

Chapter 1

‘My God, my ears.’ The person in the corridor outside their hotel room was cracking up. ‘What’s that *horrible* noise?’

Didi, wearing only a bath towel, pulled a face at the closed door and shouted back defiantly, ‘It’s called singing.’ Honestly, here they were in Venice, one of the most miraculous cities on the planet, and there always had to be one comedian trying to bring you down.

‘You can call it singing,’ her critic observed. ‘Some might call it caterwauling.’

They heard the sound of his footsteps fade as he clattered up the rickety staircase to the boys’ rooms on the top floor.

Didi said, ‘Shay Mason thinks he’s *so* hilarious.’

‘You were a bit out of tune,’ Layla told her. ‘To be fair.’

Layla was always fair; it was really annoying.

‘I don’t know why you invited him. He doesn’t even go to our school.’ Well, she could hazard a guess. As Layla carefully applied a second coat of turquoise mascara, Didi met her friend’s gaze in the age-spotted antique mirror and raised an eyebrow.

‘Don’t go giving me one of your looks,’ said Layla. ‘He’s

been kind to me, that's all. I told you about the time those other boys were taking the mickey, and he stopped them doing it. I don't fancy him.'

'Not even a bit?'

'No!'

'OK, I believe you, thousands wouldn't.' Didi broke into a playful grin and turned up the radio as her favourite Elton John track began to play. 'I only asked.' Grabbing her hairbrush and holding it like a microphone, she sang off-key at the top of her voice, 'I'M STILL STANDING, YEAH YEAH YEAH.'

'He'll be able to hear that.' Layla pointed at the ceiling.

'Oh I'm counting on it,' said Didi.

What had just happened? Didi's eyes snapped open; something had woken her. Turning her head to one side to check the alarm clock, she saw that it was 3.10 in the morning.

'Don't put the prawns on my feet,' muttered Layla from the other bed.

Right, OK. Now she knew what had interrupted her sleep.

'Just get into the washing machine,' Layla mumbled. 'You're all blue.'

Didi smiled to herself, because listening to Layla talking in her sleep was always fun. But that was it; after an irritable '*Not the dog biscuits,*' Layla turned to face the opposite wall and began snoring gently once more.

Wide awake now, Didi saw an eerie greyish light and flickers of movement filtering through the gap in the curtains. Sliding out of bed, she crept across the room and peered out of the window. Incredibly, it was snowing outside, fat

flakes falling like feathers from an inky sky. Snow in Venice, during February half-term; who'd have thought it? When they'd come upstairs to bed four hours ago, it had been biting cold, but still no one had expected this to happen.

She pressed her nose against the icy glass and peered left and right, drinking in as much of the view as she could see. But there really wasn't much of one; Calle Ciatì was a winding back street, dark and silent. She'd be able to see so much more from the front of the hotel, which overlooked the canal.

Venice. In the snow. But what if it all disappeared by morning?

Layla was completely out for the count; she might no longer be actually snoring, but her lips were making a small *ppff* noise with each regular exhalation. She loved to sleep and couldn't bear being woken even a minute before it was time to get up.

Five minutes later, bundled up and clutching her yellow bobble hat, Didi crept down the ornate staircase, reaching the deserted vestibule and silently letting herself out of the hotel. Oh wow, it was amazing; the snow was already several inches deep, soft and creaking underfoot as she turned left and made her way along the narrow street. A couple of other people had taken the same journey earlier, their footprints already disappearing as the snow fell faster, but there was no one else in sight. Didi was alone but felt entirely safe, although she took care to keep away from the potentially slippery edges when the next pathway led her to one of the back-street canals.

Then she made the final turn and there it was, the vast expanse of St Mark's Square stretching out before her. Her

heart soared at the sight. It was spectacular enough in daylight, but now, blanketed in white and with the snowflakes tumbling down, it was utterly magical. St Mark's Basilica, topped with gold and fronted by the ornate sky-high flagpoles, looked like an illuminated wedding cake. Over to her right, a couple were locked in each other's arms, kissing. To the left, someone else was building a snowman. A few other people, drawn by the snow, were taking photographs and a woman in a full-length white faux-fur coat carried a dachshund in her arms as she made her way diagonally across the square and passed the Campanile before disappearing from view.

Didi pushed her hands into the pockets of her own rather less glamorous outfit, more of a knee-length padded anorak than a coat, but at least it was warm and waterproof. Having observed the energetic creator of the snowman for a couple of minutes, she found herself moving closer before realising with a jolt who it was.

