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Angels in the Snow

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Angels in the Snow

Sarah Morgan



Daniel

PROLOGUE

'I'M OVER him. Really. That's why I'm back.' Stella stamped the snow from her boots and levered them off on the doorstep of the converted stable. 'Two years is a long time. Long enough to gain some perspective on things.' She glanced at the man next to her and caught her breath because he was so like his brother. And yet so different. *This man hadn't smashed her dreams into a million tiny pieces.* 'Are you sure it's a good idea for me to live in your stable?'

'It's nearly Christmas,' he drawled, a gleam of humour in his eyes as he stood aside to let her pass. 'A stable is prime accommodation, haven't you heard?'

Stella smiled, but beneath the smile was a shiver of trepidation.

Christmas.

Once, it had been her favourite time of year. But that had been before every glittering silver bauble reminded her of the engagement ring she'd worn for such a short space of time.

Putting her life back together had taken time, effort and determination. And she was about to test just how far she'd come.

She'd kept her emotions safely boxed away, like Christmas decorations that were no longer needed. What if

the box suddenly opened, spilling all those emotions back into her life?

For a terrifying moment it felt as though two years of healing was about to be undone and Stella stepped quickly inside her new home, hiding her feelings from the man watching her. He was a doctor as well as a friend. She knew how much he saw.

Her feet sank into the soft, cream rug that covered much of the pale wooden floor and she blinked rapidly to clear the tears, angry with herself. *No more tears,* wasn't that what she'd promised herself? 'I suspect this is a little more comfortable than the original stable. You've performed miracles, Patrick. When I last saw this two years ago, it still had a horse in it.' She was making polite conversation but it was impossible to ignore the gnawing anxiety in her stomach.

'Stella, will you drop the act?' He slammed the door shut on the snow and the freezing December air. 'You're a nervous wreck. Pale. Jumpy. Looking over your shoulder in case Daniel suddenly turns up. He isn't going to. He's up to his elbows in blood and drama at the hospital. It's just you and me. We drowned our sorrows together two years ago. If you can't be honest with me, who can you be honest with?'

Stella tugged off her gloves. 'He's your brother. That makes it awkward.'

'The fact that he's my brother doesn't blind me to his faults.' Patrick dropped the keys on the table. 'Neither does it affect our friendship. We kept each other going over that nightmare Christmas. Don't think I've forgotten that.'

Stella felt her insides wobble and wondered whether it was a mistake to pursue this conversation. In a way it had been easier living and working among people who didn't know—people who weren't watching to see how she was coping. 'I'm nervous about seeing him,' she said finally. 'Of course I am.'

'I'm not surprised. Stella, you were engaged.'

'For about five minutes.' She walked towards the wood-burning stove and stared at the glass. 'I just wish he hadn't broken it off at Christmas. It made it harder, somehow.'

'He shouldn't have broken it off at all.'

'That was inevitable.' She turned, resigned to having the conversation she'd hoped to avoid. 'Daniel doesn't believe he'd be a good husband and he definitely doesn't think he'd be a good father—you know how his mind works. The surprise wasn't that he broke off the engagement, but that he proposed to me in the first place. If I'd been stronger, I would have said no. I knew it wasn't what he wanted.' Lost in thought, dwelling in the land of 'what if', Stella lifted one of the logs piled in a basket, ready to be used on the fire, and rubbed her fingers along the rough bark. Then she looked at Patrick. 'Enough of me. How are *you* doing? If anything, that Christmas was worse for you than it was for me. Your wife left.'

'The difference is that Carly and I weren't in love. I was angry with her for ending it at Christmas, and I feel for the children not having a mother around, but for myself…' He gave a dismissive shrug. 'The one thing about being unhappily married is that divorce feels like a blessing. But I'm aware that I'm probably part of the reason that Daniel got cold feet.'

'I think it was more like frostbite than cold feet,' Stella said lightly, 'and it wasn't your fault.'

'Carly walked out on Christmas Eve. Daniel broke off your engagement on the same day. Believe me, there was a connection.'

Remembering just how awful that Christmas had been for both of them, Stella sighed. 'You and I spent it on our own, trying to smile around your kids, do you remember?'

'I remember that you were brave,' Patrick said gruffly, reaching out and squeezing her shoulder. 'After Daniel walked out, you disappeared for five minutes and then came back with your make-up on and a smile on your face, determined to give my children a good time. Because of you, I don't think Alfie even noticed that his mother wasn't there.'

'The children gave me something to focus on. And you and I *did* share that bottle of champagne, which helped. And we ate every scrap of chocolate from the Christmas tree.'

'Then I went and picked up a kitten from the farmer next door, do you remember?'

It was one of the few happy memories among the miserable ones. 'Giving Alfie that kitten was an inspired idea. And it was *gorgeous.*'

'That kitten is now a cat and has just produced kittens of her own.'

