

HELEN WHITAKER

Flying Home  
for Christmas



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## *Chapter One*

### 23RD DECEMBER

‘**B**ut I have to get home for Christmas.’  
Thea looks around Portland Airport. The departure hall is rammed. The queue for every airline desk stretches back to the kerbside drop-off zone, where security guards are instructing people that there’s no more room inside the building and they need to go back to their cars, but the gale that’s ramping up with every passing minute is making it hard to be heard.

Inside, it’s chaos. Babies cry, and a guy Thea recognises from an HBO show about cops-turned-drug-kingpins pushes to the front of the queue next to her and demands to know where the VIP line is, while passengers grab onto anyone looking remotely official and plead to be let onto planes. Planes that, Thea is being categorically told, are not going to be taking off tonight.

Robyn, the perfectly made-up ground crew member standing in front of her, shakes her head, lips pressed together sympathetically. She has a veneer of professional concern cloaked in an aura of weariness, most likely caused by reading from the same script many times this afternoon. With every, ‘Unfortunately, severe weather

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conditions have caused all flights to be grounded, both international and domestic,' she probably wants to say, 'Look outside, there's a hurricane warning. Are you crazy enough to want to get on a plane in these conditions?'

The problem is, Thea *is* crazy, or at least ultra-impatient to get home to London. She hasn't seen Mum, Dad, Kit and Nan for six months, the longest she's ever gone. Her heart squeezes when she thinks about getting home to Nan. She *cannot* be stuck here.

'The storm is forecast to pass overnight and all being well, flights will start taking off again around six a.m.,' Robyn is saying, her long nail art pecking at the keyboard in front of her. 'Tomorrow's noon flight should be up and running.'

'OK.' Thea tries not to well up. With the eleven-hour flight and an eight-hour time difference, flying home tomorrow means not landing until Christmas morning. She knows the zillions of other people surrounding her are also stranded, but they all seem to be travelling in pairs or groups. The thought of going back to her tiny studio apartment alone tonight brings the sting of tears to her eyes. As she'd prised the remaining takeout cartons from her fridge that morning, there had been a sense of extreme relief that she wouldn't have to think about Portland, or iDentity Creative, for seven whole days. In the world of American annual leave, getting a full week off is like being granted a paid sabbatical and one that Fuchsia, her boss, would definitely have reneged on if Thea hadn't negotiated it in writing when she was offered the job.

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‘You’ll need to be here *early* tomorrow,’ Robyn warns. ‘Because everyone here this evening—’ she gestures around the departure hall – ‘is now going to be travelling tomorrow, along with everyone already booked to travel tomorrow. And as you probably know, there are only two direct flights a day to London.’ Thea nods, her heart rate increasing. She doesn’t need reminding.

‘OK, thank you,’ she says, moving her overstuffed backpack out of the way so the next person can hear the same bad news. They barely let Thea stand aside before they hurl themselves over Robyn’s check-in desk. She starts her patter with the same practised line. ‘Unfortunately, severe weather conditions have caused all flights to be grounded, both international and domestic,’ Thea hears her say as she negotiates the crowd.

She hauls her backpack onto her shoulders and tries to navigate through the crush, picking her way to the exit with the symbol for the taxi rank above it. Why did she say Teddy could borrow her crappy car while she was at home? Because his equally crappy car is in the shop for its latest bodge job, she reminds herself. Her friend was heading straight home to his parents in Seattle after dropping her off and hopefully will be halfway there now, storm permitting. She’ll have to suck up the cost of a cab she can’t afford.

At the automatic doors, so many people are trying to get in, they’re stuck half open, with the roar of a tempest behind them and freezing rain sheeting down. It’s already dark outside, but beneath the shaking floodlights she sees unsecured suitcases whip off into the road and crash into

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travellers already struggling to stay upright in the wind. Security is trying to close off the entrance with the excessive use of weighted cones, and Thea finds herself being corralled around a newly created one-way system that takes her past the airport bar. Giant screens that usually show American sports games with rules that Thea barely understands are set to rolling news.

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## **STAY AT HOME ORDER ISSUED**

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The ticker tape scrolls across the bottom of the screen as images of twisted fallen trees and houses stripped of their roof tiles flash up.

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## **PORTLAND RESIDENTS WARNED NOT TO TRAVEL UNLESS UNAVOIDABLE**

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Thea stops dead in the one-way lane, people grumbling as they're forced to flow around her. 'Sorry, sorry,' she mutters, aware that she never sounds more British than when apologising for other people banging into her. Attempting to go back to her downtown apartment tonight is a stupid idea – if there's even a taxi to be found to take her. Plus, it's best she stays in the airport so she's first in the check-in queue in the morning. She *has* to be on the

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next departing flight to London. Has to. Spending Christmas Day alone in the USA isn't an option.

