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Opening Extract from...

Hubble Bubble

Written by Jane Lovering

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Hubble Bubble

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Chapter One

The fridge had definitely exploded. The small squat box, now minus a corner, leaned slightly forward into a green patch of ooze, sides bulging and its front flapping from one impotent hinge. It looked like R2-D2 after a really hard night on the Crème de Menthe. I bent and tugged at the line of rubber door seal, which pinged sullenly back at me. 'What the hell did you have in there, fusion fuel?'

Megan looked at her toes and mumbled something. Her black curls fell over her pretty-pug face but I could see she was blushing by the darkening shade of the mocha-coffee skin visible between her hair and the back of her neck.

'And since when did you eat'—I held up a dripping fast-food wrapper between finger and thumb—'this kind of stuff?'

Her mutters became more audible but more defensive. 'It was the last meal Tom and I had before he …'

'Stop trailing off when you talk about him as though he went off to a tragic hero's death! He's living in Wolverhampton, and he'd been two-timing you, *and* she's a topless model.' Only my best friend could keep the leftovers of the meal during which she split up with her boyfriend. Only she could keep them until they went critical, anyway. 'Oh, Meg,' I said helplessly. 'If ever there was a man who'd had his chips, it was him.' I picked up a newspaper from the recycling pile and began scraping unidentified runny stuff off the floor of Megan's otherwise pristine kitchen.

'I don't know why I asked you over. I knew you wouldn't understand, Holly. You are *very* unsympathetic. I think it's because you don't get attached to men like I do.' She clasped her forehead dramatically. 'You don't know what it's like to be in love.'

'Because they're all wankers. We've discussed this and you agreed. Wankers. Fat wankers, some of them.'

'Only after Tom had left. And now I'm feeling like I'm ready for something new.'

'Yep. That would be a fridge.' I handed her the pendulous paper, replete with greasy puddles. 'I've got my own house, a great job –

why the hell would I want a man hanging around wanting meals and laundry and doing botched DIY?'

'Because … oh, just because.'

'Great argument there, very persuasive. Richard Dawkins would love a debate with you, you know that?'

But Megan didn't reply. She was staring down at the sinus-clearing pool in the newspaper package. Her chunky-cut curls were, for once, completely still. 'Oh Holly, look,' she breathed.

'Never seen evolution in action before?' I poked the wobbly pile of fat. 'Hang around long enough you'll be able to tell it your views on love and the universe.'

'No.' She flexed the newsprint. 'This advert. Here.'

I looked.

'What would you wish for? Women interested in forming a group to practise a new branch of the magic arts, get in touch. No experience necessary, just a broad mind and the desire to make wishes come true.'

And then the name Vivienne, and a phone number.

'Magic, Holl,' Megan breathed. Her brown eyes had gone all shiny and big; she looked like a little girl on Christmas Eve. 'She says we could do magic.'

'Yeah, I see the mistake you're making here.' I took Megan's shoulders and shook them gently. 'Magic. Not real. Like, oh, I dunno, the Tooth Fairy, Doctor Who and impartiality. Pretend. Something you grow out of by the time you're about'—I looked into that rapt expression and my hands dropped—'twenty-nine. Or maybe, on current evidence, even later.'

'Don't be so … *pragmatic*, Holly! Wouldn't you love to wish for something and be able to make it come true? What would you wish for?' Her eyes were still unnaturally sparkly, and it made even my inner cynic go all rubbery round the edges. 'After the way Tom treated me, I'd wish to be worshipped like a goddess.'

'Wouldn't you get a bit sick of all the sacrificial blood? And then, think of being on call all the time; it'd be worse than being a junior

doctor. Or a dutiful sister, which is what I am, and I have an arrangement to meet my dear sibling in twenty minutes, so I'm going to leave you with your fantasies.' I collected my jacket and bag, and went to the door. Megan was sitting on the floor clutching the newspaper bundle, which was now dipping alarmingly in the middle. Her face was all dreamy and there was a little smile I didn't much like the look of tweaking at the corners of her mouth. 'You heard me say "fantasies", right?'

'Bye, Holl.'

I shook my head as I left the flat. Megan was about as grounded as dandelion fluff on a good day. Today, with the winds of romantic disappointment whistling through her life, she'd probably left Planet Sensible for geostationary orbit.