'Really? Alfie must love that.'

'I've said he can keep two. I have to find homes for the other two. Our life is chaotic enough without four kittens.' Patrick's gaze settled on her face. 'You really were brave, Stella. I know how much you love Dan. The fact that you held it together was nothing short of amazing.'

'If you'd seen me two weeks later, you wouldn't have thought I was amazing. I was in pieces.'

'I'm not surprised.'

Talking about the past had removed any awkwardness between them. 'I'm worried about how Daniel is going to react when he finds out that I'm living in your stable.'

'I don't care what he thinks.' Tough, calm and sure of himself, Patrick removed the log from her hands. 'My property. My decision.'

"Well, that's a non-confrontational approach.' Stella watched

as he opened the wood-burning stove. 'I don't want to cause a problem between you. I don't want you falling out over me.'

'We have to fall out over something. It won't be the first time it's a woman. I still owe him for stealing Nancy Potter away from me when I was eight. I adored that girl. I've had a thing for pigtails ever since.' His smile was slow and sexy and Stella wondered for the millionth time why she couldn't have fallen for him instead of his brother.

You always have to do things the hard way, Stella.

Dismissing her mother's voice from her head, Stella slid her hands into the back pockets of her jeans and forced herself to keep it light. 'So—was this Nancy Potter pretty?'

'She had red hair and a fierce temper.'

'Sounds scary.'

'Relationships are always scary.'

She wasn't going to argue with that. 'You and I both want the same out of life. I met you and Dan at exactly the same time, that week I started at the hospital five years ago. Why couldn't you and I have fallen in love with each other?'

Patrick fed the log into the stove. 'Because you're a beautiful blonde and I hate stereotypes.'

Stella lifted a hand to her hair. 'I could dye it black?'

'Wouldn't make any difference. There was never any chemistry between us.'

Stella watched his muscles flex as he reached for another log. 'Do you remember that time you kissed me, just to check?'

'Daniel punched me immediately afterwards.' Patrick lit the fire. 'He didn't want you involved with me in case I hurt you.'

They exchanged a look, both thinking the same thing.

That, in the end, it had been Daniel who had hurt her.

'Am I going to be able to do this?' Stella was asking herself

as much as him. 'Am I going to be able to work alongside him every day and not wish I was with him?'

'You tell me. Are you?'

Stella gave a murmur of frustration. 'I don't know. I hope so.' She paced the length of the living room, hating herself for being so unsure and indecisive. 'Yes, of course I can do it. And if it feels difficult—well, I just need to keep reminding myself that he and I don't want the same things out of life.'

Patrick coaxed the flame to life. 'You just need to keep reminding yourself that when it comes to women, Daniel is nothing but trouble. We Buchannans are *seriously* bad at relationships.'

'*You're* not.'

He rocked back on his heels. 'I'm divorced, Stella.'

'Your wife was clearly deranged.'

'Or maybe I'm not easy to live with.'

'No man is easy to live with,' Stella said dryly. 'You're a different species. I just wish I'd listened to you when you warned me about Dan.'

'It wouldn't have made a difference. Women never listen when it comes to Daniel. It's those blue eyes of his. For some reason I've never understood, he can seduce a woman with a single glance.' Patrick stood up and brushed the dust from his long black coat. 'I admire you. He wouldn't give you marriage so you walked away. You refused to accept less than you deserve.'

Stella watched as the fire whispered and licked at the logs and then flared to life. 'Why does that sound better than it feels?'

'Because the right thing isn't always the easy thing.' Patrick studied her for a long moment. 'Why now? Why did you come back now?'

As the room grew warmer, Stella unwound the scarf from

her neck. 'Because I hated London. Because two years is a long time. Because I worked here for three years and I miss all my friends. Because I can see how wrong Daniel was for me. And because I really am over him.' Dear *God, please let her be over him…*

Patrick gave her a long, hard look. 'If you're over him, why haven't you told him you're back?'

Stella felt her heart lurch and she glanced from the stove to the exposed beams. 'How did you find time to do this up?'

'I didn't. I just wrote cheques. And stop changing the subject.'

'Why would I tell him I'm back? We haven't had any contact since that nightmare Christmas two years ago. Not once.' *They'd been so close, and yet he hadn't even contacted her to see how she was.* 'He doesn't know I'm planning to live with his brother. He doesn't know I've got a job in the emergency department. If I rang him and said I was coming back he might think I was dropping hints. Hoping to get back together or something. That would be awkward and embarrassing.'

'So, instead, you're going to walk into the emergency department tomorrow and surprise him.' Patrick gave a sardonic smile. 'I hate to disillusion you, angel, but I don't think that approach is going to steer you away from awkward and embarrassing.'