She runs through her choices, landing on the idea of booking a cheap room at a budget hotel in the airport, and looks up again at the signage. Along with the arrivals and departures, there are arrows directing people to the rail transit system, the bus station and the hotel shuttle bus pick-up area. She weaves her way over, pulling up a hotel booking site on her phone at the same time. On the budget end, there's a Days Inn, an Econo Lodge and a Best Western – any of those would do. She thinks briefly about her bank balance, as she taps in her booking parameters, praying that the room prices aren't surging because of the situation and that her iDentity salary has actually been deposited into her account this afternoon as promised.

Fuchsia had made such a big deal about the staff – exclusively struggling twenty-somethings with crippling student loan debt and no savings – getting paid early 'for the holidays', as though it was a massive favour. She sees no irony in the fact that iDentity's relationship to regular paydays is commitment-phobic at best. No one ever has any idea when their wages will show up in their account and thanks to the haphazard system, Thea is perennially in her overdraft anyway, meaning the wages barely register when they do eventually turn up.

She hits enter.

***Your search has returned no results.***

'Shit!' she says, refreshing the page. The same thing happens. Thea's stomach lurches as though she's just missed a step going down the stairs. She sees a woman

hunched over her phone next to her, who says, ‘There are no vacancies,’ to the guy she’s standing with.

‘Try another,’ the man replies.

Thea unticks all the price options to widen the search. There’s a Marriott at four hundred dollars a night. Does she have that much of her overdraft left? She checks her balance, and no, no she does not.

*Nan’s credit card.*

The thought floats up and she agonises over it for a second. Meanwhile, the page times out and she has to re-enter the search. The Marriott is gone. As is the Hilton, the Hyatt and the Ramada. There’s only one search result in the airport left, the five-star Opulent, a place that bills itself more as ‘an experience’ than a hotel. The room is a thousand dollars. ‘Only one room left for this date’, the listing trills. The combination of time-pressure and price makes Thea think she might be sick.

‘You cannot wait in this area.’ An announcement comes over the Tannoy. ‘Passengers with cancelled flights should find accommodation for the night or take refuge in their cars in the indoor parking lot.’

Thea stops ruminating and pulls out her emergency credit card, the one in Nan’s name that she gave her before she came to America, along with the warning not to use it unless strictly necessary. For that reason, and knowing how Nan has scrimped her whole life, Thea has never taken its fifteen-hundred-pound credit limit less than seriously. She’s never even removed the sticker and checked it works. Now, she works fast, scanning the card in, knowing this is going to pretty much max it out in one transaction.



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### ***Your reservation number is PTLD274558***

Thea gasps out a breath, putting her phone away with shaking hands, and picking her bag back up. The only time she's ever dropped that much money in one go, it involved first and last month's rent, not just *one night* of accommodation. Her stomach is still roiling. She sees that the shuttles for The Opulent don't depart from the same zone as the budget hotels. She has to go back through the airport and past the corridor that leads to the First and Business Lounges, where there are separate entrances and exits for people with enough money not to have to mingle with the masses. On the way, she's stopped twice by airport officials asking to see her documents, before her reservation number unlocks the route. The airport is quieter, sleeker here, and there's a special seating area that she's led to by an airport representative, so she doesn't have to stand and wait for the shuttle. The driver will come in and fetch her, she's told, and would she like water, coffee, wine while she waits?

'No, thank you,' Thea replies, feeling more self-conscious by the second. She's the only person here, surrounded by attentive staff. She sinks into a seat, listening to the weather raging outside, and the clatter of what sounds like metal on concrete above the howling gale. She's relieved when a middle-aged man wearing an Opulent badge and uniform arrives, saying, 'Ms Bridges?' The shuttle driver, she presumes.

They tussle briefly and awkwardly over who will pick up her battered bag, and after he wins, he leads her outside where the strength of the wind slaps into her and almost

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knocks her over. Rain plasters her hair to her head. The driver grabs hold of her arm to steady her and shouts above the roar, 'Let me get the car door for you. I'll hold it so it doesn't blow shut.' Thea is so busy fighting the gusts that it's not until she's on the back seat that she notices that the hotel shuttle isn't a bus at all.

It's a limo.

And there's an incredibly hot man already sitting inside it.

## *Chapter Two*

**T**hea drags her wind-tangled hair from across her face to smooth it into something less matted, but her hand gets stuck as she uses her fingers as a makeshift comb. She gives up, leaving a knotty snarl halfway down her long brown bob that she knows will be painful to brush out later. She smiles at the stranger sitting on the opposite seat – riding backwards as the limo pulls away from the terminal building – and pulls her puffer coat around her. He nods in greeting and twists his mouth – a very cute, full-lipped mouth, she notices – into something that’s not quite a smile, but friendly all the same.

