

A Concert for Christmas





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For Audrey



Chapter One

Six weeks until Christmas

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!’ Sophie raced across the green to where her friend Kate leant against one of the Christmas market huts that had popped up last week.

‘Sophie, where have you been?’ Kate sounded annoyed, and Sophie didn’t blame her. She was very pregnant and standing around in the November cold probably wasn’t ideal.

‘It wasn’t my fault. I promise!’ Sophie skidded to a halt and dropped her bags. ‘I was picking up the flyers but the guy was locking up when I got there and he had to go and find them out the back and anyway,’ – she sucked in a breath – ‘here they are!’

Sophie pulled a wodge of flyers out of the carrier bag on the floor and showed them to Kate. ‘What do you think?’

Kate examined them for a second and frowned. ‘I don’t know how to tell you this, Sophie. But the date’s wrong.’

‘What?’ Sophie snatched back the flyers and turned them over. Sure enough, printed in large white letters across the bottom of the bright red page was *24th November*. ‘Oh God.’ She slumped against the hut.

‘I got you a gingerbread hot chocolate, though.’ Kate passed her a takeaway coffee cup. ‘You get a bonus gingerbread man clinging on for dear life.’ She picked hers off the side of the cup and made him dance into her mouth.

‘I can’t believe Albert messed it up.’ Sophie put the flyers back away and pulled out another bundle to check if they were the same. They were, of course.

‘This is tasty, at least.’ Kate raised her takeaway cup in a ‘cheers’.

Sophie sipped the warm drink. She had to agree. It was rather delicious; the taste of Christmas was yummy.

‘Come on,’ Kate said. ‘We’ll be late for rehearsal.’

Sophie linked arms with her friend as they walked across the green to the town hall in the glow of a hundred Christmas lights. The plastic pig that lived in the butcher’s window wore a Christmas hat trimmed with white fur and laced with tiny lights, dwarfed only by the bright lanterns that framed the window itself. Further along, the baker had transformed his window into a Christmas village scene, complete with gingerbread men, women and children dressed in all their Christmas finery. The bakery’s window was a particular favourite of Sophie’s: each week the scene would change in the run-up to Christmas, until on Christmas Eve, gingerbread Father Christmas would arrive with presents for all the gingerbread children.

‘This is just what I need after a Tuesday afternoon of geography followed by R.E.’ Kate said, sipping more of her hot chocolate as they walked. ‘Golden time was chaos today. Goodness knows what the dinner ladies put in the pudding!’

‘It’s probably the wind,’ Sophie said, watching the trees

sway across the green. Shoppers, making the most of the longer shopping hours, scurried about, clutching their hats and scarves so that they wouldn't get blown away. 'The children are always crazy when the wind's up. I really needed this.' She snapped an arm off her gingerbread man. 'Who knew organising a simple Christmas concert could be so stressful?'

'It's going to be stressful when you're in the concert, organising the concert and trying to get thirty-one ten-year-olds to the end of Christmas term.'

Sophie groaned. 'I don't know how I get myself into these things.'

She pulled a key out of her pocket, complete with enormous homemade wooden keyring, and opened the door to the town hall, balancing everything else in her spare hand.

The hall was cold and musty, with a tall ceiling and wooden floor. She dropped her stuff at the door and started to put out the old plastic chairs in rows, ready for the choir's arrival.

'Not you,' she said, as Kate began to help. She wagged her finger. 'You sit there.'

Kate frowned but followed her friend's orders, plonking herself down on a seat in the middle of the room. She shuffled from side to side, crossing and uncrossing her legs.

'Comfy?'

'Never, these days,' Kate joked, removing her coat and rubbing her enormous belly. 'So, tell me what happened. You know that's what I really want to talk about.'

Sophie continued to set up the room and avoided Kate's questioning stare.

'I don't even know where to begin,' Sophie said, tucking

some hair behind her ear before picking up the next chair and adding it to the end of a row.

‘Well, why don’t you start at the beginning?’ Kate asked.

‘That’s a very good place to start,’ they both chorused and laughed.

‘I don’t know if I really want to talk about it,’ Sophie said finally, resting for a moment. It was the same old story, and she was tired of telling it.

