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A Valentine's Kiss

Written by Lucie Hart

Published by Ebury Press,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

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Lucie Hart

*A
Valentine's
Kiss*



EBURY
PRESS

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Published in 2011 by Ebury Press, an imprint of Ebury Publishing
A Random House Group Company

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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www.fsc.org Cert no. TF-COC-2139
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Typeset in Adobe Caslon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed in the UK by CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading RG1 8EX

ISBN 9780091937935

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my wonderful agent, Teresa Chris, for helping this inexperienced sailor steer through the waters of the Mediterranean, and to my publisher, Gillian Green, and her team at Ebury, for their unfailing patience and support in getting our ship safely into harbour.

To Robert and Hector

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth:
For thy love is better than wine.*

The Song of Solomon

January

Never, ever again, Imogen thought as she stared at the road, her hands clenched on the wheel and her face set, would she pick up a hitchhiker. Especially a French one. She glanced across at the young man slouching moodily in the passenger seat. He, without a doubt, was the most infuriating person she had ever met. First, he had got into her car with barely a word of thanks when she was doing him a favour. And then, quite suddenly, he had become utterly embarrassing and inappropriate.

It must have been the fault of the Riviera weather, which was so unseasonally clement for early January. There was something about seeing palm trees against a sky of cobalt blue that turned you into a different person. Having started her journey two days ago on a bitterly cold London day, and wearing her usual uniform of practical clothing – combat trousers, trainers, her favourite fleece made slightly bobbly by too many machine washes and waterproof hooded coat – the closer she came to the south of France, the less she needed to wear, and she had rolled her combats up to her knees and taken off her fleece, revealing a baggy T-shirt underneath.

Somehow during the process, she – usually the picture

of discretion and prudence – had also let go of some of her British reserve. Even Monty, she thought, glancing at her black Scottie terrier lying on the back seat, whose habitual expression was one of solemn disapproval, was drunk with sunshine, and seemed almost to be smiling. He had not even let out a disgruntled woof when his mistress had stopped the car and picked up this guy, Dimitri. Both dog and young woman were acting out of character today.

Imogen and Monty had been driving through one of the many charming small towns along the Côte d'Azur, somewhere between St Tropez and Menton, when she had noticed a young man, a sailor's duffel bag slung over his shoulder, standing outside a deserted coach station. He stuck his thumb out and she stepped on the brake.

Why not? Imogen had thought, feeling pleasantly rebellious. This was exactly the sort of thing she would never have done in London, not in a million years. It just wouldn't have occurred to her. At home, she always liked to keep things as safe and familiar as possible, so that the idea of letting a complete stranger into her car would have made her pretty tremulous. But here in France, she felt somehow released from her own rules of behaviour. There was no one around to dictate or disapprove. She was on her own, and free to do as she pleased, so why not stretch her boundaries a little? Feeling quite dizzy with daring, she leaned across the passenger seat to talk to the hitchhiker. 'Où . . . er . . . *vous allez?*' she asked stumblingly, adding, 'Where are you headed?'

'Saint-Jean-les-Cassis,' he had replied.

'*Oh oui, d'accord!* Me too!' she had said, pointing at herself enthusiastically and feeling very, very foreign and a bit silly. 'I can give you a lift. Hop in.'

He had climbed in next to her, muttering something that sounded like '*Merci*'. And had then sat in silence for quite a while, looking sullenly out of the window. All she took in initially was that he was tall and angular, and dressed in very scruffy jeans and a black T-shirt. He wore sunglasses, which he did not remove on getting into her car.

'Er . . . *Je m'appelle Imogen*,' Imogen said after ten minutes of driving in silence. '*Et vous?*'

'Dimitri,' he said.

'Are you here on holiday?' she asked in English.

'*Non.*'

OK, *great conversationalist*, Imogen thought, her laid-back good humour generated by the Riviera sunshine dissipating in the face of this stranger's taciturn behaviour, *don't strain yourself on my account. I'm only the blooming driver.*

As they continued on their way, she concentrated on keeping to the right-hand side of the road. There wasn't much traffic, which made it harder not to glide automatically to the left. She was also conscious of her passenger fidgeting; he appeared to be looking for something in his pockets. Then a match was struck and he lit a cigarette. Just like that, without even bothering to ask for her permission! Imogen clenched her teeth. It was her car, and she did mind.