If she’d known she was going to be staying at a five-star hotel she’d have worn something other than her long-haul travelling clothes – an oversized grey hoodie and matching jogging bottoms that might have passed muster as ‘loungewear’ when she bought them five years ago, but don’t now that they’ve bobbed and stretched and picked up an oily takeaway stain that only ingrains more deeply with every wash. It’s all topped off with a slightly-too-big North Face puffer jacket that she inherited from her brother Kit, who constantly upgrades his coats and trainers,

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preferring them to be box-fresh in a way that everyone else in the family considers a total waste of money. Her look – or lack thereof – makes her only more aware of the good-looking man sitting opposite her. She scrutinises him as he peers out the limo window at the storm, where rain is lashing against the glass and the wind is going berserk, making her feel anxious for the long length of the limo.

In a bulky charcoal-coloured woollen coat and a black beanie hat that hides his hair, he looks like someone who knows how to ‘dress for the weather’. His eyes are behind thick-framed glasses that are part hipster, part tech nerd – so far, so Portland – and the requisite dark brown bushy beard covering the bottom half of his face tops off the look. He’s dressed simply with no visible labels but that doesn’t mean his clothes aren’t expensive. And if he’s staying at The Opulent he must be rich. NFTs she decides, or crypto. Something she doesn’t really understand and allows you to dress like a humble lumberjack while coining it in. He’s probably *really* into coffee, Thea thinks idly, as though six months in Portland haven’t inducted her into the ways of caffeine snobbery that she used to snigger at back in the UK. For reasons she can’t put her finger on, she’s trying to come up with ways to do him down. Maybe because she’s feeling self-conscious, in both appearance and social class, that she needs to dismiss him before he can do the same to her. Nan would have a field day with the psychology of that one.

Nan.

God, she hopes she makes it onto tomorrow’s flight. ‘Christmas is a season, not a day,’ Nan told her before she

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left, when she'd looked into return flights and realised it was double the price to fly pre-Christmas than leaving the USA on Boxing Day. 'Save your money and we'll see you when we see you.' As though Thea was doing her a favour by trying to get back earlier when really, Nan is her anchor. To England. To home. To herself. Nan might not mind if she's late for Christmas, but Thea wouldn't be able to stand it if she didn't see her.

Guilt twangs. She'll have to warn Nan about that credit card payment before she checks her balance and reassure her that she'll be paying it off. Likely in interest-inflated instalments for the rest of her life, but still, she will.

'Oh my God!' Hot Limo Guy's deep, American-accented voice pierces the thought. He sits up a little straighter in the seat and peers out of the window, his eyes wide. They're dark blue, almost navy, she notices now. She feels a fizz, as though someone has lobbed a bath bomb into her stomach.

'Look,' he says urgently, pointing to a runway in the distance. A jumbo jet is wonkily coming into land, its wings tipping madly one way and then the other as it's buffeted by the wind. It gets closer and Thea leans forward to track its progress. 'The pilot is probably loving it,' she says. 'I bet these sorts of conditions count as fun for them – all their training kicks in.'

'Not so fun for the passengers,' he replies, as the plane tips again. They both keep their eyes on the plane, which is getting closer to the runway but no steadier. Metres from the ground, it abruptly ascends again, its lights rising

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and then disappearing back into the dark sky. ‘What was that?’ Thea yelps.

‘It’s making a go-around,’ the driver chips in. ‘It couldn’t level off so will come back for another try. They’re still trying to land all the planes due at the airport but it’s taking a while because of the weather.’

Thea’s gaze instinctually seeks out Limo Guy and their eyes lock. They grimace at each other, mirror images of the gritted teeth emoji face and then burst out laughing.

‘I was desperate to get my flight out tonight, but I think I’ve accepted that I’m better off down here for now,’ Thea says.

‘Ditto,’ Limo Guy replies. ‘Where are you headed?’ She can’t tell if he’s just making polite conversation after their shared wobbly plane experience, but his voice is warm.

‘London,’ she tells him. ‘Back home for Christmas with my family. How about you?’

‘East Coast. Boston. And same. For Christmas. Do you live in Portland?’ His voice is deep and he takes his time with what he’s saying. Thea is used to the snappy rattle of voices in the iDentity office, everyone talking so fast to get their ideas out or to issue demands. She finds herself slowing her own speech down to match his.

‘Yes. Well, I have done for six months now.’

‘And how do you like it?’

Thea’s mind flicks through every negative emotion she’s felt over the past six months – loneliness, imposter syndrome, almost constant financial anxiety – before the positives bubble up behind them: the sense of potential,

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the joy of discovery, incrementally feeling that she's making inroads with friends and in a new city.

'I love it,' she says truthfully. 'Even when I kind of hate it.'

Limo Guy crinkles his eyes and gives her an inscrutable close-mouthed smile. 'I know what you mean,' he says. The air seems to crackle and not just because of the whipping wind outside. 'I've only been here a year myself.'

The limo door seems to explode open, and they both start. Thea hadn't realised they'd pulled up at the hotel's forecourt. The roar of the storm renders any further conversation impossible, and they climb out, Limo Guy gesturing for Thea to go first. Bellboys are standing with enormous golf umbrellas emblazoned with the hotel's logo under the entrance awning, and one rushes forward to shelter her, almost taking off when a blast of wind batters at his right-hand side. The umbrella doesn't flip inside out – no cheap umbrellas for The Opulent – but he has to fight to hold on to it.

