

## Fairytale of New York

*Monday 21 November*

Christmas lights twinkle in the rain as I duck down Fifth Avenue – red, greens and golds glimmering in reflections on puddles and glass as I dodge along the busy sidewalk, my phone pressed tight to my ear.

‘And the good news is, it’s looking like we’re going to hit the million-copy selling mark by the end of this week! We did it, Harry!’ my literary agent, Louisa, cheers on the phone, her voice as warm and close as if she were bundled up against the cold beside me in the sharp New York City chill. I try not to think of the three and a half thousand miles of distance between New York and London – between me and my old home and its soft, damp greyness – but every now and then

the pangs of homesickness awaken and stretch just beneath the surface of my new life. It's been four months since I left England and the pull of home is somehow stronger now that winter is setting in. New York can be cold in so many ways.

'To all intents and purposes,' she continues with glee, 'here's me saying you are now *officially* "a million-copy bestselling author".' I can't help but yelp with joy – a surreptitious half-skip in the street. The news is incredible. My first novel, a runaway bestseller, in the charts since publication, but this new milestone isn't something I could ever have dreamed of until now. New York swallows my ebullient energy greedily. I could probably lie down on the sidewalk and start screaming and the festive shoppers would probably just weave around me, unfazed. It's an oddly terrifying and yet reassuring thought.

'We'll be getting another royalty payout from the publisher at the end of the quarter,' Louisa continues. 'So, Merry Christmas, everyone!'

It's funny, it's only November and yet it does feel like Christmas here already. I look up to the halos of light hanging above me, Holiday decorations, sparkling from shop windows, strung in great swathes high over the main drag of Fifth. Everything seems to be moving so fast this year; a whirlwind, a whirlpool.

'How's it going over there?' Louisa asks, snapping me back to reality. 'Settled? Happy? Are you living love's young dream?'

I let out a laugh of surprise because *yes*, as smug and as self-satisfied as it may sound, I really am. After so many years alone, after pushing relationships away, perhaps I've paid in full for my mistakes and I can put them to bed. Maybe I'm finally allowed a little happiness.

I shake off the dark thought and grasp back onto my new life with both hands. ‘Well, we’ve got furniture now at least. Not sure I’ve quite worked out the subway yet but I guess I’ll get there in the end. Or I guess I won’t,’ I add jokingly.

The truth is, while I know I am beginning to get a feeling for New York City, I realize I am trying to settle into a city that does not settle itself. The crowds, noises, faces, people, that frenetic fight-or-flight energy. I suppose it’s only been four months – I know it can take a lifetime to become part of a city, to find your place. And the world I’ve landed into here, with Edward, the new circles I find myself moving in, his rarefied life, that is something else again.

‘And how is your dreamboat? How is Ed?’ she asks, as if reading my thoughts. I slip past a gaggle of tourists in front of St Patrick’s Cathedral, its bells tolling anachronistically alongside towering glass and steel.

Louisa was with me the night I met Edward; I shiver at the memory of the look she gave me when I first brought him over to meet her. That silent swell of pride I felt to have my arm hooked through his – the pride anglers must feel cradling their outsized shimmering catches. Though I can only credit chance and timing with my iridescent prize. In fact, it would probably be more accurate to say Edward plucked *me* from the stream than the other way around.

I would be lying if I said Edward’s background, his habits, his rituals – so alien to me – hadn’t lent him a strange additional attraction. His world is different to mine, everything he does invested with the subtle shimmer of something gilded. Not that I knew who he was when he first spoke to me.

