

JENNY GLADWELL

# A Gift in December

  
HODDER

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*Nybergsund, Norway, 11th April 1940*

The snow was falling.

The young soldier stood by the truck smoking, his dark eyes fixed on the huddle of men. The silence bothered him far more than the bombs. He took a last drag of his cigarette and threw it away. His mouth tasted sour.

At last, some decision seemed to have been reached and the men turned and began to walk towards him. They were wrapped in thick coats and mufflers and walked hurriedly through the snow. One of the men was his superior officer. The others he knew were cabinet ministers, their faces impassive but strained. And the fifth man was King Haakon.

So, the soldier thought, this was it: they were leaving. After weeks of discussion, of prevarication, of negotiation, King Haakon was leaving his people and his country. A decision born in these strange times not out of cowardice but sheer, stubborn courage. The unlikely monarch, who no one had believed was up to much, might be braver than they had all thought. Refusing to endorse a puppet ruler, he was now an enemy of the Nazi regime and every moment that he remained here meant danger for him and for the people of Nybergsund.

The soldier knew the plan, such as it was. They were to strike for Molde, the centre of Norwegian resistance, and

then the Swedish border – and then after that, God alone knew. The king thought he could form a government from afar. From England, perhaps. Norway's chance to draw a line in the sand. To strike a blow for democracy and freedom.

If they made it out alive.

The border had never seemed so close and yet so far.

The figures drew closer and the soldier straightened. His breath was a cloud in the air. Snow fell thickly now, mantling his shoulders. His eyes met those of his superior.

'The king is leaving now,' the officer said, as he drew near. 'Are you ready?'

'Yes, sir,' the soldier said.

'Please, Your Majesty.' The officer guided the king towards the car.

The soldier was used to the king's face, after this past week – it was just a face now, like any other. Rather gaunt, made haggard by weeks of worry, with a large moustache and heavy eyebrows.

In these last moments, the soldier found himself looking not at his officer or his king but at the woman who stood behind them. He had to look now, he realised, as he might never see her again. Had to drink in that face – the fierce cheekbones, navy eyes, thick, dark hair that sprang off her forehead in waves. Imprint it on his memory so that he might never forget.

His officer rested a hand briefly on his shoulder as the king was ushered into the truck. 'Our country is relying on you,' he said. 'The king is no soldier,' he added drily. 'Do what you must to get him to the border.'

The soldier nodded.

And then the woman was taking a step towards him through the darkness, holding out her hand for him to

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shake. He took it, felt her pulse beating beneath her glove. Quickly, he pulled her towards him and for the briefest of seconds her cold cheek was pressed against his own.

‘Take care of yourself,’ she muttered, her voice hoarse in his ear.

‘And you.’

‘I will write.’

And then he was running away from her, scrambling into the car, where the two men sat in silence. Foot to the floor, ploughing through the snow, he watched through the rear window until she was gone, swallowed up by the endless white.

*Dear Thomas,*

*This will be the last letter that I write.*

*I thought at first that I should not mind, but after all it is hard, writing and getting no reply. What goes through your mind when you get one of my letters? Does your heart leap?*

*You know it's over – I don't need to tell you so. But I am writing one last time because I think I should like someone to know how clever I have been. I managed, didn't I? So I thought you might like to have this memento. 'Well done, Marit,' I should like you to say.*

*You are the keeper of my secret and perhaps you might see it told.*

*Do that for me. And maybe one other thing. Come back one day. Come back to where we spent that last night, before our lives completely changed. Afterwards, you can go off and live a nice respectable life with your nice respectable girl. But come back to me, just once.*

*Your Marit*

# I

*London, November 2017*

The snow was falling.

In her tiny flat on a quiet street in Stoke Newington, Jane Brook sat on her window seat looking out at the fat snowflakes drifting down from the sky. Snow for the next week; snow for Christmas, maybe. It brought her no joy. Snow was not for watching out of the window, alone. Snow was for enjoying *with* someone. With Simon, for instance.

She thought of that week last winter when snow had fallen and she and Simon had been happy. He persuaded her to spontaneously take the week off work, unheard of for her. They sat with coffee in the Turkish café near her flat, talking, drunk on the newness of it all, giddy at their secret romance. Their eyes would meet across the table and they would burst out laughing at nothing at all. Every touch was a spark.