'Head inside,' he yells, giving up on escorting her while doing battle with it. 'I'll get your bags.'

Thea rushes through two sets of sliding doors and she finds herself in the hushed sanctuary of the lobby, feeling more bedraggled than ever when confronted with its understated glamour and chic Christmas decorations. There are several six-foot-high Christmas trees dotted around, all decorated with red baubles and twinkling gold lights. Each one has a large gold bow at the top, which is repeated in decorative accents around the rest of the lobby and perfectly complements the velvet sofas and bucket chairs that are arranged around high-shine tables. Her

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boots bounce along the springy, carpeted floor as she seeks out the check-in desk, her nose filling with the scent of pine and cinnamon as though they're being pumped in directly from Lapland. There are so many uniform-clad people hovering around that the guest/staff ratio screams 'expensive' even if she'd somehow missed the décor. It's insane that this level of luxury exists right next to the faded ceiling panels and utilitarian seating areas of Portland International. A woman appears beside her with an iPad in her hand and a welcoming smile on her face.

'Checking in?' she asks. Thea nods, trying not to look too much like a hillbilly who's never seen the inside of a five-star hotel before, even though she's a hillbilly who's never seen the inside of a five-star hotel before. When she sits down on one of the velvet sofas, Thea realises she's been subtly led there without registering it. It's an excellent skill. Out of the corner of her eye, Limo Guy is being led to a sofa on the opposite side of the room and she sees him at full height and build. Standing up, he's around five foot ten and solid without seeming too slight or built. Average on both fronts, if she were to describe him to the police, but also anything but by the way her heartbeat drums when she looks at him. He's pulled his hat off, revealing a floppy tangle of curly hair, a shade or two lighter brown than his beard. Busy watching him walk, she's missed entirely what the elegant staff member has said to her.

'Sorry, sorry,' she garbles, turning her attention back to the check-in lady's face.

'That's OK. I was just explaining that we find a traditional check-in desk is restrictive. It creates too much



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of a boundary between us and the client, so we make the process more relaxed.’ Her voice is soothing. Perky without being false, and undercut with a tone of reassurance that makes Thea feel as though she’s being taken care of. *This*, she thinks, *this* is what people pay for.

‘Firstly, can I get you a drink?’

Thea’s mouth feels very dry from the anxiety of the whole situation, but what if they bring her a mineral water and she has to pay? She shakes her head and murmurs thank you. She’ll have tap water when she gets to her room.

‘OK, then. Could I have your name and confirmation number?’

Thea fumbles for her phone and pulls up the confirmation email before handing it over, glancing away as the front desk agent rakes her gaze over it.

‘Fabulous. I just need a few extra details, and to take a copy of your passport. You’ll be with us for just one night?’

‘God, I hope so,’ Thea says automatically. ‘I mean, yes, that’s correct. I’m flying back to the UK tomorrow, the second this storm lets up.’

‘I know, right? It’s brutal out there.’ She hands the tablet to Thea. ‘If you could just check the address, contact and billing details are all correct and sign at the bottom.’

Thea obliges.

‘Is the card on file the one we should use for any incidentals? We place a hundred-dollar hold against any room charges, which will be released upon checkout.’

‘I guess so,’ Thea replies nervously. There will definitely be no incidentals. She brought her own supply of snacks for the flight to avoid having to buy anything at inflated

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airport prices and thank God; there's no way she can afford to start raiding the minibar in a luxury hotel.

'Would you like me to make you a reservation in the restaurant or spa?'

Thea almost laughs. 'No. No thank you.'

'In that case, you're all set.' The check-in agent stands up elegantly, pushing her knees up at an angle and ending in a finishing-school pose. 'Leon will take you to your room.' She gestures to a bank of lifts, where the bellboy – now recovered from his battle with the umbrella – is waiting with her backpack. It looks in even worse shape juxtaposed against the flawless soft furnishings and the gleaming lift doors.

'Thank you.' Thea holds her hand out for the room key, but the check-in agent just glances at her hand lightly. 'Leon's going to sort you right out with your key.' They're now beside the lifts, having moved again without Thea noticing. The check-in agent smilingly withdraws. Meanwhile, Leon calls the lift and installs them inside it in one fluid movement. As the doors ease closed Thea catches sight of Limo Guy again, still working through the check-in process with his own agent. His head is bowed slightly and he's nodding while wearing that same close-mouthed smile from the car. She wishes she'd had the nerve to at least ask his name, but really, what would be the point? It's not like she'll see him again.

The bellboy doesn't say anything as the lift ascends, leaving Thea to panic about whether to make chit-chat and, more pressingly, what to tip when they reach the room. Six months in the States have taught her that

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whatever she thinks is a suitable tip is usually way lower than is deemed correct, according to Teddy. And now here she is in a posh hotel where she's sure most guests press twenties into the palms of the staff as though they're single-dollar bills. Never mind twenties, does she even have any single-dollar bills in her purse? Who even carries cash any more?

