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# **This Love**

Written by Dani Atkins

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# This Love

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*To Kimberley*  
*Who once found a phoenix in a wine bar*

## Prologue

It was the handwritten sign on the window that drew me in. If they'd written '*Second-hand*' or '*Used*' I'd have kept on walking. Even the nostalgia of '*Vintage*' wouldn't have stopped me from continuing on down the High Street. But they got me with '*Pre-loved*'. I hadn't come out with the intention of shopping for new clothes, but *Pre-loved* made me think of abandoned pets, in need of a new and caring owner. It was somewhat worrying how easily I was sucked in by the sign in the charity shop window, given how little money was sitting in my current account. But it was too late to worry about that when the woman behind the counter was already straightening up from whatever task was occupying her at floor level, and turning towards me.

'Can I help you?'

I smiled and pointed at the sign Sellotaped to the window, the letters shadowy and reversed, but still legible. 'Pre-loved designer dresses?'

The woman pointed at a circular dress rack in the far corner of the charity shop. 'Are you looking for anything in particular? We have some lovely evening dresses that have just come in.'

I shook my head and felt the unfamiliar tickle of my hair grazing the base of my neck. It still felt odd that it ended there instead of halfway down my back. 'Actually I'm looking for a plain black dress.'

'Can't beat an LBD,' said the woman, tapping the side of her nose conspiratorially, as though we were members of a secret society, speaking in code. I gave a tepid smile and headed for the dresses. This corner of the charity shop was devoted entirely to clothing, and if it weren't for the sign above the door, you could easily be forgiven for thinking you'd wandered into a rather exclusive and select boutique. It was an affluent area, where the houses were mostly executive, the mummies were yummy, and no one tackled the rugged terrain of the school run without a four-by-four. Even the rejected items in the charity shop felt aspirational.

A surprisingly large section of the rail was devoted entirely to black dresses. The hangers scraped like chalk on a board as I flicked through the garments. Long-sleeved, short-sleeved, winter wear and a gorgeous lightweight fabric that I was pretty sure was pure silk. In the end I found four dresses in my size and pulled them from the rail. The woman behind the counter had been watching me from her sentry point beside the till. 'There are some lovely designer dresses there,' she advised. 'Would you like to try them on?'

‘Yes, please,’ I said, walking into a small cubicle separated from the rest of the shop by a bright chintzy curtain. It was about the size of a WC closet on an economy plane, which made wriggling out of my jeans and jumper a fairly tricky manoeuvre. After a great deal of hopping around on one leg as I tugged the boots from my feet, I slipped the first dress from its hanger and stepped into the black puddle of fabric. The zip purred up comfortably, although I’d been certain it was going to be too small. I smoothed the material down over my hips, wondering if I would always feel vague surprise when something this size fitted me so well.

I pulled the flowery curtain aside and studied my reflection in the full-length mirror conveniently positioned outside the changing space. The assistant was busy with another customer, allowing me a few moments of privacy as I turned left and right, pulling and tweaking the dress into place. At this point in the proceedings I’d usually do a few practice smiles at my reflection. *Hello, this is me in my new dress. What do you think of it?* Today, somehow, that didn’t seem appropriate.

I tried on the dresses in turn, never expecting that each one of them would fit me so well, and look equally good. I examined the four cardboard price tags. They were ridiculously cheap. Even combined, they were still only what I would reasonably expect to pay for a single new dress anywhere else. Feeling comfortable that I’d successfully justified my purchase as a saving, I changed back into my own clothes and approached the counter.

‘Do any of them suit you?’ asked the assistant politely.

‘They all do,’ I said, ‘so it’s hard to pick between them. I hadn’t expected there’d be so many to choose from.’

The woman looked up and glanced around the shop, checking we were alone. We were, although I hadn’t heard the previous customer leave. ‘To be perfectly honest, we’re *never* short of black dresses.’ Her voice dropped to a whisper and she leant a little closer towards me. ‘A lot of them have only been worn once. You see, people often buy a new dress to attend a funeral, but somehow they never want to wear it again afterwards.’ She straightened up sharply, as though suddenly realising she might just have talked herself out of a sale. ‘But I’m sure you’re not superstitious about that,’ she declared, as though she’d been able to tell that about me after our brief fifteen-minute acquaintance. ‘It’s not as though the dresses are affected by where they were worn, and it seems so extravagant to discard them after just one wearing.’