'I'm really sorry,' she piped up, 'but I would prefer it if you didn't smoke.'

Now she sounded like a cabbie. It was ridiculous. Behaving like a free spirit while in France was turning out to be harder than she'd thought. Dimitri made an exaggerated pantomime of leaning out of his open window to blow smoke away from his driver, then put the cigarette out with a sigh.

'OK, OK. Typical English,' he said under his breath.

At this, Imogen pursed her lips. Unperturbed, Dimitri took off his shades to look at her directly. He had grey eyes and his prominent cheekbones, longish curly dark hair and stubbly beard somehow gave him the air of a musketeer.

'It is completely typical that you're against smoking,' he went on insolently in impeccable if heavily accented English, 'because the English are puritans. They're against fun and having a good time. Everybody knows that.'

'I don't know where you got that from, but it's just a silly cliché,' Imogen said, as patiently as possible. It was so important to keep your manners at all times, especially in a foreign country. 'It's not true at all.'

'Sometimes a cliché is true. You are puritans and that's why English food is so bad.'

'Oh, really?' Imogen said, laughing a little. It was especially annoying that his English was far better than her schoolgirl French.

'Yes. I've tried it. It's heavy, greasy and not very good.'

This hit a nerve in a big way. But before Imogen had a chance to explain just why she was heading to Saint-Jean-les-Cassis, her passenger changed the subject.

'I really like your air,' he said.

Now that was a little cryptic. Imogen wondered briefly

what sort of air she had. Capable, she hoped, or quietly confident, in keeping with the fact that she was on her way to start a new job. The job in question was amazing, and she was really looking forward to starting a new life in this beautiful place. Of course, it was her first time away from home and she couldn't help but feel rather apprehensive about new faces and new surroundings. It was just possible that she looked worried, and even a little harassed, because, come to think of it, that was certainly how she felt a lot of the time when at home in London, being bossed around by her family. So did she, in fact, look the very opposite of confident? Imogen frowned uncertainly.

Then the Frenchman reached out a hand and brushed a stray lock of hair from her face.

'Oh!' Imogen said, nodding briskly to conceal a slight sense of shock, for she hadn't grown up among particularly tactile people. She was a little disconcerted that Dimitri was paying attention to her hair, as usually it served as a useful curtain to hide behind.

'I see,' she added, to show that she had, in fact, understood him. The French always had trouble with aitches, she knew.

'What is that colour?' Dimitri demanded, frowning. 'Brown?'

'Well, it's dark chestnut, I think,' Imogen said, a trifle defensively, 'with a little bit of auburn here and there.' She did not mention that in her family her hair colour had always been known simply as English Mouse.

He nodded, absorbing this, then gestured towards her face, pointing, 'Also I like these.'

'Oh, my freckles! Yes, I have a lot of them.'

'You have them everywhere?' he asked conversationally.

Imogen drew back, staring at him. He returned her gaze with complete self-possession, managing all the while to suggest that he knew exactly what she looked like with no clothes on. She blushed. Just her luck to pick up a hitchhiker who turned out to be a sex maniac. She had been in too much of a hurry to step outside her comfort zone, that was all. *Next time, think it through*, she told herself firmly. *Don't walk before you can crawl*.

'Are we arriving soon?' he asked, looking away with a smile.

'I think so,' she said coldly. In a few moments she would drop him off and that would be it, thank goodness.

'Maybe,' he said, as though he'd been reading her mind, 'when we arrive in Saint-Jean, we can meet for a drink. You give me your mobile number?'

'No, thank you. I don't give my number to people I don't know,' Imogen said stiffly. The arrogance! It was true what they said about French men. You really had to put them in their place.

'Oh? Then how do you make friends?'

'I have plenty of friends, thank you,' Imogen replied. Not strictly true, since she didn't actually know anyone in France yet, but he wasn't to know that. Spotting with relief the sign for Saint-Jean-les-Cassis, she indicated to turn right. After driving past a couple of modest-looking seaside cafés, they emerged onto what looked like the main high street, a vision in pink and white where fashion shops alternated with ice-cream parlours. At the top of this strip was

a square shaded with pine trees, in which a group of men were busy (if that was the right word) playing boules. Imogen parked under a tree and waited silently for Dimitri to leave.

'Thank you for the ride. It was very interesting,' Dimitri said, his hand on the door handle.