He brought out a sense of fun in her she had forgotten was there. Where she was calm and ordered, he was chaotic and spontaneous. She discovered the joy of lying in, of curling up in bed together, drowsy and warm. They spent long afternoons in the pub. She would buy a big stack of newspapers for research and they would read and drink, gossip about other journalists, share packets of crisps, and leave pleasantly tipsy.

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Cheeks pink and eyes bright, they would stumble back to her flat through drifts of snow, clutching at each other as they slipped and skidded. Simon's scarf wrapped round her neck, smelling of him, her gloved hand in his. Lazy evenings on the sofa, her feet in Simon's lap, drinking expensive whisky he brought over and watching old films that he loved. *It's a Wonderful Life* at Christmas. *The Apartment*, his favourite, on New Year's Eve. Simon laughed at her when she cried at the end.

'I thought you were meant to be tough,' he teased.

The snow was coming down more heavily now. Jane breathed on the window and drew a jaunty, smiling face that she dashed out just as quickly. A burst of laughter carried down the street and a child in waterproofs and wellies staggered past, the snow nearly up to his waist. A couple followed, a man and woman with their arms wrapped round each other. Jane closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the glass.

With Simon, she had understood how wonderful sharing her life with someone could be. She had opened up her neat, ordered world to him and things would never be the same again.

Her best friends, Margot and Kate, had taken her for dinner the other night, to a restaurant in town that they loved. They had poured her a large glass of red wine, ordered her steak, spinach and mashed potatoes. Margot was pregnant, in her third trimester, and Kate, her partner, was casually solicitous, rubbing the small of Margot's back. Talk, despite their best efforts, turned to birth plans and childcare, maternity leave, mortgages and kitchen fitters. Jane listened to their chat, charting the gentle, loving beats of a relationship, and felt misery rise up in her. They listened to her woes, eyes sympathetic, but Jane knew she would have to help herself out of her gloom.



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She could no longer stay here, perched by the window, watching the snow fall. Her feet and hands were cold. She hadn't eaten properly for days. Right now, she needed to take a shower, wash her hair. Throw out the old food in the fridge. At the last count, it had contained a lump of old cheese, half a jar of pesto and a wilted lettuce.

Because tomorrow, she'd be gone, off on a work trip to Norway of all places. She groaned. Norway.

That only meant more bloody snow.

Her boss, Nadine, had suggested the assignment. 'Suggested' was euphemistic: Nadine issued orders, not suggestions.

She breezed out of her office yesterday and dropped the press release onto Jane's desk – thick cream paper, elegant, swirling font, full-colour photos of fir trees in the snow and blazing log fires.

'I'm sending you to Norway to watch the Trafalgar Square Christmas tree being cut down,' Nadine said. 'A very *lavish* press trip.'

'You want me to write about a tree?' Jane asked, incredulous.

She had been at the *London Courier* nearly ten years. From the start, she had hero-worshipped Nadine, who had white-blond hair cut short, wore trouser suits and trainers and no make-up, and ran her paper with calm efficiency.

Nadine also had something that Jane had come to understand was rare in the industry: integrity. The *Courier* was respected for its impartial reporting – and was newsworthy itself at the moment, thanks to Jane's recent breaking of a dramatic immigration scandal that exposed corruption at the heart of the government.

She had hoped that her next story would be something just as juicy.

Jane glanced at the glossy release. ‘This looks like a puff piece,’ she said, and one of Nadine’s elegant eyebrows rose. ‘I just thought,’ Jane continued, more diplomatically, ‘that I might be better off staying here. I want to start something new. I’ve got loads of ideas . . .’

Nadine looked at Jane over her glasses for a long moment, something curious and unfamiliar in her expression.

‘I want you to take a break,’ she said at last. ‘You’ve worked hard, and I’ve seen more experienced journalists than you burn out after a big story like that. Plus, I have a feeling that things haven’t exactly been easy for you here.’

That was Nadine being diplomatic in turn and *not* mentioning Simon.

‘You should take a holiday,’ she went on. ‘That’s what anyone else would do after the month you’ve had. But since there’s no chance of that happening, yes; I’m sending you to Norway to write about a tree. It’s the next best thing.’

Jane picked up the press release and began to read.