Rich people. Rich people carry cash. Probably. And if they don't, they're not agonising over appearing tight in front of a bellboy.

Thea does care, but she's too broke to do anything about it. Should she warn him, she might not have any money? Give him the opportunity to slink off without wasting his impeccable customer service on her? At the ninth floor the doors glide open, and the bellboy leads the way, his jaunty walk unhindered by the uneven straps of her bag across his back. At Room 985, he demonstrates how to use the contactless key and opens the door, placing her bag on a stand next to an enormous king-sized bed. She gazes around a bedroom – a seemingly 'standard double' according to her booking. It's approximately the same size as her whole studio apartment in Portland.

'How's the air?' says Leon, the first words he's spoken throughout their journey.

'Fine I guess,' Thea replies, realising that it's actually perfect. Americans are obsessed with air-con, but as a Brit, her relationship to temperature has always been more of the 'put a jumper on, or take one off' side of things.

He strides to a panel on the wall. 'You can adjust it here, or using the handset next to the bed. Speaking of—'

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He gestures to the king-size bed, topped with layers of pillows of varying sizes and textures, and a duvet that Thea can't wait to sink into. 'If you download the app you can heat-control the bed and set it to your preferred temperature. It works with your circadian rhythm, optimises sleep and helps to prevent jet lag.' He pulls out his own phone to demonstrate, chattering about connecting to the machine via Bluetooth and then shows her where to find the app on her own phone.

Thea makes all the right noises knowing that perfect temperature or not, there's no way she'll sleep well tonight. Nerves about missing the next flight home almost guarantee she wakes up every twenty minutes in a panic that she's overslept, and she'll end up shattered and jittery when she checks out. However . . .

She eyes the freestanding bath that stands proudly next to the floor-to-ceiling window. It's like every fancy hotel shot she's ever liked on Instagram. A big, pointless bath *in* the bedroom. No worrying about wet floors or privacy when you can afford a giant room to yourself, and there are staff to clear up any sloshes. She will definitely make the most of it and use every single one of the luxury, eco-friendly toiletries that she clocks are lined up along its wooden bath shelf. The window, which she assumes is one-way glass, has a view of the runway a few hundred metres beyond. If it wasn't for the dark and lashing sleet she'd have a prime view of the planes coming and going. Of course, if it wasn't for the weather, she wouldn't be here at all.

She realises Leon has finished talking about the magic bed. 'Is that everything?' he says expectantly, and Thea fumbles for her purse, praying there's something in there.

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Her eye snags on a crumpled bill. A five. Is that too much or not enough? She doesn't have time to debate, and besides, it's all she has. 'Here you go.' She thrusts it at him clumsily, and he pockets it, smiling and nodding in a way that in no way answers her question.

The second Leon leaves the room, Thea turns the bath taps on to full blast, tipping into it a generous helping of some rose-scented bath oil from a luxury 'scent apothecary' downtown that she's always been too intimidated to go into. It smells divine. She runs to get one of the dressing gowns – robes, she's sure they'd be referred to here – from the bathroom, and strips off her clothes before hugging the ultra-soft material around her body. Is this moment worth a thousand dollars? Maybe. Or it will be, once the bill is paid off and it's a funny story to tell Teddy at work or Nicole back home.

She remembers Nicole's questioning message sitting guiltily in her inbox.

I'll see you on Boxing Day, right?

She hasn't replied yet, knowing that as much as she wants to see Nicole at their uni group's biennial Boxing Day drinks, she wants to see Christian less. The only upside to potentially missing Christmas in London is that it'll take the decision about going to the drinks out of her hands. She'll let Nicole know what she's decided once she's blissed out from the bath and she can separate what's stress from losing her flight home and what's perfectly rational stress at not wanting to face her ex.

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She lets it fill as much as she dares before turning the taps off. The temperature is perfect: hot enough to sit here for a good hour, her skin pruning. She undoes the belt of her robe.

Just then, the bedroom door opens and another bellhop enters. She catches the phrase ‘temperature controlling app’ before he realises the room is occupied and trills, ‘Oops, apologies.’ He stops abruptly, causing the guest behind to crash into the back of him.

‘*Shit*,’ says Limo Guy, tripping over what must be his suitcases. He looks straight at where Thea is about to disrobe as he falls on the floor.

‘Shit!’ Thea shouts in response, pulling the robe belt so tight around her to avoid flashing them that she almost folds herself in two. ‘Are you all right?’

‘I am *so* sorry,’ says Limo Guy’s bellboy, trying to back away but getting himself caught on Limo Guy’s luggage and Limo Guy’s legs, as well as the self-closing door. ‘This room isn’t supposed to be occupied.’ He shoots a look at the door number. ‘Room nine eight five, right?’ he says. Limo Guy has his eyes trained on the floor, which isn’t helping either him or the bellboy untangle themselves from the person/luggage pile.