Oh great. Instinctively she spun around, facing away and catching her breath whilst working out what to do next. A part of her was furious with Shay Mason for ruining this once-in-a-lifetime experience, because up until five seconds ago she'd been so blissfully wrapped up in the wonder of it, and now she was going to have to head back to the—

Whoomph! A snowball hit the ground just to the left of her, skidding past before disintegrating like powdered smoke.

Ha, not as clever as he thought he was. With an air of triumph, Didi turned and said, 'Missed.'

Across the ten-metre distance separating them, Shay Mason called back, 'I meant to miss.'

'Of course you did.'

‘Don’t move,’ he ordered, reaching down to scoop up and swiftly pack together another snowball.

Didi stayed where she was, wondering if it was going to hit her in the chest. Like a fast bowler, Shay took aim and threw the snowball. The first had landed two feet to her left. This one landed two feet to the other side of her. Shay did a small bow, then broke into a grin. ‘If I’d wanted to get you, I could. But I’m a gentleman, so I wouldn’t do that.’

‘You’re never going to win a snowball fight.’ Didi found herself reluctantly smiling in return.

‘I’m a lover, not a fighter.’ He paused, then shook his head. ‘That’s probably the wrong thing to say. All I really want to do is finish building this snowman. You could give me a hand if you like.’

‘Could I?’

His eyes were bright. ‘You can even sing.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Didi. ‘You had to go there.’

‘I was only teasing earlier.’ The grin broadened. ‘You have the voice of an angel.’

‘The voice of an angel who sometimes sings off-key. It’s OK, I know it’s not always great. I just love doing it anyway.’

He tilted his head. ‘So are you going to stay and give me a hand?’

‘May as well.’ Snowflakes were landing on his hair and lashes, settling on the shoulders of his navy jacket. ‘Seems like you could do with some help from an expert.’

It took them a good thirty minutes, but at last their snowman was completed and looking magnificent. Standing five feet high, with twenty-cent coins for eyes, an abandoned stripy scarf wrapped around his neck and Didi’s yellow bobble

hat providing the finishing touch, he wore a jaunty smile fashioned from discarded bottle caps.

A group of Spanish tourists applauded their efforts and offered them a swig from their bottle of Prosecco. Spotting another unopened bottle protruding from the overcoat pocket of one of the men, Shay asked in broken Spanish if he could buy it and offered him a twenty-euro note.

When the Spaniards had left, they collected two chairs from the dozens laid out in front of the café behind them and planted them next to their magnificent creation. As the snowflakes continued to tumble helter-skelter, Shay removed the wire cage from around the bottle's cork and passed it to Didi, who used it to give their snowman a nose. He popped the cork and they took it in turns to drink from the bottle before setting it down in the snow between them. Then together they sat back, side by side, to properly take in the beauty of their surroundings.

'So here we are.' Shay's bare fingers were loosely clasped as they rested on his chest. 'I know your name and I know where you live, but not much more than that. Why don't you tell me something fascinating about you?'

Didi considered the question. They both lived in Elliscombe and were in their last year at school, but the social circles they moved in were entirely different and seldom overlapped. She and Layla attended Stonebank Hall, several miles north of the town, and their parents were able to afford the fees, plus such luxuries as holidays abroad. By way of contrast, Shay Mason was in his final year at the local comprehensive at the opposite end of town, his mum had died six years ago and his dad was currently in prison. Again.

But those facts alone might give a stranger the wrong idea

about Shay, who didn't appear to feel remotely hard done by and who'd always brimmed with confidence. As Didi thought this, it occurred to her that she appeared to know more about him than he did about her, probably because his upbringing had been that much more interesting to observe and other people had loved to gossip about him. Over the years, whilst his father had spent varying periods of time languishing at Her Majesty's pleasure, Shay had convinced his social workers that he'd be staying with the parents of various school friends before stealthily moving back into the family home and looking after himself whilst working hard at school and simultaneously holding down two or three part-time jobs during the evenings and weekends. He and his clothes were always clean. He had charm, coupled with confidence and the ability to chat easily with anyone at all. He was tall and lean, built like an athlete. And of course it didn't do any harm that he possessed the kind of glowing good looks that made him irresistible to far more than his fair share of admirers.

Charisma, that was the indefinable quality. People either had it or they didn't. It would be easy to feel sorry for anyone else whose upbringing had been so chaotic and unpromising, but you wouldn't feel sorry for Shay Mason.