Chapter Two

Nicholas was waiting for me in the already crowded pub. ‘Hey, Holl. I’ve got a round in, come sit down.’ He took my jacket and hung it over the back of a nearby chair, next to the bloke who was sitting there. I smiled in apology and went to remove it, but Nick stopped me. ‘This is our table. I asked Kye to save it for us.’

‘Kye?’

The man stood, and it was a movement which went on for some time. He was tall, ridiculously tall, and had the kind of shape that is usually described as ‘lithe’: slim but muscular enough to give him shoulders that filled his jacket in an interesting way. ‘That’s K-A-I. You must be Holly.’ Welsh accent. There were other things that I noticed about him too, like his hair, which was very dark and very long but drawn back to show off his cheekbones, and the single piercing in one ear which glinted whenever he moved his head. And his hooded black leather jacket, worn over a pale blue T-shirt cut low to reveal the dip at the base of his throat, the silver ring on his thumb, and those long legs wrapped in washed-out denim, so old it was nearly white. But my brain took all this in in a flash, like looking at a photograph, then ignored it. He was a bloke, that was all.

I looked quickly at Nick. He was bouncing around on the balls of his feet, rubbing his hands together. A good day, then. But Nick’s ‘good days’ had a way of bringing disaster to anyone who got involved, his un-aimed enthusiasm was a form of weaponry that warring nations could exploit. ‘Yes. Er, Kai. Thank you for holding the table for us. I’m sure you’d like to get off now. Back to …’ I stared around for inspiration.

‘No, no, Holl, Kai is with us. Well, with me, although not in the way that you are obviously thinking by the way you’re staring. Not a couple. No.’ Nick bounced a bit more, then sat down.

‘Why the hell would I think you were a couple?’ I moved my gaze from Nicholas to Kai, only to find that his eyes were fixed on me

with a peculiar intensity, and when I met his stare I realised that he didn't only have a body that would make any red-blooded woman break stride, he had unusual eyes too. They were probably really a kind of paleish brown, but the lights in the pub made them look yellow. Nick was staring too, but that's the kind of person he was, he didn't mean anything by it. His eyes, like mine, were on the normal side of grey, although he'd inherited our father's pale skin and blond hair, so we used to tease him that if he was photographed in black-and-white he'd be invisible. I, on the other hand, got Ma's ginger ringlets and freckles, Aunt Mairi's athletic build and, from some anonymous donor to the family gene pool, the kind of mouth that always looks as though I am smiling, even when I'm not. I looked, so I was told, like Little Orphan Annie's evil twin hatching a plot.

The two guys eyeballed me until I began to feel awkward. 'What?' I sat down behind the gin and tonic.

Kai broke the silence and dropped his eyes, to stare at the scratched and scarred table and the two pints sitting stickily atop. 'Nicholas has been telling me about your job. You're a location scout? Sounds brilliant.' The Welsh accent made every word musical and slightly foreign but however sexy the voice I couldn't ignore the content.

'Nicky! You know you're not supposed to go round blurting out what I do. Remember last time? And, oh God, the time before?'

Nick looked down at his scuffed shoes. We'd never managed to get him to polish his shoes, not even with all the family nagging, and now scuffed toecaps were as much a part of my brother as his floppy fringe, huge eyes and eccentricities. 'Sorry. Sorry, Holl, but I think it's so cooooool to have a sis who drives around finding places to be in films!'

I couldn't be cross with him for long. It was completely pointless in the face of such effervescence, like sulking at a beagle. 'I know. And yes, it is cool. But when you tell people, they always think I'm some kind of backdoor entrance to the industry.' I turned to Kai. 'Look, sorry, but I don't know any movie directors or film stars and I

can't help you get your script in front of a producer. I never get to meet anyone with any influence, I just scout locations. I'm only slightly higher up the food chain than the guy who makes the coffee on set. Okay?'

This got me an even-toothed grin. 'You don't know any film stars?' He picked up one pint and drank, watching me over the soapy froth.

'No.'

'Want to meet some?'

'Kai's a journalist. Knows all sorts of people. Hugh Jackman and David Tennant, people like that. You like Hugh Jackman, Holl, don't you?'

'Hey, steady boy, you'll get me into all kinds of bother.' The golden eyes turned back to me. 'Interested, that's all. No agenda.' His look was cool now.