We met at my publisher's annual Summer Gala in London, a lavish, star-studded party packed with bestselling authors, high-flying editors and super-agents. That year it was being held at the Natural History Museum, the vaulting Victorian architecture festooned with bright bursts of tropical flowers: orchids and heady scented lilies. Waiters in white tie, ferrying champagne high above the heads of the mingling household names, debut authors and reviewers. It was my first big author event, my book having only just come out the week before and exploding directly onto the Top 10. I'd bought a ridiculously expensive emerald dress in celebration and then spent half the night trying not to spill booze and canapes down it. Nervous, and completely out of my depth, I let Louisa ferry me from important contact to important contact until I finally managed to escape the madness for the relative calm of the loos. I am no shrinking violet, but too much noise, too many faces, panic and sound trigger old wounds and set my senses to a different frequency.

It was on the way back from the toilets, empty champagne glass in hand, that it happened. At first, I thought it was nothing, just my heel snagging on something, causing a little stutter in my step. But the snag turned into a halt, a tug, and a hot blush rising as a glance back confirmed that my high heel was firmly wedged in one of the museum's tiny ornate floor vents. Victorian central heating.

I gave another tug, and the heel seemed to loosen, but a few passing eyes found their way to me and I panicked. I tugged again, harder. And with a retrospectively impressive show of strength and an extremely loud metallic clatter I somehow managed to completely dislodge the 150-year-old

wrought-iron grate from the stone floor, still attached to my Dior heel, the noise and spectacle now attracting the gaze of everyone in the vicinity.

With a deep desire not to prolong the experience but totally unsure what else to do, I hitched my dress and half-lifted, half-dragged the entire wrought-iron grate back towards its gaping floor-hole. Drained white with shame, the grate clanked and banged as I tried to get it back in, all the time my heel firmly attached. And that's when he saved me, a firm hand on my back, that warm American accent, his voice low, reassuring, like home.

'Okay, okay. I see the problem.' His first words to me. And though, of course, he meant the problem with my shoe, and the grate – and that he could fix that – to this day I like to think he meant he saw the larger problem, with everything – with my past, with the holes in my life – and that he could fix that too. Listen, I'm no damsel in distress – trust me, I've survived a lot more than most – but you can't underestimate the overwhelming power of someone swooping in to save you after a lifetime of having to save yourself.

Those eyes looking up at me, filled with such a disarming calm, with an inborn certainty that everything will all work out just great. The warmth of his skin against my bare shoulder blades. I did not have time to put up my usual barriers, to insulate myself or pull away from intimacy, because there I was, stuck.

He dropped down on one knee, like a proposal, like the prince in Cinderella, this impossibly handsome man, and as he gently wriggled my mangled shoe loose from the grate, my hands on his strong shoulders, I felt something inside me

shift. A hope, long tamped down, flickered back to life in the darkness. And the rest is history.

Here I am a year later, having moved a continent and my entire life to be with him.

‘Ed is doing great,’ I answer, though we both know it’s an understatement. Ed’s start-up company turns over more money in a month than the literary agency Louisa works for does in a year. Edward is doing immeasurably well, but we’re British and we don’t talk about stuff like that. Besides, Louisa is well aware of who Edward is, the family he comes from. He’s a Holbeck, and with a surname like that, even without family investment, success was almost inevitable. ‘I’m actually on my way to meet him now. He’s taking me skating.’

‘Skating?’ I hear the interest pique in her tone. She’s desperate to hear about him. About the Holbecks. Somehow, I managed to bag one of America’s wealthiest bachelors without even trying and everyone wants to know how I did it. *Why* I did it. But, more importantly, they want to know what they are like.

For that, of course, there is Google. And God knows I did a deep dive or ten in the weeks after meeting Edward. Generations of wealth, weaved into the fabric of America since the gilded age, shipping, communications and of course those ever-present shadows of questionable ethics. There is no end to the op-ed pieces on them, the gossip column space, the business section dealings of the Holbeck name, and yet the air of mystery they still maintain around themselves means one can never quite be satisfied. They remain elusive, mercurial. That, and their presumably ruthless brand of magic, is a heady and alluring mix.

‘He’s taking you skating?! Like roller-skating?’ Louisa asks, incredulous, though I doubt anything I told her about Edward would really surprise her.