Thea takes a couple of deep breaths, ensures the dressing gown is secured around her person, and tries to muster up some dignity.

‘Yes, that’s right. I was just about to . . .’ she gestures at the bath, and the bellboy nods, mortified. He extricates himself from the suitcases, which are those sturdy, ridged aluminium-coloured ones that look like they’re

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for camera equipment. It's all matching. Expensive, Thea notes.

The bellboy's eyes narrow nervously. He taps at the tablet in his hand. 'I'm going to step out and get this cleared right up. He holds a hand out to help Limo Guy up, who then grabs at his suitcases, trying to manoeuvre them out of the room. They get caught again on the closing door before it shuts in his face. In his haste to leave, the bellboy hasn't held it open for him, and Limo Guy becomes increasingly flustered. Every time he pulls the door open, a wheel gets stuck. Every time he pulls it free, the door starts to shut again.

'It's OK!' Thea calls, rushing towards him to help. She kicks the comfy bra she's just taken off under the bed, and adjusts the robe, so there's no chance of it adding to this comedy of errors by falling open when she gets to him. She grabs one of the cases and yanks it firmly back into the room. Very heavy, she notices, wondering what's inside. 'He'll only be a second, so you can wait here. It's all right.'

'Are you sure?' Limo Guy looks to her for reassurance, and when she nods, he takes a tentative step back into the vestibule area, letting the door click softly shut. Thea parks the case to one side and returns to where she was, near the bath, leaving him where he is.

She and Limo Guy exchange edgy smiles across the expanse of the bed. The room, which moments ago seemed enormous with perfectly temperate air, is now a little too warm, and a little too small. Or is it just that the king-size bed is *right there*, simmering between them?

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Thea perches on one corner of it. What's the etiquette in this situation? 'Would you like to sit down while we wait?' she says. She guesses that technically it's her room and her offer to make, but her words are infused with awkwardness.

Limo Guy comes a little further into the room and lowers himself onto the opposite corner – he's still in his thick winter coat, which she suspects must be boiling – before sliding a hand through his curls. 'Thanks. I'm probably next door or something. Sorry about all this.'

Thea nods. Silence descends and her stomach flutters. First the cancelled flight, then the expense of booking the hotel and now this. He seems all right, but then, don't most people until you know otherwise? He could be a murderer. Just because he's rich doesn't mean he's a good guy. Probably the opposite in fact. That's usually how it works. And what's in his incredibly heavy suitcases? Weapons? Body parts? It could be anything. She fiddles with her phone for something to do but her fumbling only serves to knock the temperature app. She hears a low hum come from the bedside machine and the bed starts to heat up under her bum. She jumps up.

'Tea?' she asks, heading towards an alcove that seems to have been built for the express purpose of laying out the minibar contents in an appealing shop-front style. Tubes of artisan crisps – or chips here, she guesses – nuzzle up to small-batch brand chocolate and locally-distilled gin. Tea and coffee must be free, right? She grazes an eye across the price list. A half-bottle of red wine starts at forty dollars, but she can't see a cost per teabag, which she takes



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as a good sign. ‘I’m having one. If I can find some teabags,’ she mutters. She can’t stop fiddling with the robe. How can something so thick and fluffy somehow at this moment feel so revealing?

Limo Guy gives her a slow crinkly smile. ‘That’s the Brit way, right? Tea for every occasion.’

She breathes out a nervous laugh. ‘What can I say, I’m a cliché.’

She spots the fancy coffee machine immediately, with a shiny hardwood box of varying strength grinds next to it, but there’s no sign of a bog-standard electric kettle. She’s found this in peoples’ homes too. Americans favour a stovetop kettle, which though aesthetically pleasing, is a total pain when all you want is to flick a switch without faffing with the hob or being whistled at when the water boils.

And there’s no stove here. Maybe there are no teabags *or* kettle. She rifles through the items in front of her. Pringles, M&Ms, pretzels, a velvet pouch she discovers contains a ‘sensuality kit’ before blushing and throwing it back down. Finally, at the back, there’s a collection of teabags – mostly herbal, but there are a couple of black teas in there too, even if they are Lipton, AKA the most pointless tea in existence.

‘Do you think I can boil water in this?’ she asks, gesturing at the shiny De’Longhi coffee machine.

‘It probably won’t go all the way to a hundred, but should get warm enough. Let’s see.’ Limo guy joins her at the alcove and starts pressing buttons. The machine lights up. He pulls out a few drawers and levers. ‘It’s sparkling

clean so there's no old coffee residue.' He holds out a clear plastic container that he's pulled away from the side and frowns at it. 'I bet if we fill this with water and don't put any coffee in, we can heat it up. What do you think?'