Imogen nodded, not looking at him.

'*Salut!*' he said, letting himself out. '*Et . . . Bonne Année!*'

'Yes, goodbye – and Happy New Year to you too,' Imogen muttered. She watched him make his way across the square, his duffel bag slung over his shoulder. There was even something arrogant about the way he walked, as though he knew that her eyes were on him. He turned into a side street and disappeared from view. Good. No need to give him another thought.

She turned to check on Monty, who was snoozing on the back seat, and got out of the car to have a look around. It was early evening.

There was a café on the square, where a few people sat chatting and sipping aperitifs. Beyond, she could see the glittering expanse of the Mediterranean stretching under a now opaline- and lilac-coloured sky. A girl drove past noisily, bareheaded, on a red scooter; then the sound of chirping crickets rose again in the air, scented with pine and salt.

Imogen felt a wave of exhilaration wash over her, and almost pinched herself to check that she was, in fact, really and truly there. Inside the car, Monty suddenly roused himself and barked querulously. She let him out and poured water from a plastic bottle into his bowl.

Now to locate the modest hotel where she was booked in for the night. Tomorrow she would start work and her new life would begin. Imogen smiled. She had landed. The greyness of north London, her job at the nursery, her family and their many demands, her daily chores – all had receded far, far out of sight.

The previous summer

Six months earlier, as she was lying in the bath one Saturday morning, an exasperated cry had jolted her out of her reverie.

‘Imo! Are you getting out?’

It was Hildegard’s voice, the well-modulated, confident voice of an actress, coming from the ‘dorm’ across the landing. A set of two rooms which had once (in Edwardian times) been designed as the nursery wing, it now housed all five Peach children, with the boys in one room and the girls in the other – inconveniently, the girls had to cross the boys’ room whenever they wanted to leave. Imogen sat up guiltily. Without waiting for her sister to call again, she bounded out of the bath, dried herself quickly, threw on her robe and hurried next door.

Going in, she nearly walked into the open wardrobe door. Within, her sixteen-year-old brother, George, stood staring at the mirror, meticulously shaving an almost imperceptible moustache. Fourteen-year-old Thea stood at his elbow, her hair pulled back into a tiny chignon, a pair of ballet shoes tucked under one arm.

‘Oi, watch where you’re going,’ George said crossly.

‘Sorry,’ Imogen squeaked, side-stepping them and making for the bedroom she shared with her two sisters.

'I don't know why you bother,' Thea said, sniffing disdainfully. 'You don't even need to shave.'

'I'm practising, stupid,' George said. 'For when I do.'

'And that stinky Dior stuff you're always splashing on!' Thea went on, wrinkling her nose. 'Yuck and double yuck!'

'Be quiet, child. Aaargh! Now I've cut myself!'

Thea smiled sweetly, turned on her heel and headed next door for her bed, above which hung a large poster of Darcey Bussell.

'*There* you are, Imo!' Hildegard said crossly, emerging like an avenging angel from behind the bookshelves that divided her part of the room from her sisters', with a slice of burned toast in one hand and a pink drawstring bag in the other. Thea came to stand behind her, striking an attitude on tiptoe with her arms stretched out.

'What *is* the matter with you this morning?' Hildegard demanded, with the stern authority that befitted the eldest of the Peach children. At twenty-four, Hildegard looked down on twenty-two-year-old Imogen, the middle daughter, as a mere helpless child who needed bossing around.

'Sorry, Hil,' Imogen said, standing on one foot and hurriedly pulling her underwear up her legs with one hand while modestly holding her robe closed with the other. 'I lost track of time. I just need to dry my hair and we can go.'

'Don't bother,' Hildegard said with a dramatic sigh. 'It's absolutely *fine*. I'll take the monkeys to their classes.'

'Are you sure you don't mind?' Imogen asked worriedly. She'd got into her jeans and was now yanking her arms

into the sleeves of a grey hoodie as she moved back into the boys' room. Catching sight of ten-year-old Gus, who stood dreamily in the middle of the room with his cardigan only half on, she helped him into the other half and handed him his violin case.

'Afterwards I'm going straight to the theatre, but I'll never make it in time for this morning's read-through,' Hildegard went on irritably. 'I thought I'd mentioned that we're starting on a new piece. Some of us have real commitments, you know. All you have to do today is walk your dog.'