‘No,’ I say. ‘No, he’s taking me ice-skating. It’s a family tradition, The Rink at the Rockefeller Center – start of the season. He wants us to go together this year.’

‘Oh my God, will his whole family be there?’ Louisa erupts. She’s dying to hear more about them but I haven’t been able to furnish her with any more information than I’ve gleaned from the internet so far.

‘No. Still haven’t met them. No family yet. Edward’s terrified they’ll scare me off.’ I cringe as I say it; I know how it sounds. Millionaire playboy won’t introduce girlfriend to family. I’m aware I’ve moved my life for Edward and I haven’t even met his parents yet. But it isn’t like that; I see the look in his eyes when we talk about them. He has his reasons and the time will come. Besides, I didn’t just move over here for him. I’ve needed a fresh start for a long time now and the success of the book and meeting Edward made that a very real possibility.

Funny, I always thought I’d end up over here. My mother was an American. Sometimes, if I close my eyes, in coffee shops and restaurants I can almost imagine her voice among the crowd, her round open vowel sounds all around me, the warmth of it, like the past.

It’s strange I don’t recall my dad’s voice at all, but I was only eleven when it happened. Twenty-plus years of new experiences have since scribbled over what was once so clear. Though I miss him equally. It’s only natural to forget when remembering hurts so much.

Louisa chuckles. 'I'm not surprised he's wary. They sound terrifying. Well, you know what I mean, fascinating but . . . hive-inducing.' Her tone becomes playful, confidential: 'Although, between you and me, bloody hell, I would definitely be willing to put in some awkward in-law hours if Simon had looked half as good in a suit as Edward does.' Louisa and Simon split up last year. He was pretty useless by all accounts, but her compliment stands.

And she's right, I would be willing to put up with an awful lot to be with Edward.

'Oh, and how's the new book coming?' she asks with a studied nonchalance that almost has me fooled. I'm three weeks past the deadline of my second book.

I shiver in the winter breeze waiting for the crosswalk light to change. The truth is I haven't been able to focus for about a month now. Even the thought of sitting down to finish drains me. The crosswalk *pip-pips* and I join the swarm of commuters flowing across Fifth.

'Harry?' Louisa's voice drags me back to reality. 'The book?'

'Sorry, yes. The book is coming,' I say, which is true. 'I'm almost there,' I say, which is not true at all. 'I just need—'

'—another month?' she interjects. She knows me too well.

'Um. Yes. That would . . . that would be great.'

'Okay. I'll hold the publishers off one more month. Listen, the first book is still flying off the shelves, so we're in a good place. People will wait for the next. But you need to be honest with me about where we are, Harry. You're definitely nearly there?'

The seriousness of her tone hits me hard. 'Yes. Four weeks, probably less. I swear. First draft done.' As I say it, I realize it



will be hard but I can do it. I just need to break my funk.

My eyes catch the time blinking high on the side of an office building. I need to finish this call. Rockefeller Center is right ahead and Edward will be there waiting.

‘Oh, and I forgot to say: the publishers want to have a meeting about the paperback edition this Wednesday afternoon. At their main office. Does that work?’

Ahead, the glittering frontage of Saks comes into view opposite the entrance to the rink and I realize the rain has stopped.

After I agree to the time and hang up, I pop my phone on silent, pull off my winter hat and shake out my hair, checking my reflection in a shop window. Edward and I have already been together a year but I can’t image a time when I won’t still get those date-night nerves.

Tonight will be special, I feel it. I’m being introduced to a family tradition and God knows I could do with some of those. Orphans don’t tend to have many.

As I round the corner of Rockefeller Plaza, my breath catches. The scale of their Christmas decorations bringing me to a stuttering halt.

In front of me is a tunnel of pure light created by the forms of angels heralding, golden trumpets raised. It’s all colour, light and warmth. And beyond them, the famous tree rises up into the New York skyline. I’d read in the paper this morning that it’s over eighty feet tall, but standing beneath it now, that number finally sinks in. It’s the largest Christmas tree I’ve ever seen. I stand slack-jawed as I stare up. Around me a few other kindred spirits look up, transfixed, as the rest of New York jostles past us. Eighteen thousand lights twinkle

golden into the night air, thick with the scent of Nordic pine and the delicious aroma of Christmas treats wafting from the vendors dotted about the plaza.

A hand grasps my shoulder and I whip around to a familiar touch. Edward. He's wrapped up warm against the chill in a cashmere scarf and coat, his hair tousled, his eyes smiling.

'You scared the shit out of me,' I lie, too embarrassed to say I would know the feel of him anywhere.

'Sorry,' he chuckles. 'I called your name but I guess you didn't hear.' He nods up to the tree, slipping his arms around my waist as I lean back into him, his warmth against mine. 'It's really something, isn't it?'

Beneath the lights of the tree, on the sunken ice-skating rink, we watch as people glide effortlessly across its pristine surface, bobble hats on, scarves bundled. Among the young, old New York is still present, an elderly gentleman in a full suit and hat, two women of equally advancing years wrapped in thick furs, their hair set hard as rocks.

'I'm a terrible skater,' I warn Edward later as we fasten our skates and hobble out of the enclosure towards the ice.

'Lucky I'm here, then,' he grins, pulling me tight. He backs out onto the ice first and offers me both his hands for stability. I take them, my breath held in concentration as he glides us out into the middle of the rink. It's not that busy, a handful of new skaters slip and weave around us and after a moment my muscles loosen into his rhythm, his movements reassuring and fluid. He was an athlete – I suppose he still is.

Christmas music blares merrily over the ice rink's tannoy and as a new song begins, Edward loosens one of his hands from mine. 'May I have this dance,' he intones, grinning as

he slowly spins me. I realize the song they're playing is 'Fairytale of New York' by The Pogues – its craggy lilt kicking in as we slip and slide across the ice, grinning like idiots. One verse in and everyone on the ice is gliding in time with the jaunty tune as above us one of the more vocal market vendors starts to sing along with the lyrics, his accent an appropriate lilting Irish brogue. Other skaters instinctively join in, merrily blasting out the odd phrase, tongue-firmly-in-cheek, but we're all singing. And just for a microsecond, New York is made of magic. And I find myself thinking, *God, I love Americans*. British people just aren't like this; our toes curl at the slightest inkling of real sentiment and yet here *I* am, singing, dancing, on ice. Everyone's caught in the moment as the song crescendos and we belt out the chorus. Edward releases my hand again and I wobble slightly as he swoops down in front of me, one wet knee on the rink. He's got something in his hand and suddenly my stomach tightens with soul-capsizing embarrassment as I realize what it is.

*Oh please, no.*

This is too much. He can't be doing what I think he's doing. I swallow hard. People are looking at us now, smiling at us, clapping for us, and I keep smiling because what the hell else can I do.

God knows I want him to ask, but this, here, is too much, too public. I feel my panic rise as he opens the box and starts to speak and suddenly the world around us fades away. I feel tears come and my voice catch and he's taking off my glove and sliding a ring onto my finger. A small crowd has formed on the walkway above the rink and they're cheering and whooping as the song ends and 'Chapel of Love' blasts out

into the chilly air around us, the lights twinkling in time as I struggle to take everything in.

Edward pulls me close. ‘I love you, Harry,’ he whispers. And for a second nothing else matters, because when I look into his eyes, I know it’s true. This is him trying to give me new memories – strong, bold, undeniable memories. This is him sharing his life, his past, and his future with me. I touch his face, so handsome I often marvel at being allowed to. His lips are warm on mine and the city around us disappears, the sound of cheering muffled by his hands over my ears.