Anyway, he'd asked her a question. 'I can pick up a pencil with my bare toes,' said Didi.

'Useful.'

'It *is* useful.'

'And you can actually write messages with it?'

'Of course, but I'm not going to do it now. Your turn. What's fascinating about you?'

Promptly he replied, 'I can fit a whole crumpet in my mouth in one go.'

She nodded, impressed. 'Equally useful.'

'Can I ask you another question? Why did Layla invite me along on this trip?'

It had been one of Layla's father's typically expansive gestures. He'd asked her how she'd like to celebrate her eighteenth birthday, and Layla had said she'd always wanted to visit Venice, thinking that it would be a family holiday. Instead, her dad had told her to pick nine friends so she could celebrate with them in style, creating memories that would last a lifetime. To avoid mayhem, her parents had come along too, in order to pay for everything and keep the party under control.

'She told me you were kind to her,' said Didi. 'Something about a group of boys taking the mickey out of her one night in town. But you stepped in, sorted them out and walked her home.' She paused, because Shay was observing her closely. 'Why are you looking at me like that? Did it not happen?'

'Oh yes, it happened. And it was really good of Layla to ask me along. It was just . . . you know, unexpected.' His brief smile indicated what he meant. Out of the ten of them here in Venice, nine were from the two local private schools and socialised together. Shay was the only one from the comprehensive and certainly the only one with a jailbird dad.

'She wanted you here.' Didi brushed away a snowflake that had landed like a feather on her nose. 'She likes you.'

'What kind of like?' Shay's silver-blue gaze was unwavering. 'That's why I'm asking you. Does she just like me as a friend because I'm an awesome person – which I definitely am, by the way – or does she fancy me?'

‘And you’re asking me this because you *want* her to fancy you?’

‘I don’t want that. She’s a lovely girl, but . . . no.’ He shook his head. ‘But I don’t want to hurt her feelings either.’

They paused whilst an elderly man drew closer in order to admire their snowman then smiled and nodded before continuing across the square.

‘I asked her this evening, before dinner,’ said Didi. ‘And she said no, she just likes you as a friend. No plans for anything more.’

‘OK. Well, good to know.’ Clearly relieved, Shay raked his damp blonde hair back from his forehead. ‘Out of interest, any other reason you can think of for her inviting me?’

Didi recalled sitting in the kitchen of Layla’s house whilst she’d been compiling her list of invitees. When Shay’s name had come up, Layla’s mum Rosa had said, ‘Would he get on with your other friends?’ and Layla had replied, ‘Of course he would, Shay gets on with everyone. And I bet he’s never had a holiday in his life.’

Was that what he was asking now? She wasn’t about to tell him he’d been added to the list as an act of charity. Instead she said, ‘No other reason. She’s just grateful you rescued her from the idiots that time. And I can’t believe you aren’t even wearing gloves.’ She changed the subject and pointed to his hands. ‘Aren’t they freezing?’

In response, he reached across and briefly rested his fingers against her left cheek. They were unbelievably warm. ‘I have excellent circulation. Second to none. Another of my talents.’

Didi bent down to collect the bottle of Prosecco wedged upright in a mound of snow. She took another fizzy swig,

passed it across, then watched him drink before resting the base of the bottle on one knee. 'I can't believe we're sitting here at four in the morning, in front of the Basilica.' Her gesture encompassed the white marble, the Byzantine architecture with its ornate gold detailing, blurred now by the steadily falling snow.

Shay nodded in agreement. 'When I woke up and looked out of the window, I had to come outside and see it properly for myself.'

'And build a snowman.'

'Sometimes these things just have to be done.'

Didi found herself wanting to learn more about him. 'What A levels are you taking?'

'Maths, physics, chemistry, English. You?'

'English, history and art.' She paused. 'You must miss your mum.'

Shay took another glug of Prosecco, then passed the bottle back to her. 'Of course I miss her. But it's been six years now. You kind of get used to the way things are.'

Here, in this moment, it seemed as if a connection had been forged between them; Didi felt as if she could ask him anything. 'What's it like to have your dad in prison? Sorry, tell me if I'm being too nosy.'

'No worries. People always ask me that question. It's the kind of thing they want to hear about.' He shrugged. 'Again, I don't really know any different. It's like me asking you what it's like to have two honest law-abiding parents who live and work together and own a luxury hotel. That's your life and you don't stop to wonder how it feels, because you're used to it.'

