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Paradise Fields

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Chapter One

Nel's arm was beginning to ache. The mistletoe, heaped about her feet, was selling well. She'd already run out of the bunches she had tied together with red ribbon and was now selling the larger Stately-Home-size boughs, which had been too thick to separate into smaller sprigs. It was one of these, held above her head in an encouraging way, that was proving a strain.

She was just about to replace it for a smaller sample of her wares when a man came towards her. She'd been faintly aware of him standing at the next stall, considering mulled wine syrup and the little bunches of dried flowers and herbs known to their creator as tussie-mussies. She had time to take in that he was tall, wore a navy blue overcoat and looked Cityish, when he put his hand on the mistletoe she was holding and kissed her.

She couldn't quite believe it was happening. People don't kiss strangers on the lips in full view of half the world; or, at least, they didn't kiss Nel. It was over in a moment, and yet the feel of his cool, firm lips on hers sent a strange feeling shooting down from the underwiring of her bra to her knees. It made her catch her breath and she felt as if she had flu - all swimmy in the head.

It was amazing how many people spotted that kiss. Nel didn't usually sell things at the market - she didn't have time, she was always rushing around organising it. But this time, she was pinned down by her wares and at that moment it seemed every stallholder and every shopper had their eyes turned in her direction. She tried to pretend she wasn't blushing, took the coins he offered, handed him the bunch, and watched him walk away, relieved he didn't engage her in conversation or anything.

Her daughter skittered over, eyes sparkling. 'Oo-er,' she said in a way that Nel felt made everyone stare at her even more. 'Mum! Who was he? A bit tasty!'

Nel brushed a hand over her face, apparently getting the hair out of her eyes, but actually giving herself a moment to pull herself together. 'He was just buying

mistletoe, Fleur. Now, how are you doing? Are you ready to take over for me here yet? I've been here since seven this morning and I have to speak to loads of people.' Was she still bright red, she wondered?

Fortunately Fleur had stopped looking at her mother and was searching her tight trousers and pale blue fleece for her mobile. 'I know, I know. In a min. I've just got to text Anna about something. We're supposed to be going out tonight.'

Fleur, eighteen, blonde and lovely, eventually unearthed a phone hardly bigger than a credit card and tapped away. Why someone who found writing the shortest essay such a Herculean task should prefer texting to phoning, Nel didn't understand. That was probably (her daughter had told her) because Nel thought you had to spell everything out: she didn't know the shorthand and hadn't heard of predictive text. Fleur's kindly if unintelligible explanation had been delivered to Nel when she was attempting to remonstrate with Fleur about the size of her mobile phone bill. As often happened with Nel and her children, the roles got reversed and they ended up telling her things they felt she should know, and no parental remonstrance had gone on at all.

Lavender, who appropriately sold wheat bags and lavender-filled products, 'out of self-defence, because of my name', didn't leave her stall, but she waved and winked approvingly.

Sacha, who produced beauty creams and potions in a very small way and sold them in blue glass jars, gave her a thumbs-up sign.

The trouble with knowing everybody, Nel thought, was that it made you vulnerable to people keeping an eye on you. When she had first moved here, as a young and distraught widow, she had been glad of the concern and care of the small town, but it did have its down side. She could see Reg on his fruit and veg stall giving her a saucy look, too. Living in a small community was indeed a bit like living in a goldfish bowl, and Nel occasionally felt she was the only goldfish.

She stopped trying to sell mistletoe and cast her eye over the stalls that were ranged in a horseshoe shape on the fields in front of Hunstanton Manor. It looked lovely, the stalls full of Christmas fare. There was one selling poultry and game: huge bronze turkeys in all their glossy black plumage hung next to bunches of brightly feathered pheasants, ducks and geese. Further along, strings of sausages looped up between fat bouquets of fresh herbs decorated a stall selling organic pork. Then there were what Nel thought of as the 'dippy-hippy' stalls selling brightly marbled wrapping paper, home-made candles, and nativity scenes modelled (she'd discovered after enquiry) out of wine bottles and plaster-soaked muslin, and then painted. The results were quite realistic, if somewhat sinister biblical figures.

Everyone was there, and for once, everyone had been happy with their appointed places. They all knew that this was the last market until after Christmas and were determined to appreciate it. Some of the stallholders, the ones who produced food, went to other markets as well, but few venues allowed non-food products and so for

the crafts people, the Paradise Fields market here at Hunstanton was a valued outlet. And the variety of people and products made it very popular with visitors.

Simon, the man Nel's children referred to as her boyfriend, had also seen Nel selling the extra-large sprig of mistletoe. Simon and Nel had been going out in a gentle way for about six months, and even Nel had to admit he was not particularly exciting, but at least he did little jobs for her, the sort that Nel found awkward and time-consuming, like cleaning out the gutters. Now, she spotted him negotiating the crowds, and could tell he was annoyed.

