

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'a' and 'b' in a white, elegant, cursive script. The letters are intertwined, with the 'a' and 'b' sharing a common baseline. A thin white horizontal line is positioned directly beneath the 'b'. The entire logo is centered within a solid black square.

*The Patron Saint
of Lost Souls*

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Chapter One

Three phone calls would change Jude's life. But that would come later. Now, Jude stands in her favourite spot, gazing out at snowflakes drifting down to sprinkle the street below. As she watches the early Christmas shoppers scuttling from shop to shop, their hats and hair brushed with a dusting of white, a twist of longing wraps slowly around Jude's heart and squeezes tight.

Jude's life is full of people. She sees dozens in the shop every day and she's lost count of just how many she's helped. But, of all the hundreds of souls she has saved over the years, none have ever stuck around long enough to befriend, let alone love her. And sometimes Jude is so overcome with a sweep of loneliness that she must sit down and tell herself to breathe.

Now she touches her finger to the cool windowpane, feeling a snatch of pleasure at the chill on her skin, an odd little reminder

that she's still alive. It's odd perhaps, but true, that because she has no witnesses to her life – no husband, no lover, no close friends – Jude often needs reminding that she's alive, that she isn't a ghost accidentally trapped along with all the other spirits in the labyrinthine antique shop.

Jude traces the tip of her finger across the misty glass, first sketching the shape of a small heart then letters: H E L P. Jude's eyes widen with surprise. She hadn't expected to write that; she hadn't realised she felt that way, at least not so strongly. Quickly, in case anyone glances up from the street and sees her scribbling, Jude starts smudging the letters then, in a flash of inspiration, alters and adds to them so, instead of a dire proclamation, it's now an advanced seasonal greeting: H A P P Y H O L I D A Y S!

Jude lets out a short sigh of relief, which serves to mist up the window again. Then, reluctantly, she turns to leave the quiet tranquillity of her upstairs room. At the doorway, she presses a hand to the wall, open palm splayed on the red brick, steadying herself to leave the tranquillity of her office before going downstairs to open the shop and greet the throng of holiday shoppers.

Jude isn't a fan of holiday shoppers. Especially not those who start their Christmas shopping in November. Those are the worst. She doesn't despise them on principle – she doesn't mind them at all when they confine themselves to other shops – she simply doesn't like them when they come to Gatsby's. It isn't because of their giddy cheer, or their bustling, frantic desire to purchase something – anything – now, or their often dangerously overeager, grasping fingers among her delicate antiques. No, Jude hates holiday shoppers because they have no business being inside her special shop in the first place.

Over the past decade, Jude has observed that Christmas time, and the months preceding, sends ordinary people into a frenzy of consumerism that overrides all their subtler instincts. So they don't realise that Gatsby's isn't an ordinary shop, that its wares aren't supposed to be bought on hurried impulses for assorted family and friends. Christmas shoppers simply see the glittering front bay window and all the beauty displayed within – art deco lamps, ornate Victorian writing desks, polished silver photo frames, elaborately carved onyx and ivory chess sets, glass and gold scent spritzers, delicate Edwardian wooden chairs, plump embroidered footstools – and they pounce. During the rest of the year, they simply wander past the glittering window without being drawn inside – unless a rogue, last-minute birthday is suddenly snapping at their heels.

In the non-winter months, Jude doesn't have to endure the heartache of selling special pieces to people to whom, strictly speaking, they don't belong. For it gives Jude considerable pain to see shoppers snatch up her antiques, claiming that they're 'just darling' or that 'Cristobel/Lucinda/Sally will simply adore it!', then plonking said piece onto the counter and chattering on as Jude sorrowfully wraps it, mumbling apologies under her breath. It gives her great joy, however, to see a purposeful shopper – one who knows they're looking for *something*, even though they don't know exactly what it is – shuffle or stride into Gatsby's, losing themselves among the clusters of crowded gems spread across the two floors before finally alighting on *it*.

For Jude isn't in the business of selling antiques as collectables, as pretty things that will adorn living rooms or desks or the like, objects that will extract exclamations of approval from various visitors. No, Jude doesn't provide the gift-seeking public of

Cambridge with trinkets; she bestows them – if they come looking for it – with a talisman.

The special shoppers who step inside Gatsby's want something much more than a trinket, they want something far more precious; a boyfriend, a baby, a promotion, a new home, the healing of a health problem. And, among the thousands of extraordinary objects crammed between the tall, narrow walls, they will find the one they need. The one they will hold, the one they will gaze at, the one they will rub like a magic lamp while the whispers of their desires echo in their hearts. And Jude knows, though they rarely come back and tell her – after getting their heart's desire they can't believe it was anything else but fate or just plain good luck that brought it to them, certainly it wasn't magic – that each person gets what they want, so long as the desire was pure and true.