'Yes, of course,' Imogen said. 'I'm really sorry. Tell Stephen it was all my fault.'

'*And* I had to do my hair myself because you weren't around,' Thea added, with a stern look.

'Where's Mum?' Gus asked over Thea's shoulder.

'Studio,' Hildegard replied, inspecting her toast then chucking it in the bin. 'I think she slept there, actually. You know she's working on something really big.'

Gus nodded, then started down the stairs, followed by a skipping Thea.

'Will you be around later, Imo?' Hildegard said on her way out. 'I still need you to take in that dress for me, remember.'

'Yes, of course,' Imogen said meekly. After a tiny pause, she added, 'I'll do it after I've been to see Di. She's really enjoying *Great Expectations*.'

Her voice remained quite even. After so many years of keeping up the pretence of regular reading sessions with her elderly neighbour, she had almost come to believe in them herself.

Hildegard nodded, her mind on other things. No one in Imogen's family ever bothered to remember her appointments. They simply assumed that she would be available whenever they needed her.

Once she'd dried her hair and George had nearly knocked her over to dash like a missile towards the stairs and his mosaic class, Imogen automatically tidied away her brothers' and sisters' possessions and made all the beds.

Afterwards she went downstairs into the kitchen, which was, as usual, devoid of any signs of food preparation. She stood for a moment looking out of the window into the garden, where Monty could be seen disporting himself in dignified manner with his favourite squeaky toy. Beyond him stood the large garden shed which housed her mother's studio. Inside, Elsa Peach would be sitting on the floor in her dungarees, her hair tucked into a turban, enthusiastically flicking paint at an enormous canvas. The sky was an ominous shade of grey and it was rather chilly. Proper summer weather was proving to be its usual elusive self. Imogen sighed and zipped up her hoodie.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of a bright object dancing wildly over the garden wall. It was Di, standing on a ladder and waving a red bandana – their agreed signal for an emergency. Imogen leaped to her feet and ran next door.

'Thank goodness you're here!' Di said, looking agitated as she opened the door. Over her usual uniform of slacks and a blouse with piecrust collar, she wore a large striped apron. Imogen followed her into the kitchen.

'I'm really worried this time,' Di said. 'Because, you see,

this was a special order from our local MP. She gave very precise instructions. And now it's all gone wrong. Oh, help. This will finish me.'

'Di, stop it,' Imogen replied sensibly. 'You know you're the best . . .' she went on, looking critically at what lay on the counter. 'He looks great – really he does. It's just that . . . the, um . . .'

'I know, I know!' Di wailed. 'The chest hair is *all wrong*, isn't it?'

'Yes,' Imogen admitted. 'Too spiky. Like a hedgehog, or a punk hairdo.'

'Dear-oh-dear. That won't do at all. Should we just pull it all out?'

'I think we'd better,' Imogen said decisively.

The chest hair *was* wrong. And this was a serious problem, because the hair in question belonged to Tom Jones, who stood, in all his marzipan glory, on top of a large birthday cake.

'You've done a great job, though,' Imogen said supportively. 'Wonderful knickers!'

These, fashioned out of frilly pink, red and blue icing, were artfully dotted all over the sponge-and-buttercream rock 'n' roll podium.

'And what's that?' Imogen asked, pointing at a spherical black object that lay at the singer's feet.

Di peered at it, then said, 'Why, that's a marzipan sex bomb, dear. It only needs a wick to finish it off.'

Imogen looked at her friend with affection. The cake-maker was, as ever, a reassuring sight, with her snow-white hair cut in a neat pudding-bowl style and her alert, shrewd

face deeply tanned from decades of gardening. Shifting her gaze to the singer's now hairless chest, Imogen was suddenly struck by inspiration. 'I know! How about pushing some black icing through a garlic press?'

'You *are* brilliant! That's *just* the thing.'

Moments later, the Welsh Wizard was sporting a surprisingly lifelike mat of curly fur in the deep opening of his edible gold lamé shirt.

'Oh, phew,' Di said, pressing the back of her hand on her brow. 'Another disaster averted. Do sit down, dear. Tell me your news.'

Bewildered, Imogen replied, 'I haven't got any.'

'No,' Di said wryly, looking at her young friend. 'I didn't think so. But have I got some news for you.'

And then, without further ado, Imogen's neighbour dropped her Thrilling Bombshell.