*The global social-media spotlight will be on Norway this November as a select group of bloggers and journalists join us for a magical journey into the past . . .*

*Since 1947, the city of Oslo has presented a Christmas tree to the city of London every year, in gratitude for its assistance during the Second World War.*

*In 1940, in the midst of the occupation, King Haakon of Norway refused to install a Nazi sympathiser as the head of government. Miraculously, he escaped German bombs and established a temporary government in London. Norway worked tirelessly against the Nazi regime for the remainder of the war. Each year, a magnificent Christmas tree – known as the ‘Queen of the Forest’ – is carefully chosen from the forests outside Oslo and transported, by*

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*boat and lorry, back to London. This gift to Londoners from the Norwegians forms a central part of the city's Christmas decorations and is integral to many festive events throughout the season.*

Jane paused to protest and Nadine raised a hand. 'Just keep reading.'

*This year, the Norwegian Tourist Board, Luxury Travel magazine and a selection of top fashion and lifestyle brands are sponsoring a lavish trip for our guests through the stunning Norwegian landscape to see the chosen tree cut down. Guests will stay in Norway's top hotels and sample the country's finest cuisine and Christmas traditions. The trip will culminate in a winter ball before returning home to see the tree installed in Trafalgar Square.*

*A symbol of peace for our time, shared with the world.*

'I'm sending Andersen too,' said Nadine. She raised her voice. 'Do you hear that, Ben?'

Ben Andersen, a freelance photographer, who was known for being irrepressibly cheerful despite covering a succession of bleak war zones, raised his head.

'I just got back,' he said mildly. 'I've been away for six months. I haven't even unpacked yet.'

It was as close to a complaint as Ben would ever make.

'Think of this as a nice change of pace,' Nadine cackled. 'You're too nice to say no. It's perfect – you're actually Norwegian, right?'

'I am,' said Ben. His face brightened. 'I guess we'll be there for the Christmas markets.'

Nadine beamed. 'That's the spirit. Take a leaf out of Ben's book, Jane. Now then, if you're both happy . . .'

'I just don't understand what the *story* is,' Jane muttered, scanning the paper. 'Also, I hate Christmas.'

'Well, Scrooge,' Ben replied, 'if anything can convert you, it'll be a few weeks in Norway. It's where Christmas was practically invented.'

'Just stop,' Jane told him. 'Christmas was invented by department stores in a bid to sell people more stuff they don't need.'

'Christmas as we know it was invented by Dickens,' Nadine said, sat next to her, absently tapping out an email on her phone, already thinking about something else. 'It's a feel-good story. That doesn't make it worthless.' Ben nodded vigorously and Jane shot him a dirty look. 'Our readers need a bit of sentiment – something to remind them that people are essentially good. A positive story about European solidarity and collaboration might be just the ticket.'

'Exactly!' said Ben.

Jane allowed herself a very small smile.

'Besides,' Nadine added, 'how many fancy holidays normally land in your lap when you're writing for a boring old broadsheet? Think log fires and hampers and hot tubs. I had to fight Chrissy from Travel for it.'

Jane leaped in as Nadine took a swallow of coffee.

'Chrissy from Travel is *exactly* who should be covering this—'

'Finally, and most importantly, you'll avoid this place in the run-up to Christmas,' Nadine continued. 'Think of it, Jane. No office parties. No average pub lunch where we have to fork out thirty quid to wear paper hats.'

'Even if those hats look great on you,' Ben said. 'Even if you were born to wear those hats.'

Jane groaned. 'Christmas isn't for ages,' she said weakly. 'And you're already putting me off it.'

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‘It’ll come around sooner than you think. But at least you’ll be relaxed after a few weeks in Norway,’ Nadine said, standing and smoothing down her trousers.

*The sly glances from the rest of the team as Simon and I avoid each other,* thought Jane.

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘I’ll take it. Like you’re giving me any choice.’

‘Good,’ Nadine said briskly. ‘I’ll loop you in with the PR now. She’s called Natasha. Watch out for her – she’s already annoying me.’ She gave Jane the ghost of a wink. ‘Ben, it’s your mission to make Jane enjoy herself. I want her back more cheerful than Scrooge on Christmas morning.’

‘Ho, ho, ho,’ Jane said mirthlessly, slumping down in her seat.