It's strange, Jude sometimes thinks, that as the custodian of so much power and good fortune, she isn't the recipient of any of it. No talisman has found its way into her hands, nothing to help when her mother got sick, nothing to assist in alleviating her father's alcoholism, nothing to aid Jude in finding love or having a family. *Nothing*. Which, Jude thinks, whenever she's lying awake and alone at three o'clock in the morning, is both very strange and very sad.

Chapter Two

Viola has always been a perfectionist, ever since she was a little girl. No matter what she's doing, from cleaning an oven to taking the Cambridge University entrance exam, she does it with great precision and absolute dedication. Viola's earliest memory is of making chocolate Christmas cake with her father. It was his own special recipe, a closely guarded secret that died with him and something Viola has been trying, and failing, to recreate ever since.

She attempts it every Christmas Eve. A week in advance, Viola steeps the dried fruits in a brandy and amaretto mix. The day before, she finely chops the dark chocolate and prepares the spices: cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg. Then she simmers up a pan of mulled wine and, when the air in her kitchen is thoroughly soaked in the scent of Christmas, Viola pours

herself a large glass. She sits for a long time then, eyes closed, remembering her father and each of the dishes he taught Viola to cook before he died.

Jack Styring wasn't a chef but a barrister, working fifteen hours a day, six days a week, only taking Sundays off to be with his family: Viola and her mother, Daisy. Since Daisy was always less interested in making food than eating it, the creation of Sunday lunch meant, for Viola, two glorious hours of unadulterated daddy-time. Together they prepared pork belly, the most succulent part of the pig, sometimes stuffing it with nuts, sometimes with herbs. They dusted the potatoes in flour, letting them soak and roast in the fat. Viola learnt how to chop an onion without it making her eyes water, she perfected the chopping of green beans and broccoli, learnt how to sauté and steam. Most of all, Viola learnt how to love food with an undiluted, unsurpassed passion.

It was her father who taught Viola to be a perfectionist. For him, nothing was worth doing unless it was done with absolute excellence. At first, little Viola found this difficult, since she didn't know how to cook at all, let alone with any sort of skill. So, in the beginning she simply watched, eyes fixed on her father's fingers as they flashed across a chopping board or dove in and out of herb and spice pots, picking out the perfect blend to season whatever lay in the ceramic dish. Viola listened while he explained which flavours supported and which sabotaged each other. She smelt the delicacies he held under her nose until she could identify every ingredient with her eyes closed. She tasted all their creations with great care, savouring every bite. Until, one day, Viola had the ability to name each single, separate element in every dish they made.

‘Whatever you do, ordinary or extraordinary, significant or insignificant, should always be done with passion and to perfection,’ her father would say, as he darted about the kitchen, boiling water and heating pans. ‘It’s all an expression of who you are. Live with passion and you deserve every breath of life you get, live without it and you may as well go straight to your grave! Am I right?’

Viola would nod earnestly, even though she didn’t understand what her father was saying, not until later. Still, she adored him and was completely certain that whatever he said was quite flawless and absolutely true.

‘Parsnips! Where the hell are the baby parsnips? I needed them, in greens, fried in garlic butter, five bloody minutes ago – Viola!’

‘Yes, Chef!’ Viola snatched up a pan, cursing herself for getting behind. As she slides the butter into the pan and chops the greens she thinks about the topic she’s been thinking about every second, minute, hour of the day for the past month. The competition.

A month ago, Viola’s boss, the owner of the *La Feuille de Laurier*, had thrown down the culinary gauntlet to his chefs: a cooking competition on Christmas Eve, the winner of which, he said, would be awarded the much coveted title of head chef. Viola has wanted to head up the kitchen of the prestigious restaurant ever since getting a job as a kitchen porter when she was twenty-one. Having never intended to enter the hospitality industry in the first place, having been set to study English Literature at Cambridge University, Viola found herself in the lowly position of washing dishes and scrubbing floors after a devastating event that left her unable to do anything more mentally or physically challenging than that. However, once

she'd set foot in the kitchen, Viola had vowed that she would strive until she'd achieved the highest position possible and then, after a few years working at the top of her game, she'd open her own restaurant and name it after her father. She's been waiting nearly fifteen years and here, at last, is her chance.