I reached into my handbag for my purse, pleased I’d visited the cashpoint earlier that day, even if the money had been intended for my weekly groceries. ‘Actually, I haven’t got a problem with that at all, because that’s why *I’m* looking for a black dress.’

‘Oh, for a funeral?’ asked the woman, her voice taking on an instantly sombre tone. ‘I’m so sorry, my dear.’ I pulled out two notes from my purse, anxious to leave before she grew bold enough to probe a little further. ‘Which of these were you taking?’ she asked, reaching for a used carrier, which boasted the name of a top-end retailer. Even the bags here were upmarket.



*This Love*

‘All of them, please,’ I said, laying down my money on the glass-topped counter.

‘All four?’

‘Yes, please.’

I could see the questions dancing in her eyes behind her wing-tipped spectacles. I could see the one that polite decorum prevented her asking. ‘*Surely you don’t have four funerals to attend? Not four? Surely not?*’

I wondered how she’d react if I simply nodded my confirmation. Would she look aghast at the colossal misfortune that must have led to this, or would she blame me for not taking better care of the people around me? I could hardly blame her. Four funerals was indeed excessive.

In a world of miracles, I would never need these clothes. Grief wouldn’t be standing like a stalker in the shadows, waiting for the moment to colour everything in grey, again, and again, and again. Perhaps I was being unnecessarily pessimistic. Perhaps *nothing* bad would happen to the people I cared about. Perhaps this time, love would be enough to keep them with me.

Or perhaps it was time I finally grew up.

## Chapter 1

I dreamt about the fire again last night. This time I didn't scream. This time there were no feet thundering in panic down the stairs to see what was wrong. This time the only rest I disturbed was my own.

I woke up panting heavily, wrapped up like a burrito in the tangled sweat-dampened sheet. I reached for the clock on the bedside table, knowing I should feel more surprised than I did that the digital read-out registered it was ten minutes past two. Again. For years my subconscious had kept waking me, reminding me, of something that needed absolutely no reminder. I thought I'd finally left those memories in the past, but they'd crackled back into life since the night of the fire. They hadn't gone at all; they were going to be with me forever, just like the small scar the flames had left behind. I turned my arm, and in the moonlight studied the five centimetres of skin above my inner wrist that, until the day I died, would forever be red and thickened. I wasn't the only

one who still carried the marks of that night, for he had a scar too, practically identical to mine. That bothered me far more than my own.

I don't light candles any more. If I want atmospheric lighting, I'll dial down a dimmer switch. Halloween pumpkins are always going to make me uneasy, and it has nothing to do with their ghoulish grins or the jaggedly carved teeth. Because that was how it started . . . at least, that's what the fire investigators said.

## Four Months Earlier

### *October*

I was surprised to have been invited to the party. I stayed for only twenty-seven minutes before wriggling through the mass of bodies jammed in the hallway to reach the front door. Two vampires, one zombie, and a man dressed like Marilyn Monroe (I have no idea why) all tried to stop me from leaving. But to be truthful, I had probably had enough after the first two minutes. The remaining twenty-five were just to be polite.

It's not as though I knew the group of guys in the flat below mine that well. Well, not at all, really. I mean, we exchanged pleasantries in the lift, nodded politely and smiled if we happened to be emptying our mailboxes at the same time, but I knew nothing about them except that they worked somewhere where suits had to be worn, were fond

## *This Love*

of music with a deep thumping bass that trembled through the ceiling and walls, and filled up the bottle recycling bin in the basement with liver-worrying regularity. I suspected my invitation was more to prevent me from complaining about the noise of the party than anything else. The group reminded me of university students, who hadn't realised that they were now in their mid-twenties and that the partying years were finally coming to a close.

