Oof, you know what I mean. I want to connect with someone who... gets me. Like what you and Rory have.’

Talking about relationships and the deep connections I craved didn’t come easily to me, unless I was pouring everything out in one of my emails to my younger sister, Livvie. Elle was the opposite. Back at school, our conversations had revolved around her latest crushes – yes, plural – and seemingly endless love-life dilemmas. Finding a life partner was less of a mission for her and more of a YO! Sushi-esque conveyor belt of blokes, practically begging for her to select them.

She’d met Rory during freshers’ week as soon as we’d arrived at uni and he’d followed her around like a lost puppy from the outset. But, unlike all the others, she’d permitted him to stay on the scene. And he had, despite Elle messing him around endlessly for three years.

They’d finally made things official shortly before graduation and had been together ever since, though it took Rory an age to convince Elle to move in with him, and even longer to have a kid. But she was always at her most relaxed in his company. And he was blatantly still so smitten with her. It was easy to see why: even without her perfectly proportioned figure, flawless porcelain skin, poker-straight glossy brown hair and almost obscenely large almond-shaped hazel eyes, her magnetic personality alone was enough to get her noticed. Success was always going to come easily to Elle – professionally *and* romantically.

Unlike me. What I lacked in charisma I tried to make up for with my self-deprecating humour and unshakeable reliability. And while I had no real qualms with my pale, mousy but pleasant-enough appearance, I wasn't in possession of that carefree girl-next-door vibe that would attract attention from anyone who didn't already know me. I was very much the 'kooky yet weirdly organised best friend' to Elle's chaotic yet magnetic 'main character'. No wonder I found meeting decent men so bloody labour-intensive.

'More than anyone you deserve some luck on the relationship front. Look, we need to get to the bottom of this. And we will. But I don't have any answers for you right now. What are you up to Friday night?' Elle asked.

'Friday? I thought Tuesdays were your only child-free night?'

'They are, but Rory's going to be out until God knows when on Friday for his work Christmas do and it'll just be me and Frannie. So why don't you come to mine for the night? You can give me a hand getting her to bed and then we can have a cosy night in with a film and a takeaway and try and figure out your next move.'

'I swear we had this exact conversation when we were like fifteen – minus the toddler element.'

'Yeah, except this time we won't be drinking my mum's sherry while miming to "Lady Marmalade" in my bedroom mirror. We can upgrade to a nice bottle of pinot grigio I've been saving, watch whatever you fancy on Netflix and hope Frannie doesn't wake up and insist we watch *Olaf's Frozen Adventure* for the sixty-eighth time this year.'

I shivered at the prospect of watching anything from the *Frozen* canon. I used to love watching Disney films,

but these days they triggered way too many difficult memories. And I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to watch one that centred around the unbreakable bond between two very different sisters.

'Yeah, go on then.'

'And maybe we can also have a teeny-weeny chat about that article you keep promising to write for me and never do?'

These 'teeny-weeny' chats about writing an article for our employer, *The Helix* – one of the UK's leading lifestyle, entertainment and features websites – were a regular fixture of our conversations. Elle was always on the lookout for ways to commission cheap – or, let's be honest, free – content.

'Here's me thinking we'd made it through a night without you bringing that up,' I said. 'I still can't think of anything remotely interesting to write about. The people you commission for *The Helix* all have so much to say, whereas I've got nothing. Unless you want me to write about chocolate-based breakfast cereals, in which case I can have an article with you by nine a.m. tomorrow.'

'Let's pop a pin in that particular idea, eh, Mally?' Elle placed her wine glass down and grabbed my hands firmly. 'Seriously, though. You know I'm the features editor, right? And I could simply commission you to write something with no questions asked?'

She squeezed my hands tightly as if to emphasise her clout.

'I know, but I don't even work in editorial. It'd be awkward – everyone would assume I'd been commissioned because we're friends. I swear most people still think that's how I got my job anyway.'

She sighed and released her grip, sliding her glass towards her. I did the same.

‘We commission non-editorial employees all the time, you know that! I swear I’ve been approached by 95 per cent of people who work for the company. Only yesterday, Colin from the canteen asked if he could write a piece about his top ten favourite hand dryers.’

‘I’d read that.’

‘Yeah, I know *you’d* read that, but I reckon the topic’s a tad niche, even for *The Helix*. Plus, the draft he insisted on sending me read like an actual hand dryer catalogue, not a wry feature. Whereas the intranet piece you wrote today about next week’s health and safety training genuinely made me cackle.’

‘Huh. I think the pun in the headline is probably my career highlight.’

Elle sighed. ‘You’re doing that thing again.’

‘What thing?’ I don’t know why I bothered to play dumb with Elle; she knew me better than anyone.