Chapter Three

‘Hurry up or we’ll be late!’ Mathieu taps his foot on the doorstep, checking his watch for what feels like the thousandth time. The school run is a military operation, one for which he’s ill-equipped and always failing. ‘*Allons-y!*’ It doesn’t help that Hugo, the eleven-year-old soldier under his charge, couldn’t care less whether or not they make it to school on time or, indeed, at all. Hugo drifts dreamily from breakfast – singed toast dripping in jam – to languidly pulling on his school uniform to brushing his teeth, while Mathieu barks orders every few minutes to draw Hugo’s attention away from his comic books and back to the matter at hand. Mathieu usually ends up assisting in the feeding, clothing and brushing, simply because it’s easier that way and means that he’s less likely to scream at his son as if he really is an army general.

'Allons-y – Hugo! We'll be late! Dépêche-toi!'

Why Mathieu even bothers wielding this as a threat, he has no idea. A more effective motivational call would be the one issuing a ban on all reading for twenty-four hours unless they're out of the door in three seconds flat. But even that would be no use. Mathieu's a softie and Hugo knows it. Anytime he issues any sort of ultimatum he quickly recants once Hugo starts fussing, and bans rarely last more than a few minutes. Mathieu knows he should be stricter but he simply doesn't have it in him. Not any more.

'Hugo! Now!' Mathieu shouts into the flat, before marching inside to retrieve his errant son. He finds Hugo sitting on at the kitchen table, jumper only half-on, one shoe dangling off his toe, toast crumbs scattered like confetti, with his nose scanning the exploits of *The Amazing Spiderman*.

'Oh, Hugo.' Mathieu sighs, bending down to sort out the forgotten shoe, before pulling his son's arm through the forgotten sleeve. 'What am I going to do with you?'

Either sensing the rhetorical nature of the question, or simply ignoring it altogether, Hugo doesn't respond, though he allows his father to gently manhandle him.

'Have you brushed your teeth?'

Silence.

'Hugo!'

Hugo glances up, blinking.

'Have you brushed your teeth?'

Hugo shakes his head.

'Of course not.' Mathieu sighs. 'Unless I do it for you, it doesn't get done.' He looks to his watch again. '*D'accord*, well we don't have time now.' He pulls Hugo up to stand, tugging him towards

the door. ‘These ones will all fall out anyway, so I don’t suppose it matters too much.’

Fortunately, the school is only a ten-minute walk, or seven-minute hustle, from their flat and they usually make it, Mathieu half-carrying, half-dragging Hugo through the school gates. He wishes that, just once in the past three weeks, he’d managed to be early, so he wouldn’t have to brace himself for the sidelong glances of the other parents at the school gates, their innocuous comments barely concealing judgements of parental inadequacy. He wishes that, just once, he could be early, to stand with those superior models of parenthood, the early birds, while casting a few sidelong glances himself, seemingly sympathetic nods to the stragglers. If only.

‘Don’t you want to make a good impression?’ he asks, as they hurry along Trinity Street. Unsurprisingly, Hugo doesn’t respond. No doubt he’s fighting Octoman, defending the citizens of Gotham – or is that Batman? Mathieu can boast a prodigious knowledge of fictional worlds, though he does tend to confuse them, eliciting much eye rolling from his son. ‘Other kids probably won’t want to be friends with someone who’s always late.’

He’s grabbing at low parental straws now, he knows, but sometimes he’ll be reduced to saying anything just to get a response from Hugo. No doubt his fellow pre-teens care as much for punctuality as does Hugo himself but, short of bribery, Mathieu has little else to resort to. Not that he’s above bribery, but it’s an expense he can’t quite afford now; not with Cambridge rents and a lecturer’s salary. Since, sadly, the kudos of a position in the Faculty of Modern History at Cambridge University isn’t matched by the monetary reparation, Mathieu is earning a third of what he earnt

at the Sorbonne but, at least for now, it doesn't matter. He had to leave Paris and to leave for Cambridge didn't seem like such a terrible move.

He bends down to kiss Hugo goodbye at the gates. He's noticed that none of the other parents seem to do this too but he doesn't care. They can add overly sentimental parenting to their list of judgements against him. They'll probably just put it down to the fact that he's French.

'I'll see you at three-thirty,' he says. 'Be good, OK. Listen to your teachers, pay attention in—'

'Bring Spiderman with you,' Hugo says, pulling away. 'And the Green Goblin.'

'Yes,' Mathieu says. 'But, remember—'

'Promise?'

'Of course, when have I ever forgotten?'

This elicits one of Hugo's patented eye rolls before he breaks free to scuffle across the playground towards his classroom.

'Hurry up!' Mathieu calls out. 'Be good!' He stays at the gate, waiting until Hugo is through the main doors, hoping his son might turn back and wave. Sadly, Mathieu's expectations in this regard are disappointed, just as they are every day. 'Be safe,' he says under his breath, before turning to go.