'Who was he then?' he demanded.

'Hello, Simon. How are you? I didn't know you were going to be here today.' Seeing that he wanted an answer, she added, 'He was just a man buying mistletoe. The kiss was only Christmas spirit. Look!' She shook her apron, the pocket of which was full of money. 'I've sold loads.'

'And you're going to give all the takings to Sam, I suppose?'

'Well, he did risk his life cutting it down off the tree. It's only fair that he should have the money.' Nel always stuck up for her eldest son, who had been addicted to tree-climbing since childhood and now climbed mountains as well.

'Mm. If stealing apples is scrumping, what's the word for stealing mistletoe?'

Ignoring the question, she twinkled up at him, 'Be a love and buy me a burger. They're organic beef and the smell of them cooking has been driving me mad. I want mayonnaise and a gherkin, and just a smear of ketchup. Please! I'm starving. I didn't have time for breakfast and it's nearly two.'

Simon returned her look gravely. 'I checked your tyres and they're all right now.'

'You're an angel. Or a Father Christmas, one of those.' She pulled down his head and kissed him, fleetingly aware that she felt nothing except his smooth cheek under her lips. 'Now, the burger?'

He frowned. 'I'm not sure they're hygienic. They're cooked in the open, they're probably loaded with salmonella.' His distaste was evident in the involuntary curl of his lip and the anxious glint in his eye.

Nel's feeling of warmth towards him dimmed. 'That farm sells meat at all the farmers' markets. They can't do that unless they have food-handling certificates. So, are you going to let me die of hunger?'

He shrugged and walked away.

Vivian had obviously dressed up specially. She was a physiotherapist and carried herself beautifully. As she came over, she looked magnificent with her flame-coloured hair and dramatic velvet cloak. Although a bit younger than Nel, she was

her closest friend, and the reason Nel and the children had moved to the Cotswolds when her husband died.

Now, Vivian tucked a strand of hair behind an ear. 'I've sold the last of my honey, and almost all my beeswax and turpentine polish. People buy loads of it at Christmas. Does that mean it's the only time they clean their houses?'

'Personally speaking, yes,' said Nel, who had several jars of Vivian's home-made polish, mostly unopened, at home. 'It smells heavenly, though.'

'I know,' said Vivian. 'And that is not a coincidence. I've been talking to Sacha about providing her with beeswax for her lip balm, but I don't think I could ever get it pure enough. Everything has to be perfect for her stuff.'

'It's why it's so good,' said Nel, relieved that her friend appeared to have been looking the other way when she was swooped on from on high.

Her relief was shortlived. Vivian peered suspiciously at her. 'Have you been holding out on me? Who was that man who kissed you? You've been keeping him dark.'

'No, I haven't. He's a complete stranger and he bought some mistletoe. As have plenty of other people here today.'

'Did everyone who bought mistletoe kiss you?'

'Lots did. It's an occupational hazard. Although I suppose it's mostly been people I know, who would have kissed me anyway. It's no big deal.'

Vivian, who enjoyed an active and varied love life, disapproved of Nel's casual attitude. 'You should have maximised your opportunity. He was the most gorgeous man I've seen in weeks.'

'And I have a boyfriend, as you very well know.'

'Simon, yes.' Vivian didn't approve of Simon, and although she never said so, Nel was perfectly aware of the fact. 'Oh well,' she went on, 'he must be a commuter, down for Christmas. Or staying with his parents, possibly. He looks young enough to still have parents. Oh, sorry, Nel.'

'It's okay, mine died decades ago. But I am still young enough to have them.'

'What d'you reckon?' said Vivian. 'Has he hired a cottage to spend Christmas in the Cotswolds with friends? He was on his own, so probably not with a girlfriend.'

'I have no idea and couldn't possibly speculate!' Nel said defensively.

'Well, I certainly haven't seen him before, I would have remembered.'

Actually, Nel had seen him before, playing squash at the leisure centre. She had been going home from Weight Watchers on Monday and had looked into the squash courts to see if her son was there, possibly wanting a lift. Instead of a couple of sweaty teenagers, she had seen this stranger, hammering ten bells out of a large blond man. They were both galumphing about the court like young bulls, shoes squeaking, squash balls ricocheting bullet-like around the court. At the time Nel had wondered if this sort of squash would be better for losing weight than the low-cal kind she occasionally made herself drink instead of wine. But as her hand-eye co-ordination was atrocious, it probably wasn't a great idea - although it might be more fun than queuing for hours each week to find that, in spite of all her efforts, she had stayed the same weight as last week, and was still on the plump side of size fourteen.

She didn't say any of this to Vivian, who disapproved of dieting even more than she disapproved of Simon. 'Well, when you've found out everything about him, including his collar size, let me know, will you?'

Vivian laughed. Her ability to extract huge quantities of information about people, men in particular, in a very short space of time, was a skill she had been honing for years.