My own party years at university had ended ten years earlier. Now at thirty-one I could look back on those days with a fondness and nostalgia that I don't think I'd felt at the time. The edges of my memories were nicely blurry with age. The best thing I took away from university (aside from a degree in modern languages, which allowed me to earn my living as a translator) was my friendship with Julia. I don't think a single day has passed when I haven't silently thanked the university administrator who'd randomly placed us in adjacent rooms in our first year halls of residence. I remember very little about the Chancellor's speech on that very first day, except for the bit when he told the crowded auditorium that sitting right there in that room were the friends who were going to stay with us for the rest of our lives. His calculations were a slight over-estimate. I'd only made *one* friend who I knew would be with me for everything that lay ahead. But sometimes, even if they're travelling on a completely different path than you, one truly exceptional friend is all that you need.

Julia was part of the reason why I hadn't returned to my

home town after graduation. Not that I'd needed a great deal of persuading to stay in our university town and share a flat with her, it's fair to say. Some part of me had always known when I'd packed up my possessions, pulled the Blu-tacked posters from my bedroom walls, and finally cleared out my wardrobe, that the house I'd grown up in would probably never be my permanent address again.

Julia was *definitely* the reason I hadn't declined the party invitation on the night of the fire. 'What else were you planning to do with your Saturday night?'

'Er, watch *Strictly*?' I'd said hopefully, which actually had sounded a great deal more appealing than getting dressed up and making small talk to a group of people I didn't know.

'Sophie Winter, you are *never* going to meet anyone new sitting in and watching television. You're going to be thirty-two next year. Can you hear that deafening tick? That's your biological clock counting down.'

I'd given her an affectionate squeeze, and chosen not to point out that there were still another eleven months to my next birthday. 'Actually, I'm not sure I can hear anything above the sound of your raging hormones,' I said, smiling down at Noah, Julia's second child who also happened to be my two-month-old godson, fast asleep in his Moses basket beside us.

'Hmmm ...' she agreed, with the kind of satisfied smile that pulled and tangled so many emotions within me. 'I guess I'm just so happy, so content, that I want you to have everything I've got too.'

‘You’re offering to share Gary with me?’ I teased. ‘Wow, you really *are* a good friend.’

‘No. But I don’t want you to give up on the possibility of finding your own Gary. He’s out there . . . somewhere. He might even be going to this party on Saturday.’

‘I doubt it,’ I’d said. ‘And for the record, you do know a person can still be perfectly happy being single? Life isn’t like a game of Snap, where you have to find your other half in order to win, you know.’

Julia had smiled and pushed a long lock of auburn hair behind one ear as she bent to pick up her suddenly grizzling baby. ‘It’s not meant to be a game of Old Maid either,’ she said, trumping me into silence. ‘And anyway, you’re not, are you?’

‘Not what?’ I asked inarticulately.

‘Perfectly happy.’

I twisted in my chair and looked out of the window at her neatly manicured garden, until I was sure the prickling sensation at the back of my eyes had gone, before turning back to face her. ‘No, I’m not. But that’s okay. Not every story has to have a happy ending.’

There’s something very wrong about making your best friend cry. It makes you feel selfish; it makes you feel guilty. It also makes you agree to go to a party you never wanted to attend in the first place.

As I wriggled my way past the party-goers, a cocktail of odours wafted out of the front door after me like a noxious

cloud: alcohol, cigarettes and the distinctive odour of candle smoke. The last was hardly surprising, for I'd spotted at least half a dozen pumpkins, lit from within by flickering red candles, positioned on every flat surface that wasn't already covered with beer bottles.

I took the stairs back up to my attic flat, and was already kicking off my uncomfortably pinching heels as I let myself through the front door. One shoe narrowly missed hitting a small smoke-coloured bundle of fur that launched towards me and began weaving around my ankles. It was only a matter of time before he successfully brought me down with that move, I thought, as I bent and scooped him into my arms. 'Hello, Fred,' I said, burying my face into the thick fur of his neck. 'Did you miss me?' An answering purr thrummed through his body like a motor, which I took as a 'yes'. Fred was the pet I'd always longed for and never got as a child. He was the sounding board for all my decisions, and rarely contradicted my choices, even the poor ones. He was a present for my thirtieth birthday, from me to me, and while Julia might joke it was the first step on a slippery slope to becoming a crazy cat lady, I wasn't worried. The fact that my landlord was willing to turn a blind eye to pets was a deciding factor in moving into the attic flat. *'As long as he doesn't pee on the carpet,'* was his only stipulation. It was a reasonable request of any tenant.