He was right, she lived a privileged life and took it for

granted. She said, 'It must be horrible for you when he . . . goes away.'

'It is. But again, I'm used to it. And then I'm glad when he gets out. It's always great to have him home again.' Shay shrugged easily. 'I know he's a bit of a nightmare, but he's still my dad and I love him. He's all the family I've got.'

Didi still couldn't believe she was having this conversation with someone she barely knew. She found herself really looking at him for the first time, at his relaxed body, his damp blonde hair and carved cheekbones. 'You're doing so much better than most people would in your situation.'

'I know.'

'Modest too.'

He smiled. 'When everyone in town expects you to go off the rails and follow in your father's footsteps, it kind of makes you want to go the other way, just to prove them wrong. And now I have another question. What's Didi short for? Or is it a nickname?'

'My name's really Danielle, but when I was little I couldn't say it. When my mum and dad tried to teach me, it came out as Didi instead. Started off as a family joke, then after a while it just kind of stuck.' She shrugged. 'I've been Didi ever since.'

'Cute.'

'It wasn't my fault. I blame my teeth.'

'Of course it was their fault.' He grinned and sang teasingly, 'Guilty teeth have got no rhythm.'

'You're hilarious.' But she was smiling too.

'Are you getting cold now?'

Didi was starting to shiver. 'Tiny bit.'

'Well we can't go in without taking a few photos.' He

reached into the pocket of his navy padded jacket and pulled out a disposable camera. She took a snap of him standing in front of the Basilica with his arm flung around the shoulders of their magnificent snowman. Then it was his turn to take one of her in the same position, followed by another as she twirled with her arms outstretched and her head tilted back, catching snowflakes on her tongue.

Finally, having beckoned a passing Venetian across to do the honours, they had a photo taken of the two of them together, standing either side of the snowman with the bottle of Prosecco clutched to his snowy chest.

'*Grazie mille, signor,*' Shay called after him as the Venetian trudged away in the direction of the Campanile, and Didi was quietly impressed by his facility with languages, seeing as this was his first trip abroad.

'My toes have gone numb,' she said as they returned the chairs to the café and prepared to set off through the narrow streets that would lead them back to the hotel.

'Don't forget this.' He grabbed the yellow bobble hat from the snowman and gave it a shake.

Didi pulled it on. 'That's just making me colder.' Her teeth were starting to chatter now.

Shay removed the hat, grinning as she brushed melting snow from her hair. 'Can I just say? This has been fun. I'm really glad we did it.'

He was standing directly in front of her, his breath warm on her face. The fingers of his left hand made brief contact with her cheek as he lifted aside a wet strand of hair. Didi felt her own breath catch in her throat. His mouth was only inches from hers and all of a sudden it seemed as if he might be about to kiss her.

More to the point, all of a sudden she found herself wanting it to happen with every fibre of her being.

But it didn't.

'Come on, let's get back,' said Shay.

Didi nodded in agreement, because what else could she do? Fling her arms around his neck and wail, 'But I thought you were going to kiss me! I was waiting for you to do it!'

No, that would be the opposite of cool.

As they began to make their way back to the hotel, he said, 'Are we going to tell the others about this?'

'I was just wondering that.' If they did, would everyone assume they'd sneaked out together? Would they be teased unmercifully for the rest of the trip and possibly for months to come? 'Might be easier not to.'

'I think so too. And tomorrow when we come to the square, we won't say anything when they see the snowman. It'll be our secret.'

When they reached the hotel, he paused in the narrow street and Didi's foolish heart did another skip, because maybe *now* the kiss was going to happen.

But no, double disappointment; all Shay did was slide his key card out of his jeans pocket and use it to open the front door of the small hotel. Then, having brushed the snow from their jackets and wiped it off their trainers, they made their way silently up the stairs.

On the third floor landing, he whispered, 'See you tomorrow. Our secret.'

'See you.' Baffled, Didi wondered why it hadn't happened. What was *wrong* with him, for heaven's sake? Shay Mason should be flattered she'd wanted him to kiss her; he should have jumped at the chance.

Three hours later, she was woken by a whoop of delight followed by a great thud as Layla bounced onto the end of her bed.

‘Oh my God, you have to get up!’

‘Why? *Ow*,’ said Didi as her feet got landed on.

‘You aren’t going to believe this,’ Layla shrieked. ‘It’s been *snowing*.’

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP