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Out of the Blue

Charlotte Bingham

Chapter One

It seemed it had been raining for weeks. Not the slow relentless rain that is so much part of West Country life, but driven by a fierce wind, whipped up to a frenzy by outside forces, howling round the rectory. At times it could be heard knocking at every window pane, as if it was seeking shelter from itself; or as if, like the sole occupant of the small country house, it would prefer to be staring into the lazy flames of a log fire, not driving the last flurry of small autumn leaves about the lawn, or bending the trees to its fierce will. In short, it was not an afternoon to be out; so when the old bell in the cupboard under the stairs rang out faintly, it was not surprising that, at first, it was only Punch the sheepdog who heard it, and in response sprang up and ran, barking excitedly, to the double front doors.

Florence, her face flushed from the fire, her back cold from the lowered temperature of the old house, followed her dog to the half-glassed front doors. A man stood in the old stone porch, his figure bent against the elements, one hand holding on to a weathered trilby hat.

Florence frowned, reluctant to open to someone whom she did not immediately recognise, and Punch continued to bark incessantly.

'Ah, it's Colonel Willoughby,' she told Punch, and she started to undo the lock at the top of the door. 'Colonel Willoughby. How are you?'

The colonel, upright once more, but still holding on to his hat, smiled. 'My dear lady, my dear, dear lady, how is you indeed?'

He held out a tray of charity ribbons towards Florence as if she might be too short-sighted to see them.

'I am collecting, as you can see, my dear Mrs Fontaine, collecting for the-' but his words were lost as the ribbons housed neatly in the cardboard tray were thrown into the air, dancing off up the front lawn to join the already frenzied ballet being performed by the leaves.

'Oh dear, oh dear . . .'

The old white-moustached gentleman turned to follow his recalcitrant collection, as did Florence and Punch, Florence darting about the lawn and snatching at the small ribbons, followed closely by a now joyously barking Punch.

'Come in, come in, and have a cup of tea, do,' Florence insisted as they finally retrieved the last little tie of ribbon, and retreated once more to the comparative shelter of the porch, and from there into her small hall.

'I don't think I may, dear lady.' The colonel looked momentarily embarrassed, as if he had already been asked this many times that afternoon. 'The memsahib is waiting for me at home with tea and a Victoria sponge, more than my life's worth to slake the thirst before I pitch up at her tea table. More than my life's worth indeed. And to be truthful, if I take tea at every house, I end up with what they used to call "a curate's flush"!

They both laughed, after which there was a pause as Colonel Willoughby glanced down at his collecting box in rather the same manner that Punch would look from Florence to his empty food bowl and back to Florence again, hinting that it needed filling.

'Oh, I am sorry, wait a moment.'

Florence pushed a pound coin into the box, then she pinned one of the mud-bespattered ribbons on to her cardigan.

'I'm afraid that's all I have in the house at the moment,' she told him in a matter-of-fact voice. 'I am flat to the boards until Monday morning.'

'Most kind of you, Mrs Fontaine, very much appreciated, I do assure you.'

'The widow's mite . . .'

 Florence told him and shrugged her shoulders, because she knew he must know of her impecunious situation.

'How are you going along, Mrs Fontaine?'

'Oh, you know.' She smiled, avoiding the colonel's kindly eyes, looking away, not wanting to see the sympathy in them. Sympathy was always so weakening. Besides, she had grown used to the embarrassment that her recent tragedy brought to people's faces, their eyes looking everywhere except into her own. 'I am going along all right, you know. Quite used to being on my own, since my husband Henry, was always away so much, being a concert pianist. You know how it is? Quite used to it, really.'

Florence cleared her throat.

Of course Colonel Willoughby didn't know at all - he had no children and his wife was still alive, waiting for him to come home and take tea with her.

Colonel Willoughby nodded. He had always found Florence Fontaine a very appealing woman. Brown-haired, grey-eyed, with a rounded feminine figure and a pale Dresden-china complexion, offset nowadays by a haunting look of permanent, if unsurprising, sadness. After all, to lose both your husband and your son within a short space of time - as the present Mrs Willoughby always said so sadly, and so often, as soon as Mrs Fontaine's name was mentioned, 'That poor Florence Fontaine, her plight is somehow unimaginable.'

'Thank you for your donation, Mrs Fontaine. It is most appreciated.'

Colonel Willoughby raised his old battered hat and backed out into the weather once more, struggling up the front lawn, his head bent determinedly against the force of the wind, before finally reaching his car.

Florence watched him until his car disappeared from sight, when she shot the bolt up on the door and returned to the fire, to the sound of the howling wind - and dear heavens, it did howl - to her library book, and to her thoughts. Punch settled down beside her, and as he did so, she started to stroke the top of his head.

In her mind's eye Florence followed Colonel Willoughby back to his small Georgian village house. She imagined 'the memsahib', Mrs Willoughby, greeting him at the door, tuttutting around him as she removed his wet coat and hat and hurried them off to the drying rail in the kitchen. She even thought she could hear him recounting his collecting failures and successes, giving his wife an account of his rounds, telling Mrs Willoughby who had put what sum of money into the collecting tin, before he finally confided to her.

'Oh, and I called on poor little Mrs Fontaine. She put in a pound. A widow's mite, poor soul, that's what she called it herself, a widow's mite. I think she has been left quite badly off, really I do.'

Florence continued to stroke the top of Punch's head, slowly and rhythmically. She would give anything to be sitting drinking tea in front of the fire with someone else, to be laughing about some funny incident in the village, or reading out an amusing item from the newspaper. Well, not anything perhaps, but it would be nice.

Still, she must not feel sorry for herself. She clenched her fingers, making one hand into a small fist. As her mother used often to remind her, feeling sorry for yourself was the worst way to be in life. No, she was much more fortunate than some; besides, tomorrow was Amadea's birthday, and she would be coming home for the weekend. She must begin icing her cake. She was lucky. She kept telling herself that. She was very, very lucky.

Amadea lay as still as she could, for as long as she could, listening to the distant sounds of the town going about its business below her bedroom window, hoping that by some miracle her head would clear. Then she fell back into a halfsleep, a fitful and uncomfortable doze from which she was finally awaked by a noise, somewhere in her flat. She was sure of it. There was a noise, not just in her head - but in her flat!

Sitting up a little too quickly, she listened, but whatever, or whoever, she might have heard had now lapsed into silence, a silence so intense all she could hear was the thumping of her own vastly over-stimulated heart. Unable to prevent herself giving a long, soft but heartfelt moan, she slowly swivelled her body to the edge of the bed, putting her feet on the stripped wooden floor and standing up to reach for her dressing gown as she went in search of something that might relieve what now seemed like a truly life-threatening headache.

Before making her way to the kitchen, one hand on her head, one on the corridor wall, she stopped for a few seconds, still half listening for the noise, until she realised it must have been Fred Chopin, her cat. She pushed open the sitting-room door.

Oh dear heavens, of course!

There had been a party, although why the party should have been at her flat she could not quite remember. Parties meant people and people spelt chaos, a room full of people shouting at each other, drinking and dropping finger food everywhere; some of them even forgetting to go out on to the landing to smoke. Oh please God, it had been fun, hadn't it?

With growing despair, her pained gaze took in the dirty glasses, all of which appeared to have gone forth and multiplied before falling over or acting as ashtrays. Large and greasy pizza boxes lay naked and abandoned; small cheese muffins, sausages and vol-au-vents sat about in deadly groups, their insides removed, a culinary holocaust. It seemed that, unlike the finger food, the guests had all decided to go home together.

'So who was here exactly, Fred?' Amadea wondered out loud to her Blue Point Siamese cat as he followed her back into the kitchen, where she slowly and very, very quietly placed a halfdozen glasses at the correct angle in the dishwasher. 'We really must be able to remember that.'

Happy birthday, Amy! The room was full of cards from everyone at Psemisis. Oh God, of course - it had been her pre-birthday bash. Of course today was her birthday - what could she have been thinking? Holding her head in one hand and her coffee in the other, Amadea screwed up her eyes and went full on for total recall just as the telephone rang, far, far too loudly. It was her mother.

'Amadea? Happy birthday, darling. How are you? I've been waiting for over an hour now - you said you would be here about midday, didn't you?'

'Mum?' Amadea chewed her lip, agonised, and not just because of her headache. 'Mum, I'm afraid I'm not feeling terribly well. I can't come over until tomorrow. There was a bit of a party last night a surprise birthday from everyone at the office, you know, and it's . . . well - it has left me wiped out.'

Amadea thought she could see the pain of rejection crossing her poor mother's face, feel her hurt, and understand her disappointment. But what

could she do? In her present state driving was out of the question, birthday or no birthday.

'It's all right, Amadea - I haven't started cooking the lunch yet, love.'

Amadea could hear her mother clearing her throat, and there was a short pause before she continued.

'Did you open my present, by the way? And, and - the cards?'

'Yes, yes, of course, it's lovely, they're lovely.' Anguished, Amadea could not remember where she'd put either the parcel or the cards. They must be under all the stuff that everyone at the office had given her.

'Did you like the card from Punch? I thought it was so like him.'

'Yes, yes, it's brilliant.'

'And the present?'