As I went from room to room flicking on lights and drawing the curtains, it felt as though I hadn't left the party at all. Music from oversized speakers still thumped up through

the boards beneath my feet, while open windows in the flat below allowed half the street to join in too, should they wish.

I changed into old comfortable pyjama bottoms, made myself a couple of slices of buttered toast, and slipped my feet into a pair of oversized fluffy sheep mules that Julia's daughter Lacey had given me last Christmas. I suppose I was feeling a little down and deflated as I flicked through the channels on the TV before finding the one that showed a never-ending loop of *Friends* episodes. I drew my legs up onto the settee, automatically avoiding the place where one of the springs was just beginning to poke up through the upholstery. Pulling a crocheted afghan over me, I waited until the cat had circled six times before settling on my lap and sat back to watch a group of people who were, as yet, blissfully unaware that one day there might not always be someone who was *'there for you'*.

The noise of the alarm woke me, but I wasn't scared. Well, not to begin with, at least. Years of remembered middle-of-the-night false alarms from my student days had led to a dangerous complacency about that constant beeping sound. I think that's why I wasn't initially concerned when the piercing noise pricked and punctured my sleep like an annoying needle. I sat up and rubbed my eyes blearily, automatically glancing down at my watch, probably to ensure accuracy when I told this story the following day. *'And then, just before midnight, some idiot set off the smoke alarm.'*

I'm not sure how long it took me to work out that the shrill warning claxon wasn't just because someone had burnt



their middle-of-the-night toast snack. I know it still hadn't filtered through to me as I padded into the kitchen, to make sure the idiot responsible hadn't actually been me. There was still an awful lot of noise coming from the party below. In fact, it was now quite riotous. I would have thought things would have quietened down a little, but from the shrieks I could hear through the floor below my feet, things were still in full swing. I paused halfway across my tiny kitchen and listened again. They didn't sound like shrieks of laughter or drunken merriment. They sounded like screams. For the first time I noticed that the vague haziness around me might not just be from my sleep-filled eyes. I inhaled deeply and smelt it then. There was something sharp and acrid in the air.

I raced to my front door, the security chain rattling beneath my shaking fingers in my haste to release it. From there I could hear the smoke alarm, the one positioned on the ceiling of the stairwell, screaming out its warning. I opened the door a crack and almost instantly the device in my own flat joined in the chorus. Not that I had needed it to tell me what my eyes could already see. The hallway was filled with smoke. Thick grey belching clouds of it were fluming up the stairwell, occasionally interspersed with lightning flashes of something bright orange. The building was on fire.

I slammed the door shut, but a small opportunistic cloud had squeezed through the opening, making my gasp of terror dissolve into a coughing fit. I had to get out. *Right now.*

There's a question people often ask themselves. *What would you save if your house was on fire?* I now know the answer to

that one. Nothing. Not one damn thing. Let the fire have it all. As long as everyone is safely out, the possessions you leave behind for the flames to devour don't matter one little bit.

It took only seconds to find Fred; all I needed to do was follow the peculiar yowling sound I'd never heard him make before. His small body was trembling as I swaddled it into the folds of a thick quilted coat. The bundle jerked and jolted as though it held something possessed, but I gripped it firmly, hoping the fabric was thick enough to resist his thrashing claws until I got us out of there.