'So, why are you and Nick …?'

'Kai was doing a piece on these new drugs. Wanted to interview someone who's taking them and my doctor put him on to me.' Nick cupped his pint glass and lifted it, spilling beer as his hands trembled.

Yeah, I had my doubts about that doctor too.

'I thought you were all about the famous people.' To fit in I took a sip of my gin. The lemon slice bobbed to the surface and hit me on the nose like a fairy slap and, as if in reaction, someone behind me burst out laughing. The Welshman's eyes flicked up for a second to watch the crowd and I caught a hint – I mean, call me Mrs Suspicious if you want, but it was there, trust me – of someone used to watching, observing the crowd from the outside rather than being a part of it.

'Yeah. Sometimes. But I do other stuff too.' Now I got the full economy-pack version of the look, and I swear his eyes really were a pale gold, like a cat, or an owl. A colour I'd never seen on a man before. 'Deeper stuff, you know? Can only go so long asking all these gorgeous women if they've had work done, just so they can deny it.'

I waited for him to leer and ask if I'd had work done, but he didn't.

Bastard. I mean, I haven't, but it would be nice to be asked.

'Anyway.' The body stretched out again, seemed to grow towards the ceiling. 'Thanks for the drink, Nicholas. Better be off. Deadlines, you know how it goes.' A hand went into a pocket of the battered leather jacket. 'Nice to meet you, Holly. And if you're ever looking for a gothic cottage, well, quite fancy seeing my place on screen.' He held out a card to me. 'Come over.'

'Thanks.' This, at least, managed to sound sincere. Not many people volunteered their homes; most had to be persuaded into letting some film crew muck up their lawn, scare the cat and leave traces of John Nettles everywhere. And by the time I looked up from the small-printed square of card, the lanky Welshman was gone and Nick was drawing house shapes on the table in spilled beer.

'I thought he'd be your type.'

'Stop it. He's not my type. I don't have a type. Anyway. How're you doing? Did you get the washing out that I put in the dryer at your place this morning? It needs folding as soon as it's dry or it goes all crinkly.'

Nick flicked me a sudden straight stare. It was disconcerting, from someone whose eyes usually never stayed still. 'He's a nice guy, been nice to me anyway, and you can't say that about everyone, can you? And he was interested in you, Holl, I could tell, the way he kept looking at you.'

'People always look at one another when they're talking. That's how people *are*,' I said without thinking, draining my G & T and watching his fingers fill in curtains on the little beer house.

'No. That's how normal people are.' He added a chimney and a winding plume of smoke. 'I don't look at people like that, do I?' A sudden, almost vicious flat palm wiped the outlines, scrubbed them back into the sticky pool they'd come from, then kept moving until there was nothing but a brown smear stretching between beer mats.

I reached out and laid a hand on his bony wrist. 'Hey. Come on. You're doing okay. And the new stuff seems to be helping, doesn't it? You're better than you've been for a long time.'

‘Yeah, yeah.’ A flick of the head and his mood changed again. ‘How’s Megan?’

I told him about the exploded fridge and the latest idea and he laughed until beer came out of his nose. ‘Seriously? She really thinks you should join a witching group? Oh, God, Holl, do it, just for the laugh. She’s so great, isn’t she, Megan – it’s like having this never-ending supply of fluffy kittens, and, hey, it’d be so fantastic to have you doing these like magic-y things – I can so see you and Meg prancing around naked, waving wands and chanting stuff.’ He snorted again, then started sneezing. ‘Well, I can’t see *you* naked, *urgh*, that would just be wrong.’

‘Ain’t gonna happen anyway, brother dear. It takes August sunshine to get yours truly into a bikini, there is absolutely no chance of me taking even one layer off in a Yorkshire winter.’

‘Wishes come true!’ Nick giggled again. ‘You never know, it might work. Stranger things have happened, hey, no, my bad, those were hallucinations, but you’d go along, wouldn’t you? If Megan was up for it?’

‘If Megan was up for it I’d have to.’ Megan has all the gullibility of a toddler and all the self-protective instincts of, well, a toddler. Someone had to watch her back. Given her 36DD chest there were already plenty of volunteers to watch her front.

‘So, then.’ My brother leaned in close across the table, one elbow in the beer pool. ‘What would you wish for? What’s your …’

To be continued ....

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