Later in the rink’s Christmas café, I inspect the ring on my cold-numbered finger while he fetches us hot toddies. The stone glimmers in the light, the colour caught between a rich claret and a warm brown. I’ve never seen anything like it. A ruby, I imagine. Large, deep, expensive. The setting, and cut, old. It must be an heirloom yet the fit is perfect.

Edward heads back over, balancing our drinks and two mince pies in his hands.

‘Did you plan that?’ I ask, taking a tentative swig of the sweet, heady drink. ‘The music, the singing?’ It fleetingly occurs to me that, with the means at his disposal, Edward could have rented out the entire rink and peopled it with ensemble actors twice over if he had so desired. It’s a terrifying thought, but thankfully a million miles from anything Edward might actually do.

He splutters a laugh and shakes his head, wiping mince-pie dust from his upper lip. ‘No,’ he chuckles. ‘I mean, I knew I was going to ask you tonight; I had the ring on me, but I wasn’t planning for it to turn into a Broadway number out there. Guess that’s New York for you; everyone’s got something

to say.' He looks suddenly concerned. 'Ah, God. It was too much, wasn't it? Damn it, sometimes I forget you're British.'

He's genuinely mortified.

'No, stop. It was perfect. I mean, I'm not likely to forget it,' I quip. 'And for the record, I'm not British anymore, am I? My US passport is as real as yours.'

'Good. Well then, consider what just happened out there on the ice as your swearing-in ceremony. It's all going to get pretty un-British from here on in. But seriously, if anything gets too much, you have to tell me. No harm no foul. I don't want to scare you off. At least . . . not yet anyway.'

He means his family. They must know he was planning on proposing; I'm guessing he had to ask them for the ring. And now that we're engaged, meeting them must be on the cards. I raise my hand and consider the deep red jewel in the light. 'What stone is this?'

'Garnet. It was my great-grandmother's. Mitzi's.' He studies my reaction. 'You like it, right? No? We can change it. Get something new?'

'No, no,' I blurt. He's so worried about the effect his family will have on me he can't read me at all. 'Edward, *I love it*,' I tell him, taking in its gleaming facets. 'I mean, God, I think I might love it more than I love you,' I joke. 'Seriously, though, I love that it means something. To you, to your family. That it's important. What was she like? Mitzi?'

I would be lying if I said I didn't already know as much as the internet can tell me about Edward's family.

John Livingston Holbeck, Edward's great-great-great grandfather, was one of the original gilded age tycoons who made their fortune in the 1800s during a period of massive

expansion across America. J. L. Holbeck created monopolies and reaped the rewards of a captive market by controlling a large percentage of all shipping, rail and communications at the time. One of the handful of men who built America in a time predating taxation, he amassed a mind-boggling fortune and innumerable holdings and was a contemporary of Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie and the father of the man who built the building we're now sat beneath. Which makes me wonder if this 'skating on the first day of the season' tradition dates a lot further back than I had previously considered.

'What was Mitzi like?'

Edward ponders my question. 'She was beautiful. And talented. She was an artist. She trained as a ballerina. German, but she left between the wars. Then she met my great-grandfather. They had this great love affair, so the story goes – very intense. Famously, theirs was the first marriage for love in the Holbeck family.'

I choose not to open that can of worms. Though I have no experience of wealth, I can understand the instinct to protect it, to fortify what you have. Love is an unknown quantity after all. It's a gamble at the end of the day. I'm more than happy to gamble with the few chips I have, but give me the GDP of a medium-sized country and I might at least consider a pre-nup. I'm sure the Holbecks have learnt the hard way to question that first flush of passion.

'And your family's okay with this? With me? They let you have Mitzi's ring?'

I wonder what they'll make of me now that I know for certain that they're aware of my existence. What Edward has or hasn't told them about me. Perhaps they've looked into

me themselves? I shudder at the thought, then quickly reassure myself that while they might be able to research me, they can never know my thoughts, my memories. I am just a British novelist with no real credentials – except one bestseller to her name – with no real history, no Ivy League anything, no Oxbridge. I can't imagine I'm what they had in mind for their firstborn son. I don't even have a family, let alone a notable one.