The way he says 'we' – twice – makes Thea glow. She takes the container off him and busies herself filling it up in the bathroom, while also taking the opportunity to slip on some leggings from her bag underneath the robe. Now she's fifty per cent less likely to have a wardrobe malfunction, she feels better. She runs the tap and gives herself a moment's pause, admiring the walk-in rainforest shower and flattering light in the mirrors above the sinks, if not her slightly spotty, make-up-free face, before she returns.

Limo Guy has found two crackle-glazed kiln-fired mugs. More local craftsmanship with an extortionate price tag, she assumes. He drops a teabag into each.

'I went for a camomile,' he tells her a little sheepishly, clicking the holder back into place and pressing a button. 'I don't get the milky dishwater you Brits call tea.'

'More of an artisan coffee guy?' Thea can't help saying. Coffee snob, she knew it.

'I live in Portland,' he replies with the ghost of a smile, before pulling a 'what can I say?' face. He looks goofy. And cute. His toothy smile is at odds with his dark beard. 'You know where the best coffee in the city is?'

Thea suppresses a groan. She has this conversation almost weekly with people in her work's co-working space, all of whom claim to know the best 'spot' for beans or brew. Fuchsia is evangelical about it. Not that she ever

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buys her own, but she always wants it from a place that charges about seven dollars a cup. To Thea, they all taste like variations on . . . coffee. She arches an eyebrow. ‘Let me guess. Bean and Gone? No? How about Roasters Paradise? Or Brew-ha-ha.’ The machine clicks off and Limo Guy pours steaming water into each of their cups.

‘Is the last one even real?’ he says, throwing a dubious look. He opens the fridge beneath the machine and pulls out a tiny, perfect reproduction of an old-fashioned milk bottle, holding it up to offer it to her. Thea skims the menu again to see if milk is on there with a price next to it. She’ll have her tea black if she has to pay. Listed alphabetically, the menu goes from malt whiskey to Milk Duds with nothing in between. Thea nods and he pours milk into her cup. She watches him, wincing. He hasn’t taken the bag out yet or even let it brew properly. If this is how he makes tea, then no wonder he thinks he doesn’t like it.

‘Thank you.’ She accepts the mug when he offers it, and discreetly takes over, squeezing the bag as hard as possible with a spoon until it goes from anaemic to the correct deep mahogany colour. Only then does she fish out the bag.

‘Brew-ha-ha totally exists,’ she continues. ‘It just opened near Hawthorne.’

Limo Guy nods, as though another coffee house in that area is no surprise. ‘I wasn’t actually going to say any of them though.’

‘Go on,’ Thea says in encouragement, before taking a sip of her tea. It’s the perfect temperature and strength. She does make an excellent cup of tea.

*Helen Whitaker*

‘Are you ready?’ he says.

She rolls her eyes slightly at him and nods, before taking another sip of tea.

‘It’s Dunkin’ Donuts.’

Thea barks out a laugh, spitting tea back into the cup.

‘I’m not kidding!’ Limo Guy says. There’s a cheeky look on his face. ‘I’ve done extensive research into all of these so-called best spots, and concluded that good old DD is as good as any.’

Thea’s still smiling, her hand covering her mouth where she can’t believe she just spat her drink out in front of him. ‘I’m surprised you’ve lasted a year here with fighting talk like that,’ she says. ‘You must have very few Portlandian friends. Even *I* have chosen a coffee house allegiance and I drink tea most of the time.’

They grin at each other as a soft knock at the door interrupts them. The elegant front desk lady, trailed by the bellboy, enters the room.

‘Hi,’ they both chorus at her. At seeing that the bellboy has returned with backup, Thea feels a prickle of uncertainty.

‘I’m so very sorry about this situation and the inconvenience,’ she begins.

Not good.

‘So, I have a reservation for this room under Theodora Bridges,’ she continues.

Thea nods.

Elegant front desk lady turns her attention to Limo Guy. ‘But I also have a reservation for this room under Logan Beechwood. A glitch in the system meant that

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when bookings surged due to the storm, it got double-booked.'

'That's OK,' says Limo Guy – Logan – cheerfully. 'I'm happy to move.' He puts down his mug and makes to leave.

'That's just it.' Front desk lady's professional mask slips for the first time, revealing an anxious look beneath. 'There are no free rooms to move you to. The entire hotel is fully booked.'

Logan's face is now far less cheerful; his dark brows furrowing together. 'So, what are you saying?'

'There's room at our sister hotel in downtown Portland, so we could move you there – with a significant upgrade of course. Although we'll have to wait for the shelter-in-place order to lift before we can shuttle you over, which is likely to be in the early hours of the morning.'

Limo Guy's face crumples in comprehension. 'But that's no good to me. I need to be back in the airport as soon as flights start taking off. And what am I supposed to do until then?' He looks at Thea pleadingly. 'Maybe you could take it instead?'