Harry, Nel's younger son, who looked so like his father it was almost uncanny, arrived, panting slightly. Like Sam, he was down from university for Christmas. 'Hey, Mum - Oh, hi, Viv - Mum, I've just overheard something that might interest you.'

'Oh?' asked Vivian. 'About your mother's bit on the side?'

Harry frowned in bemusement. 'What? No! That friend of yours who's on the council?'

'Fenella, yes?'

'She was talking to a woman while they were picking over the apples - God! People are so fussy! There I was with my paper bag open and ready and they were looking at each apple as if they might have worms in them.'

'Well, they might,' said Nel, 'but what did you overhear?'

'Apparently there's a planning meeting. And they mentioned Paradise Fields - that was when I pricked my ears up. Something to do with planning permission. Anyway, it's tonight. I asked Fenella and she said anyone could go. I said you might be interested, and she said, yes, she thought you might be. So are you?'

Nel and Vivian both frowned, trying to cut their way through this confused report. 'You didn't pick up any other bits of information, did you?' asked Nel. 'I mean, I don't understand. The hospice owns these fields. We've been using them for years. I really don't think anyone could be building on them.'

'Is Fenella still here?' asked Vivian, looking about her. 'We could ask.'

Harry shook his head, his floppy brown hair landing in his eyes. 'No. She said she had to rush. I told her I'd tell you about the meeting. She said ring her to find out the time. She couldn't remember offhand.'

'Oh God! It sounds ominous!' said Nel. She was mystified and rather concerned. 'But thank you for telling us, and for finding out. I'm sure there isn't a problem, but we'd better check. Are you busy this evening, Viv?'

Vivian nodded. 'Hot date. New man. Could be fun.'

Nel sighed. 'OK, well, I'll tell you if I discover anything exciting.'

'Oh yes. I'd hate to miss out. I wonder if Simon knows anything? Being an estate agent, he might well.'

'We could ask him,' said Nel.

'No, thank you.'

Anxious to get off the subject of Simon before Viv could imply yet again that Nel could do better for herself, Nel quickly changed the subject. 'So, what are you doing for Christmas, Viv? I don't think I've asked you.'

'Going to my aunt in the Highlands. It'll be roaring fires, whisky galore, and long walks. I might take the hot date, if he's up for it. What about you guys?'

'The same old same old, I expect.' Nel smiled to cover the dread the word held for her. She liked the Christmas carols she sang with the hospice choir, she liked fairy lights and she liked - no, loved the Christmas farmers' market where they now stood. But since her husband had died, all other pleasure in Christmas was feigned. She was so good at pretending, she doubted even her children knew how she really felt about it.

'What, at yours, with Simon and your cousin and her husband? What about the kids? Are they spending it with you?'

Nel knew perfectly well that soon the children would want to spend Christmas with their various love interests, but so far, they hadn't said so. Nel didn't know if this would make it better or worse. If they weren't around, she could go away too. Perhaps if she weren't at home, the space by the fireside, unmentioned but always there, would be less obvious.

'Simon's going to his mother's, but I think all mine will be there,' she told Viv. 'I'm a bit worried about your goddaughter, though. She's got this new boyfriend. He's from London.'

Vivian laughed. 'It doesn't mean he's a rapist, you know. London is really quite civilised these days. They have policemen and everything.'

Nel made a face. 'They met in a club. It's the first time she's gone out with anyone whose mother I don't know. Or, if I don't know her myself, I always know someone who does. It's a growing-up experience.'

'What? For Fleur?'

'No, for me. Oh good, here's my burger.'

'Hi, Simon,' said Vivian. 'I'd better go back. I left your Sam in charge of my stall,' she said, turning back to Nel. 'If I leave him to get bored, he might take the money and buy drugs with it.'

Nel laughed as she looked across at her son, persuading someone who obviously did not want them to buy a pair of beeswax candles.

Simon looked down at Nel. 'I don't understand you,' he said, pretending to take offence. 'You get huffy if I suggest the boys shouldn't put their feet on the sofa when they're wearing shoes, but Vivian accuses Sam of theft and illicit substance abuse, and you don't bat an eyelid.'

Nel smiled at him, to acknowledge he was joking. 'Have you smelt their feet without shoes?' The truth was often disguised as a joke, and had been this time, but she didn't want this conversation now, so she bit into her burger. The mayonnaise oozed delightfully. 'This is so good! It may be the most delicious thing I've ever eaten, and you are a hero for bringing it to me. And you got yourself one. Good choice! Have a bite.' Ensuring his mouth was full and he was therefore unable to speak, she went on, 'But I'm glad Sam's around. I'll ask him to mind the shop for me while I have a last gallop round the stalls. I still haven't done all my Christmas shopping, and I've got to break it to people that there's a mountain of red tape to go through when we go official. Fleur's obviously gone off somewhere, and God knows where Harry's got to. Oh bugger! That'll never come off.'