'Maybe not, but there won't be an opportunity for conversation. There's no time to talk about personal stuff in the emergency department, especially not at Christmas when it's so busy.' Stella flopped down on the comfortable sofa. 'And one of the advantages of having been engaged for less than twenty-four hours is that most people didn't know about it.'

Patrick spread his hands in a gesture of apology. 'What can I say? Dan's always shied away from commitment. Our parents'

marriage was ugly, you know that. *Really* ugly. Not an example anyone in their right mind would be in a hurry to follow.'

'It didn't stop you marrying.'

'Maybe it should have done.' His tone weary, Patrick walked to the window. 'I suppose I wanted to create something I'd never had—I wanted the whole family thing. Dan just rejected it. And maybe he was the sensible one given that my ex-wife is now living in New York and my children no longer have a mother.'

'I'm sorry about your divorce,' Stella said softly, watching as Patrick's broad shoulders tensed.

'Don't be sorry for me. I'm fine. It's just the kids I worry about.'

'I'm dying to see them. They won't remember me.'

'Alfie remembers you.' Patrick turned with a smile. 'He was eight when you left and you've been sending him thoughtful birthday presents. He's dying to show you our kittens. And you won't recognise Posy, she's grown so much.'

'I can't believe she's three.'

'She's very mischievous. Generally creating havoc.'

'And what about you? Any women in your life?'

'Thousands,' Patrick drawled, a wicked gleam in his blue eyes. 'I find I can't get through the day without stripping at least one midwife naked.'

'You can joke, but I happen to know that ninety-five per cent of the midwives in your department would be only too happy to be stripped naked by you.'

'What am I doing wrong with the other five per cent?'

'He's a man.'

'Ah.' Laughing, he tilted his head. 'Your turn to tell all. Did you find yourself a decent rebound relationship to cure you of my brother?'

Stella straightened her shoulders. 'Not yet, but I'm working on it. It's my Christmas present to myself. A love life. I've made a list.'

'A list of men?'

'No!' Stella laughed. 'A list of qualities. You know—things I won't compromise on.'

'Like tall, dark, handsome, rich…' Realising what he'd said, Patrick threw her an apologetic look but Stella managed a smile.

'That sounds too much like Dan,' she said lightly. 'I was thinking more of must want marriage and children.' She glanced around her. 'Does this place have an internet connection?'

'High-speed broadband—why?'

'Because I've joined an internet dating agency. I've decided that this time I'm going to be more analytical about the whole thing. It was crazy, falling for Daniel. He had "unsuitable" stamped on his forehead. If I'd made him fill out a questionnaire he never would have passed "go". This time I'm weeding out all the men who aren't right for me. I posted a description of myself last month and I've had three hundred and fifty replies.'

'You're going to be busy.'

'Maybe you should do the same thing?'

'I don't have time to date. Between the children, the kittens and the hospital, I'm lucky if I sleep. And, anyway, I wouldn't expose the kids to another woman. Too complicated. Talking of which, I'd better get going. The labour ward rang half an hour ago to warn me they have a woman who isn't progressing as she should be. I need to check her out.' Patrick scooped the keys from the table and handed them to her. 'These are for you. You're my first tenant so if there's anything I need to know about the place, just tell me. They're forecasting constant snow between now and Christmas so if the heating isn't high enough, light the fire or adjust the thermostat.'

'I'll light the fire. It's so cosy. And if you need any baby-sitting, I'm right here. It's so good to be home. I've been away too long.'

'I hope you don't find it isolated after city life. If you're internet dating, surely you're more likely to find Mr Right in London?'

'I don't think so.' Stella stared at the craggy outline of the mountains in the distance. 'This place is in my blood. I need a man who understands that. A man who loves it as much as I do.'

'Well, I wish you luck.' Patrick strolled towards the door and Stella turned to look at him.

'Just one thing…' Her heart pounding, she tried to sound casual. 'Is Daniel seeing anyone?'

Patrick paused with his hand on the doorhandle. 'Are you sure you want me to answer that question?'

'Yes.' Stella licked her lips. 'I'd rather hear it from you. It will be easier if I'm prepared.'

'He *is* seeing someone.' Patrick's voice was gentle and his eyes held hers. 'She's a lawyer. Career-woman. Workaholic. About as maternal as a cactus.'

'Oh. OK.' Feeling suddenly cold, Stella rubbed her hands over her arms. Because Patrick was watching her intently, she smiled. 'She sounds perfect for him. Not the sort to want marriage and a family. That's good. Great. Really, I mean it. I—I'm glad he's happy.'

Patrick studied her face for a long time and then he opened the door, letting in a blast of ice-cold air. 'I said he was seeing someone. I said she reminded me of a cactus. I never said that he was happy.'

And, with that cryptic comment and an enigmatic smile, he closed the door behind him.

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