Maybe they just want Edward to be happy. Edward has promised me time and time again that not meeting them has nothing to do with me. He's had problems with them in the past; they like to exert control, and he tries to keep his life at a distance from the madness of theirs. Things tend to get dragged into their orbit. Which makes the sudden appearance of this family ring now on my finger all the more interesting.

'Yes, they know about you,' he chuckles. 'A worrying amount actually. Mother was over the moon when I asked for the ring. Insisted I use it actually.'

'Really?' I ask, trying to mediate the surprise in my voice. It's not that I have a self-esteem issue, but it's slightly puzzling that a woman like Eleanor Holbeck would be insisting her firstborn child jump at the chance to marry an orphan from England.

'Really,' he echoes, and takes my cold hand in his across the table. 'Listen, I know it's weird you've never met them. But I wanted to be sure we were in a good place before . . .' He pauses, trying to find the words. ' . . . I let them loose on you. They are a lot to handle. But if you want to meet them, they *really* want to meet you. Especially now.' He thumbs the ring on my finger gently. 'We haven't had anyone like you in our

family before,' he says lightly, and the words imprint themselves in my mind. What does that mean? *Someone like me.* 'And God knows we could do with fresh blood.'

I feel my throat tighten at the thought of the type of person I actually am. But they can't know that. They cannot know what happened to me on the edge of that road twenty years ago; I was alone.

I shudder and Edward lifts my hands to his lips to blow warmth back into them. 'If you're worried about what they think about us, don't be. My great-grandfather had all the money in the world and he married a woman without a penny. Granted he was the only one to ever do it – but, point is, there's precedent.' He laughs at my reaction. 'I know, I know, you're hardly on the breadline! Plenty of pennies in bestselling author Harry Reed's coffers. But you know what I mean,' he adds seriously. And I do, because whatever I have is only ever going to be a drop in the Holbeck ocean.

'Why did your great-grandfather choose a garnet? For Mitzi's ring?' I ask.

'She loved pomegranates.'

I look down at the ring and smile. It looks just like the top of a ripe pomegranate seed.

'He knew he could make her happy and that she would do anything for him. They just fit. Two peas in a pod. And together no one could stop them,' Edward says, studying my expression.

I take him in, this fiancé of mine, in all his glory. Tall, athletic, in cashmere and tailored Italian wool, and I can't hold back the grin. God knows how I found him. God knows how it got this far, this serious.



‘When am I going to meet them?’ I ask.

A smirk forms. ‘Apparently, my sister has been chosen to *ease* the transition. The powers that be have deemed her the most accessible family member to make an introduction,’ he says jokingly. ‘After me, obviously.’

I can imagine Edward is the most normal – if that’s the right word – of the Holbecks. He’s clearly spent his life trying to be. He actively moved away from the family business, handing his control of that side of things over to his brothers. After graduating from MIT, he became a *self-made* man – as much as a Holbeck descendent can ever be, that is. He established his own tech start-up and grew the company into what it is today. Although I’m sure the glamour of his surname can’t have hurt his success, alongside his intelligence and easy, affable charm.

‘So, I’m going to meet your sister first. Matilda?’ He nods before I continue. ‘And she has my phone number?’

‘Oh yes. That she does.’ Edward grins. ‘She’s got your number, email address, *actual* address, dress size, blood type, donor consent status . . . kidding.’

I narrow my eyes. ‘I thought you said I shouldn’t be scared of her?’

‘Oh, no. You should *definitely* be scared of her. She’s absolutely terrifying; they all are. You’d be mad not to be petrified. But I think you want this, don’t you? To be included, part of the family?’ He finds the answer in my eyes. ‘Just don’t change your mind about me after all this, that’s all I ask,’ he says, then kisses the ring on my finger lightly with a smile.