I don't know why I ever imagined I'd be able to leave through the front door. It's not as if I'd failed to notice the flames creeping up the stairs like deadly intruders. What did I think – that I could run through them like a stuntman in an action film? Two steps into the shared hall was all it took for me to realise there would be no exit for me that way. I hurriedly retreated to the smoke-filled sanctuary of my flat, slamming the door behind me. But even as I stood panting rabidly beside it, I could see thin white smoke serpents coiling sinuously in through the floor-level gap. Fred had shot from the coat as soon as I put it down, and I hurriedly began ramming the slightly shredded garment under the door, with enough force to rip back several fingernails and not even notice. The smoke continued to meander in, lazily audacious, as though it had all the time in the world to get to me. *No need to hurry here, none at all.* I, on the other hand, had every reason to hurry. I yanked a second coat down from the rack on the wall with such force that the hook flew clean out of

the plasterboard. In other circumstances I'm sure I'd have worried about the damage . . . but it didn't even register. The coats offered a temporary barrier, but behind it the smoke was determined. It would find a way in.

I raced back to the lounge, which was the only room that looked out onto the main road. Fire was licking out of the open windows of the flat below. I saw a shape twisting and turning in the flames, and for one dreadful moment I thought it was a person, before I realised it was the bellowed-out curtains, flapping and contorting in the air as the blaze consumed the room behind them. The street, three floors below, kept disappearing from view beneath a thick blanket of shifting smoke, like cloud base through a plane window. Through the gaps I saw people streaming from the building. Most of them were running; some didn't stop, even though they were clearly no longer in danger. They raced across the empty road and kept on going, as though the fire was still coming after them. I saw people collapsing to their knees, perhaps in shock, perhaps in gratitude to have made it out alive. Some of them looked like they were throwing up. Bile rose thickly in the back of my throat, and suddenly I felt like joining them.

As my fingers fumbled for the brass sash fastener to open the window, I tried not to think of the row of spiked iron railings that lined the concrete steps leading to the building's basement flat. Because if I stopped to think – even for a second – I would see myself impaled on them, flapping and skewered like a fish on a spear. Jumping could prove to be every bit as lethal as not leaving at all.

I braced my arms against the frame of the lower sash and pushed upwards with all my strength. It didn't move. It scarcely even creaked. It felt as solid as though it had been nailed shut, which it just as well might have been, I realised in horror, as I ran my finger over the thick layer of paint sealing every join. *'The whole flat has just been redecorated,'* I recalled my new landlord declaring proudly when I'd viewed the property two months earlier. That was what had sealed the deal, I remembered. Now the only thing that appeared sealed were the windows . . . and my fate.

I tried several more times to prise it open, without success. Hammering on the glass to get someone's attention was ineffective and totally useless, but I still wasted several vital minutes doing it anyway. There was chaos and confusion on the narrow pavement. No one was going to be able to see me beating against the stuck window this many storeys up. I spun around, surveying the room with terrified eyes, looking for something heavy enough to smash the glass. I kept picking up and discarding totally ridiculous objects, like the TV remote control, the plate my toast had been on, and even a cushion off the settee, before I forced myself to slow down.

*Think. Think. Use your brain,* said a voice I hadn't heard in quite a while. Panic was making me slow and stupid, and I couldn't afford to be either. *Try another window,* suggested the voice in my head. I nodded, as though the idea had come from someone else.

The kitchen and bathroom windows were protected by thick security rails, which had always reminded me of the

bars of a prison cell. It was terrifying to realise that tonight that is *exactly* what they'd become. But the bedroom window looked out onto a side street, and beneath it was a flat roof. *That* would be my way out, I realised, as I ran through the home that was no longer my safe and comfortable haven. It was a smoke-filled Alcatraz and I had very little time left to escape from it.

Some half-forgotten piece of advice prompted me to close the bedroom door. It's funny the things your brain chooses to store away, never once knowing that one day they might actually save your life. Fred was already yowling by the window when I ripped the curtains apart so forcefully I heard material tearing from the hooks. Because of the direction of the wind, there was hardly any smoke outside my window, but being visible from the ground was immaterial – because there was no one there to see me. The focus of everyone's attention was very much on the front of the blazing building.

The narrow street that ran along this side of my flat was always quiet, even in the middle of the day. At this time of night it was as empty as a desert highway. Eyes screwed shut in concentration, I tried to visualise the topography of a place I walked past several times a day without ever really noticing it. Beyond the corner where the wheelie bins lived, there was a lock-up storage room belonging to the laundrette next door. That was the flat roof I was going to have to climb on to, I thought, looking down at the moss-covered square of concrete two floors below me. It looked a great deal further down now that I knew I was going to have to leap onto it.