'The present's lovely . . .' Where was the present? Worse, what was the present?

'But did it fit? I was worried, in case it didn't fit. Sometimes Dottie's alpaca knits come out a little smaller than they should, I always think.'

God, of course, it would be one of Dottie Stuart's knits. Dottie was her mum's country neighbour. Although reassured, Amadea now knew for certain that she had to proceed with extreme caution.

'I wasn't too sure of her choice of buttons, but they are hand-painted by a hippy in the village, and I believe they are quite fashionable again - hand-painted buttons, quite fashionable.'

Ah, it was a cardigan. Thank God, anyway, it wasn't one of Dottie's hot-water-bottle covers, although it would probably look like one when she put it on. God, that woman's taste was bizarre.

'I will wear it when I come tomorrow. You will see how good it looks.' Amadea's hand was still on her lowered forehead as the hangover hammer continued to hit out with deadly, rhythmical accuracy. 'I will wear it tomorrow, with that nice skirt you gave me at Christmas, Mum.'

Amadea closed her eyes as she tried not to remember that the skirt her mother had given her for Christmas was still hanging unworn in the back of the cupboard.

'Yes, well. Pity about today, Amy, but there you are, if it's not to be, it's not to be. Let me know how you're placed tomorrow, won't you? You know, what time you can get across and so on. I'll put the lunch on hold until then. Only hope the Russian salad will last. Fingers crossed you can make it by tomorrow, love. 'Bye.'

Her mother cleared her throat once more and replaced the receiver.

Amadea stared at her own telephone before replacing it on the table. Oh God, she had hurt her mother - yet again - and nothing to be done. God.

Amadea turned away and sighed as heavily as her pounding head would allow. It really wasn't her fault that the office had decided to throw a surprise party for her in her flat. Jamie, her boss, said she had planned it all ages and ages ago. It really wasn't her fault. She had just been so surprised. God, she had been so surprised, the door of the flat being thrown open and suddenly the whole of Psemisis was pouring through the door, waving bottles, carrying trays of food and embracing her with their good wishes.

No, it certainly had not been her fault that she couldn't schlep across and see her mother today, as arranged. But it would be now. It would be so her fault.

'Why oh why can I never do anything right?' she murmured to Fred Chopin. 'Because I can't, is the answer.'

She stared at herself in the mirror. She was fairly sure that she did not normally look so dreadful first thing in the morning; fairly dreadful, but not that dreadful. She tilted her head sideways. Mind you, the dark patches of eye make-up gave her an interesting panda-like look.

'Ouch. No, it's no good fighting this,' she informed her entirely uninterested cat. 'I'm going to go back to bed and surrender to pain and lassitude, not to mention a four-hourly dose of paracetamol.'

Florence stared at her beautifully laid kitchen table in the centre of which was placed the birthday cake she had baked and decorated for Amadea. Happy Birthday Amadea, it proclaimed. She bent down to look a little closer at the writing. She should really redo it now so that it read Happy Late Birthday Amadea.

For some reason she could not make out, the white cloth that she had ironed and starched now looked positively limp, as did the Russian salad - despite the magazine recipe being 'a new exciting variation on an old theme'. From the perfectly prepared salad her eyes travelled to the herby chicken breasts wrapped in foil, the scrupulously scraped very early new potatoes from the garden, and the tray of ready-to-be-roasted tiny vegetables. She had thought Amy's birthday lunch was all going to be so nice.

'Ah well, teach me to look forward to something,' she murmured to Punch. 'I'll put it all back in the fridge until tomorrow. Only thing to do, really.'

Amadea worked twenty miles away in the newly emergent, ever-expanding town of Swinton. Florence knew that she was personal assistant to a woman called - for some reason best known to either her parents or herself - Jamie Charlbury, and that they both worked for a company called Psemisis. Despite working so near to where Florence lived deep in country seclusion,

Amadea hardly ever came home, except for bank holidays and the odd weekend. Florence accepted this. It was only understandable. Amy had to have a life, after all, and now there was only Florence and Punch, well, in truth, there was nothing much for poor Amy to come home for.

Florence finished putting away what now looked such a forlorn feast. Her celebration lunch for Amy had turned into a right Eeyore of a birthday: all it lacked was an empty honey pot and a burst balloon.

'My fault, Punch,' she told the dog, before they both settled back in front of the fire. 'Never look forward to anything. If you look forward to anything it means you've enjoyed it before you get there, and are therefore bound for disappointment.'

Later, for want of something better to do, she went to bed early, and lay awake for hours listening to the howling wind still hammering to get in, still insisting on trying to knock the glass out of her windows. Would it never stop? Would anything ever stop? And if it didn't, what could she do?