‘You’re selling yourself short. How many times do I need to say this, Mally Allister? You’re an amazing writer, but your talent’s going to waste. You need to free your voice! Who knows, if you play your cards right, you could be moved up to editorial! Whatever it is that’s holding you back needs to do one.’

Was I being held back, though? Or was I simply content with a quieter life than hers? Even when we were teenagers, Elle had always been chomping at the bit to move to London and grow into the person she was born to be. She’d had her life and career mapped out from the start, whereas mine seemed to be playing out like a fading vapour trail behind her flaming booster jets. And I didn’t mind it that way – I’d rather evaporate than burn.

‘Yeah, I know. But my heart doesn’t lie in journalism; it never has. Actually’ – I took a larger-than-average swig of wine for courage – ‘I’ve been thinking about it a lot recently, and what I’d really like to do next year is start focusing on the ideas I’ve got for my children’s books. If I start writing clickbaity features, I worry that I’m going to end up distracted and pigeonholed, so...’

‘Stop. Listen to me. In the kindest possible way, you’re some way off from having kids. I mean, think about it: do you honestly believe you’ll be able to write anything that will resonate with that audience and that market?’

My stomach flipped at Elle’s words, my throat swelling. Despite always knowing what I needed to hear to boost my confidence, she also had a knack for slapping it back down again. But she was right, of course. Meeting someone who I might be able to start a family with one day was definitely on my ultimate to-do list, but if I wanted to even have a shot at having kids this side of forty, I’d have to meet someone immediately. Like, this month. And she was probably right about my pathetic book ideas, too. I tried to maintain my composure but my glossy eyes must have given me away.

‘Urgh, don’t look at me like that,’ Elle said. ‘I feel crap enough as it is. It’s been a shitty week at work – you wouldn’t believe some of the stuff that’s going down in editorial at the moment.’

‘It’s fine. I just thought... you know, with Billy, maybe I’d finally met someone who I could...’ The rest of the words got lodged in my neck. I downed the remainder of my wine in an attempt to wash them away.

‘Like I said: what an absolute fucker.’

‘Yeah.’

I looked at my phone and did a double-take at the time.

‘Shit, I’ve got to go or I’ll miss my train.’

I wiped my eyes quickly and grabbed my stuff. I had eight minutes to sprint from Leicester Square to platform three or five – I could never remember at this time of night – at Charing Cross station. It was just about doable based on previous drunken dashes but it was going to be tight.

‘Okay, go, go, go. I’ll sort the bill and you can pay me back. I’ve got a busy couple of days coming up so I might not see you around the office. But come by my desk on Friday just before five and we’ll head to mine from there, yeah?’

‘Will do. And, Elle?’

‘Mmm?’

‘That elf and safety training is *mandatory*, okay?’



I missed the train by about four seconds. It was a freezing thirty-minute wait on the concourse for the next one to Hither Green. And, as much as I respected his enthusiasm, I wasn’t sure I could hack the resident saxophone busker playing the same four bars from ‘Last Christmas’ on an endless loop.

Shivering on the platform bench, I put my earmuffs on and decided to re-read the email I’d sent to Livvie last night. After all, re-reading our historical correspondence was one of my life’s biggest comforts these days. I logged into my ancient inbox, which I only ever used for Livvie.

The sight that greeted me caused every millilitre of blood in my body to plummet to my feet. Because, for the

first time in twenty years, there was a reply. I had to hold back the urge to plunge my thumb through the screen to read it as quickly as possible, forcing out a restrained tap instead.

An unfamiliar noise escaped from my voice box as it all became clear:

Address not found

Your message wasn't delivered to

Livvin_mybestlife@hotmail.com because the address couldn't be found or is unable to receive email.

I was shocked by the intensity of my reaction to the automatically generated reply. I knew, after all these years, it was inevitable this would happen at some point. But part of me had never really let myself believe it.

By the time I'd pulled myself together I almost missed the next train, too. Settled into my usual spot in my usual carriage, I re-read the bounce-back message. It was so brutal. So final. And I knew I never wanted to get one of those blunt emails ever again. But that meant one thing: I would have to stop emailing Livvie. And I wasn't sure I was ready for that. Because I always liked to imagine that, in some alternative universe, she'd replied to every single one of my messages over the last two decades in her usual no-nonsense manner. In the case of Billy, she'd have said something along the lines of 'just call him, FFS!'. Instead, I'd spent two decades having to imagine her advice.

She'd always been that rare kind of person who'd never cared what anyone had thought of her. She'd always been unashamedly herself – and had made me feel *I* could be unashamedly *myself*, in a way that no one else had since.

My little sister had been my confidante, my best friend, my favourite human – by quite some margin. But then we lost her when she was just fifteen.

And losing her was the catalyst that, eventually, caused the rest of my family to lose each other, too.