She shakes her head, even as she wonders what a 'significant upgrade' on a room that's already the best room she's been in in her life would be. 'I'm in the same situation. There are only two flights a day to London and with the flight time and then the time difference, tomorrow is my only shot at getting home for Christmas Day. Sorry,' she adds, although she's not really sorry. The front desk lady said it was her room first, so it's her room. Now is not the time to concede out of a misplaced sense of politeness. She hopes he's not the type of guy to kick off when he

doesn't get his way. After all, what does she really know about him?

'So, what should I do?' is all Limo Guy asks instead. 'Am I allowed to spend the night in the terminal?' The hotel staff look at him slightly blankly.

'We will of course look into that for you,' says front desk lady.

'They seemed to be sending people away from the airport buildings when I left,' Thea says slowly. 'They were directing them to their cars in the indoor car park.'

Logan nods slowly in resignation. 'I guess that's where I'll be, then.' He takes a wistful look around the room. Front desk lady turns to lead the way out, mentioning the possibility of a food and beverage voucher for the inconvenience, as well as a discount on a future stay. 'Not to mention a full refund for tonight, right?' Logan asks as he starts to follow her.

At that moment there's an almighty crash as something thuds into the floor-to-ceiling window and bounces off. All four people in the room rush over and peer out into the gloom, seeing an object – perhaps a food tray from an aeroplane, but it's too dark and chaotic to tell – drop nine floors to the ground, before it's whisked up again by the wind and dances off.

'Reinforced glass,' says the bellhop uneasily. 'And pretty well soundproofed. To block out the noise of the planes. When there are planes . . .' he trails off.

'You can't go back out in that,' Thea blurts. 'Even just back to the terminal building. What if you get hit on the head by, I don't know, a piece of propeller or something?'

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Limo Guy flashes that twitchy smile again. He's standing right next to her and it makes Thea want to give him a flirtatious nudge of the hip.

'A piece of propeller?' he says in an amused voice. 'I didn't realise we were going to be flying out in the 1940s.'

'OK, maybe not a propeller, then,' Thea says with a laugh. 'But debris. Suitcases, branches—' she throws up her hands – 'I don't know, storm stuff.'

He nods as though absorbing what she's said. 'Maybe I can hang out in the lobby for a while.' He shoots a look at the front desk lady whose expression has returned to its elegant impenetrable mask. Technically he is still a paying customer, but Thea suspects this is an unprecedented situation and front desk lady doesn't have the authority to make that call. They can't boot him out into a potentially deadly storm, can they?

'Unless it's not the sort of place you'll let me sit all night,' Logan continues lightheartedly when he gets no immediate response. 'Not least because I might get mistaken for an escort. High class, of course.' He smiles again, and takes his glasses off as he thinks. His eyebrows unknit and she gets a face-on look at those dark blue eyes. Kate Middleton's sapphire engagement ring pops into her head. They're the same colour.

'We could share,' she blurts without thinking. 'The room. And split the cost. To be honest, I can't actually afford to stay here anyway.' She turns quickly to the front desk lady, who is silently watching the exchange. 'To be clear, I *have* afforded to stay here, but only by maxing out my credit card and I already feel sick about the bill. If we

split the cost, it would really help, and it's not like I'm expecting to get much sleep anyway.' Her eyes wander to the bed.

In this room with Limo Guy – Logan – all night. Getting no sleep.

'Because I'm too wound up about catching my flight home, that is, not for any other reason. I see this more as a waiting room really.' She looks at the hand-painted, gilt-leaf wallpaper. 'A very fancy waiting room. So you could stay. I don't mean *stay*, I mean wait here as well. If it's not too weird. Although it *is* weird, but the whole thing is weird if you really think about it.'

Thea, the bellhops and the front desk lady all look at Logan. His forehead wrinkles again as he absorbs her offer.

'Let's do it,' he says slowly, nodding. 'There's plenty of room and I'm happy to split the cost if you need to.'

The way he says 'if you need to' is mild and he likely doesn't mean anything by it, but Thea notices. The subtext is that he hasn't pushed himself past his financial limit to spend the night in this hotel the way she has. But even if she were rich, she wouldn't want to pay full price for a room that she's now sharing with a stranger. And she's not rich. So a five-hundred-dollar refund is five hundred dollars she's just clawed back from her future sporadic pay cheques.

She doesn't say any of this. 'Great!' she says instead.

Logan clears his throat and addresses front desk lady. 'We're going to split the room, so just to confirm we'll both get a fifty per cent refund on the rate we paid?'



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She agrees, looking beyond relieved that the situation has been settled despite its unconventional resolution. ‘I’m so sorry for the inconvenience,’ she keeps saying.

The cheeky look returns to Logan’s face, as though something has just occurred to him. ‘It really has been an inconvenience,’ he says in a very reasonable but also a very confident voice. He definitely has money. You can just tell. He sweeps another hand in Thea’s direction. ‘For both of us.’ He flashes a wide, charming grin. ‘And you did mention food and beverage vouchers. To make up for it, how about you throw in dinner for us in the restaurant downstairs?’