Jane had always prided herself on not getting too involved when it came to men. Her hard-won job as a reporter for the prominent, award-winning *London Courier* brought her a joy so fierce that she could only acknowledge it with a sort of superstitious caution. Even after a disheartening day, she still had to pinch herself that this was her, with her patchy education, working alongside some of the best journalists in the country. She had hit her stride at the *Courier*, found something she loved doing and thrown herself into her work.

And then Simon Layton had joined the *London Courier* just over a year ago as arts and culture reporter. ‘Sitting in a dark room watching films – what’s not to like?’ he said to her.

Jane hadn’t paid him much attention at first – average height, curling dark hair, a lilting Irish accent – but suddenly he was everywhere. Teasing her in the kitchen, asking her opinion with flattering frequency on his work. Stopping by her desk with tempting little nuggets of office gossip, making

her laugh. Arguing with her about politics, which, as she told him, he knew nothing about. Coffee, exactly how she liked it – strong, with a lot of milk – on her desk every morning. Waiting for her, ever so casually, at the end of the day so that they could walk out together.

He became, she wasn't quite sure how, part of the fabric of her life.

*So this is what it's like to have an office crush*, Jane thought. Someone you made an effort for. She was constantly aware of Simon's presence – when he was in the room, she would surreptitiously apply lip balm, fluff up her hair, sit straighter. She chose her outfits and applied her perfume in the morning with extra care. He was one of those people who was friendly to everyone: she had no idea whether she was special to him or not. The uncertainty made their flirtation – if that was what it was – extra exciting.

She found out he had just split up with his long-term university girlfriend, Emily.

'She wanted the whole two-point-four-children thing,' he told Jane one day by the coffee point. 'You know – big ugly house in suburbia, big ugly car. Good schools. Holidays in Center Parcs.' He shrugged. 'It's not for me. Not just yet anyway.' He grinned, his eyes lighting up his face.

Jane had stalked Emily on Facebook as soon as she was back at her desk. Wholesome – a sweet face, long, shiny dark hair, freckles across her nose, and very white, even teeth. Jane skimmed through the photos of her and Simon – camping, hill-walking, beaming at the camera over pints – then shut down the page and smiled.

The tension, real or imagined, had bubbled away for weeks. And then finally, after Nadine's birthday drinks last November, they found themselves alone and slightly tipsy

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on a corner of Lamb's Conduit Street. It was a perfect London night, clear and cold, Christmas lights twinkling and their breath clouding in the frosty air. Simon's hand on her arm, pulling her to a halt. Jane's heart beating so hard she thought it might burst as he leaned towards her, and then their mouths fitting together, just right.

After that, they were inseparable. They kept it quiet at work, but everyone knew. For nearly a year, everything was perfect.

Or almost perfect.

Looking back, Jane had to admit that there were cracks. When she had introduced him to Margot and Kate, he couldn't have been more charming, but she sensed an unusual reserve on their part. Kate laughed at his jokes, but Margot seemed distant. She didn't talk much, which for Margot was a red flag. She mostly leaned back and watched Simon through half-lidded eyes.

Jane began their group WhatsApp the next morning with an excited 'Well?????' Kate had been effusive – 'He's gorgeous! That accent!' – but Margot was strangely muted.

'Didn't you like him?' Jane asked her the next time they met, over fish pie in their usual midweek dinner spot. 'I feel like you guys didn't like him.'

'Oh, we liked him,' Margot said. She was in the middle of IVF and the strain was showing, although the signs – the faintest furrow in her perfect forehead, the bluish shadows under her eyes – would have been imperceptible to most. She took a thoughtful swallow of her sparkling water. 'He's handsome and charming, which I'm sure he knows.' She leaned forward, her face serious. 'He seemed a bit cross about how late you were coming home from work.'

'Oh,' said Jane, waving her hand. 'He just worries about how hard I work.'

‘And he said you should be getting the drinks because you make more money. That felt kind of bitter.’

‘That was a joke! He’s not threatened by me, if that’s what you think.’

Margot nodded, clearly appeasing her. ‘OK. I mean, you know him best. The only thing that matters to me is – is he nice to you?’

‘Of course he is!’ Jane exclaimed. Margot was way too protective of her, she thought. She knew what she was doing.

And it was true – Simon *was* nice to her. He adored her. They even spent Christmas Day together because his family were in Spain for a wedding and he hadn’t enough holiday allowance left to go. Since her mum died, Jane spent it with Margot and Kate, but Margot airily waved off her apologies. ‘There will be plenty more Christmases,’ she said. ‘Enjoy yourself.’

Jane agonised over what to give him for this first Christmas but chanced on a battered first edition of *Moonfleet* in a charity shop, his favourite book as a boy. And he had given her a ridiculously expensive pink bobble hat, something Jane would never have bought in a million years.

‘One hundred per cent cashmere,’ he said proudly, when she unwrapped it. ‘Try it on.’

She pulled it on and he laughed at her doubtful expression. ‘You look adorable in it. Like a very serious elf. It’s not a crime to have nice things, you know. You should see how overboard my parents go at Christmas.’

‘Do you miss your family?’ she asked, snuggling next to him on the sofa, still wearing the hat.

‘They’re all right, but they’re not a patch on you.’ He kissed the tip of her nose. ‘You’ll meet them all next Christmas,’ he said confidently, and she glowed.



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The months rolled by and Jane counted them off with glee. Finally, after years of rubbish men, she was in an adult, functional relationship. Weekend trips to the seaside and dinners with friends. A drawer in his flat for her to keep her underwear and a hairdryer.

And then Jane had hit on her big story – an immigration cover-up that struck at the heart of the government itself. She had known she was onto something huge right from the start. This was it, her career-defining moment. And she was going to nail it.

She put the story together piece by painstaking piece over a six-month period, knowing that it had to be rock solid. She worked long into the night. Things with Simon took a back seat, and at first he was understanding about the cancelled dates and missed calls. Then she noticed him becoming slightly grumpy and distant. Rather cold when they spoke on the phone.

She would have to make it up to him, she thought vaguely, as soon as this was over. But she hadn't thought very much about it – she'd been working too hard. And then she had emerged, dazed and exhausted, with the story of the year in the bag.

The day it broke, she entered the office to a round of very British, yet warmly enthusiastic applause. Nadine went so far as to squeeze her arm. 'This will be front page on every paper for the next month,' she said. 'Scandal of the decade. And we were there first, thanks to you.'

Jane's phone started ringing then and it didn't stop all morning. Talk of her winning prizes had begun. It was only after lunch when, still flushed with excitement and triumph, she noticed the email sitting towards the top of her neglected inbox. It was from Simon, marked 'high importance'. *Please read this*, was the subject line.

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A wave of love and affection rushed over her. Simon, who had been at her side so patiently these last hectic months, just waiting for her to come up for air.

And now she could breathe again.

She beamed.

He must be out watching films today. He was probably going to suggest taking her out for dinner to celebrate after work, somewhere typically Simon, over-the-top and decadent.

She clicked on the email. And suddenly everything around her became muffled, as though she were underwater.

*Jane,*

*I'm emailing you at work because I can't think of any other way to get your attention these days. You only seem interested in work. So here goes.*

*I can't do this anymore. You've barely spoken to me in months. The last time I persuaded you to come out for dinner, you spent the whole night on your phone fact-checking. I know you've been busy, and I know this story is important, but I matter too. And right now, I feel invisible.*

*I'm sorry. I've reached my limit. I really hope we can still be friends. For the record, I think you're an amazing woman. I just can't come second to a good story anymore.*

*I'll come by the flat this morning when you're at work and clear out my stuff. To be honest, I doubt you'll even notice.*

*Love always,*

*Simon*

Jane stared at the screen, a chill sweeping through her whole body. Even the tips of her fingers went cold. Dimly,

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she felt a pang of fury that he had dared to ruin this moment for her, but it was lost in her confusion and misery.

She was still numb moments later when she became vaguely aware of Nadine calling her name and the sound of a champagne cork popping.

She went home that evening to a flat that felt bare without Simon's towering piles of books, the jumble of cycling gear by the front door, the cookbooks full of outrageously complicated recipes, the expensive coffee maker. Her beloved flat seemed now empty and rather cold.

It didn't take her long to find out that Simon had moved on – or, rather, had moved *backwards*. In fact, it took Jane the investigative journalist precisely two hours before she went on Emily's Facebook page and saw her with Simon's arms wrapped round her, and the caption *Maybe it was always meant to be*.

Margot came over straight away, carrying a bottle of wine in one hand and one of gin in the other.

'I thought you could choose, depending on how bad you're feeling,' she said sympathetically, sinking onto Jane's sofa. She gazed at her bump slightly regretfully. 'This is *all* for you.'

'You were right all along,' said Jane. She held up her phone and brandished Emily's profile at Margot. 'He's gone back to his ex.' She laughed bitterly. 'I guess it'll be fine so long as she doesn't have to work long hours.'

Margot seized the phone. 'Give me this. Until you're of sound mind, I'm removing Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. All the torture devices. And I'm blocking his number.' She glanced over. 'OK?'

Jane nodded miserably. 'OK.'

'There.' Margot handed back the phone. 'And now, I'm

going to find some ice because I think it'll have to be the gin.'

After sobbing into her pillow for a few nights, Jane attempted to pull herself together. But something had changed. Her well-ordered life had been knocked off course when she let Simon in and now she didn't know how to get it back on track. Job offers poured in, including a coveted foreign correspondent post at the *Washington News*, but Jane turned them all down. She needed to stay where she was safe.

She tried acting as cheerfully as she could, but Margot wasn't fooled.

'I *know* you,' Margot told her one afternoon over tea, when Jane had been trying to smile so hard her face hurt. 'And you can pretend you're fine to everyone in the world, but I want the truth.' With her dirty-blond hair, perfect rose-petal skin and blue eyes fringed with thick lashes, Margot's beauty could still take Jane's breath away. Even now, with a raging cold and in the grip of pregnancy insomnia, she looked gorgeous.

The waiter came over to take their order.

'We'll have a pot of Earl Grey tea for two, one raspberry millefeuille and two forks.' Margot handed the menu back, drew a packet of tissues from her handbag and blew her nose vigorously. 'I swear pregnancy is making me catch every bloody cold going.'

'Now.' She laid a firm hand on Jane's. 'Break-ups suck, Jane, and they especially suck if you're a control freak, which, let's face it, you are. But I'm telling you that this *will* get better. Think how many times you've rescued me from one disaster or another.'

A single tear trickled down Jane's cheek and she caught it with her finger. 'Like when you forgot your speech at

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Fiona's wedding and made us sing the Spice Girls' "Two Become One" instead,' she said, smiling faintly. 'Or when you told that girl in Cornwall you were a competitive surfer and nearly drowned. Or when you borrowed the dog that was tied up outside the supermarket for a fancy-dress competition and I had to get you from the police station. Or—'

'That was a long time ago,' Margot said, shifting back while the waiter set down a fat pot of tea and two china cups. 'Anyway, the point is that I was always getting into bad situations and you were always getting me out of them. Look at everything you've been through these last few years. You lost your mum. You broke the story of the year. No one is tougher than you. And let me tell you that Simon, of all people, is not worth the heartache. He's gone back to his boring ex so they can move to the boring suburbs and have boring babies. Is that *really* what you want?'

'Yes. No. Sort of,' Jane said.

'Come on, Jane,' said Margot. 'You used to have fun. Not as much fun as me, but fun. You can have fun again.'

Jane sighed.

The waiter brought the cake, all pastry and raspberries and puffy cream. Jane's stomach turned.

'I'm not hungry,' she said.

Margot looked at her thoughtfully.

'You know, as much of an arse as Simon is, he did serve one purpose. He reminded you that it's not a bad thing to enjoy yourself.' She pushed the plate towards Jane. 'Now eat the bloody cake.'

Still hovering by the window, Jane glanced down at her delicate cup, half filled with tea that was now stone cold. She missed Simon, ached for him. He had cleared out his stuff,

but still she kept stumbling across fragments of him, which were gradually filling a charity-shop bag by her front door. He was too messy, too impulsive and generous, to have left her life without a trace. The cup was yet another reminder – of a day by the seaside and him buying her the cup at a little antique shop. *‘Pretty, just like you,’* he had said.

With sudden force she put it down on the window ledge. Enough of this wallowing. She was going to go outside and buy some food. Then she would come home and make coffee. And she was going to drink it out of a proper mug, not a stupid china teacup.

This Norway trip was coming at just the right time. She would get some distance from Simon, turn in a few thousand words on a Christmas tree and come back refreshed for the new year.

And one other thing.

She would avoid all men.