The idea of jumping was terrifying, but realising I wasn't going to be *able* to do so, was even worse. Had I been a fresh-air fiend, or one of those people who always slept with the window open, I would already know my plan of escape was impossible. My bedroom window didn't open, except for the small fanlight at the top. While feeling smug about how warm and cosy my new bedroom was, why hadn't it occurred to me that in an emergency there could be no escape from this room?

I thumped my hand in frustration on the reinforced glass of the double-glazed unit, looking for a handle in the case-ment that I knew didn't exist. Panic was creeping through me, at a rate even faster than the encroaching flames were greedily consuming everything in their path. I thrust the fanlight open as far as it would go, which really wasn't that far at all. I could just about get my head through the gap, but there was no way the rest of my body was going to be able to follow. If I'd never eaten a single slice of pizza, if not even one burger had ever passed my lips in the last thirty-one years, it *still* wouldn't have made the blindest bit of difference. No one except a contortionist or a very skinny ten-year-old could have wriggled their way through that narrow opening. Or a cat. A cat could get out that way.

The cool October air on my cheeks was cruelly tantalising. I could feel freedom; I could smell it – even if it was heavily tainted with the odour of smoke and burning timbers. But I just couldn't reach it.

'Help!' I screamed. It was, I realised, the first time I had

ever screamed in my adult life. It felt strange, as though I was somehow pretending to be someone in trouble, as though none of this could possibly be real. From the direction of my front door I could hear a weird crackling and popping sound. ‘Help! Help! Help!’ I bellowed into the night. It turned out that I knew how to do it, after all.

No one came. No one. I kept screaming, hoping that above the noise and chaos at the front of the building, just one pair of ears might tune into my cries. When every light in the building suddenly flickered and went out, plunging me into complete darkness, I screamed again. I ran to the bedroom door, wrenched it open for a second before slamming it shut with a gasp of terror. I now knew the source of the weird noise at my front door. It was alight; the frame and panels were blazing in a halo of bright orange flames, making it look like the portal to hell itself.

Sometimes, even though you know something isn’t going to work, you still have to go right on ahead and try it anyway. I picked up the low wooden stool that was beside my dressing table. It was made of oak and the legs felt solid beneath my fingers as I curled them around the wood. I waited until my eyes were fully adjusted to the darkness, putting those moments to good use with a couple of practice swings. When I was as ready as I was ever going to be, I wiped my palms dry on the material of my pyjama legs and swung back the stool, aiming it at the dead centre of the window pane.

I didn’t expect it to shatter. I know double-glazed glass doesn’t do that. But I thought it might crack, or maybe bow

slightly. What I definitely hadn't expected was for the stool to bounce off the glass as though it were a trampoline. The force of the rebound knocked me off my feet. The air at floor level was a little clearer than the rest of the hazily smoke-filled room, but I didn't linger down there long enough to enjoy it. I picked up the fallen stool and swung it again. And again. And again. The glass remained intact, but on the fourth swing the stool exploded in a flying cascade of spindles and splintering wood.

After his undignified treatment with the coat, it was hardly surprising that Fred struggled violently when I picked him up and carried him to the window. He was a house cat. He used an indoor litter tray and had no idea of the dangers posed by the outside world. Except the *real* danger to his life was now *inside* the flat. I turned him around in my hands and looked for a long moment into his terrified green eyes. If this were a *Lassie* film, I'd be telling him to go and fetch help. I'd be instructing him to find someone with a really long ladder to come and rescue me. Timmy was most definitely down the mineshaft right this minute. But this was real life, and the best I could hope for was that only one of us was left imprisoned in the smoke-filled flat. I kissed the cat on the top of his head, then lifted his squirming body up to the small window opening. He teetered for a moment on the narrow sill, glancing back at me as though questioning my judgement. I don't blame him. It suddenly looked like a very long distance to jump. Just as I was about to change my mind, I felt his muscles bunch and stiffen beneath my hands and