‘Yes, you do!’ Kate said, popping the final bit of her gingerbread man into her mouth. ‘What was he like? How did it go?’ Crumbs flew everywhere as she spoke.

‘It was awful.’

‘Oh no! Not another one! What happened this time?’

How could Sophie even explain? She had spotted him long before he saw her, and she’d known instantly it would never work. He’d pitched up with a bunch of balloons, for goodness’ sake. After an hour of sitting in a crowded, noisy pub, batting away the offending items, she’d made a feeble excuse, given him a fake number and left.

‘In every possible way,’ Sophie said dramatically. ‘It’s likely I’ll be single for ever and to be honest, I think it’s probably for the best – especially for the men of this town.’ She was only half joking.

‘Not true. You’re a catch.’ Kate waddled over to the bin to dispose of her coffee cup. ‘You’ll bump into someone one day. I mean, a bakery is hardly the most romantic place in the world, but look at me and Gav!’

‘I know,’ Sophie said, remembering Kate’s story of how Gav had swiped the last Christmas fruitcake from under Kate’s nose and she’d made a joke about how she’d have ‘stollen’ it back.

They'd moved in together by the end of the following month. Sophie sighed. If only it could be that easy for her.

'I'm hardly likely to meet anyone at school, though. The only person who ever visits Cranswell Primary is Reverend Williams for assemblies, and I was kind of hoping for someone a little less wrinkly.'

They both laughed.

'You go other places than school.'

Sophie raised an eyebrow.

'OK, good point. Anyway, enough moping,' Kate said, settling back into her chair. 'Chalk it up to experience and move on.'

Kate would never let her dwell on a bad dating experience for too long. Secretly, Sophie enjoyed a little mope when things didn't quite go her way. It was cathartic.

'I was wondering about the charity for the concert.' Sophie changed the subject and was relieved to do so. 'I'd really like to donate the money we raise to Mum's charity this year. What do you think?'

'Sounds like a lovely idea.'

'I'll have to add it to the list of nominations but hopefully people will realise it's important.'

'You're in charge, Sophie. You could just make the decision yourself.'

'No, I need to put it to the vote. I don't want anyone to think I've gone behind their back.'

'You care too much about what other people think.'

Sophie ignored Kate's comment. She knew she overthought things occasionally, but this was important to her. And she wanted to do it right.

‘Nigel will have to wheel the piano out of the cupboard when he gets here. It’s too heavy for me.’ She flopped down in the chair and took her coat off, warm from lugging around the furniture. She rested her head on Kate’s shoulder.

‘Do you think you’ll audition for the solo?’ Kate asked.

Sophie laughed. ‘Definitely not.’ There was no way she would ever volunteer to sing a solo.

‘Why not? You need a distraction from your horrible dating life,’ Kate said with a cheeky smile.

Sophie sat up and protested, but fell silent at the sound of the outside door banging open and the other choir members arriving.

It was a good job she’d pulled out her thick Fair Isle jumper. Sophie had been warm setting out the room, but by the time everyone else had arrived, the temperature in the draughty old church hall had dropped. She rubbed her gloved hands together and let out two deep breaths to test whether she could see them in the air. Her coat went back on.

‘Right, let’s get started.’ Sophie stood and used her teacher’s voice to get the attention of the group. They were mostly seated, and the stragglers shuffled through the rows to sit down once she’d spoken. Sophie looked out at the choir. It was made up of every type of person imaginable – including an eclectic range of singing abilities . . . but she loved this amazing bunch of people. They’d saved her when she’d first arrived in Cranswell a year ago.

‘Lovely to see you all.’ She smiled nervously. It didn’t matter that she did this all day, every day with the children in her class; addressing an audience always got her heart racing. ‘Today we’re going to start working towards the songs for the

Christmas concert, just a general rehearsal this evening. Solo auditions will be next week. I believe Nigel has the list, so speak to him before the end of the evening to sign up.' There was a general mumble of interest. 'Also, we need to vote for the charity we'll be supporting this year. I know we had a couple of nominations last week.' She looked down at her notes. 'The Blue Cross centre over in Sheephams and Children in Need, which happened last Friday. I'd also like to throw my mother's charity into the mix. They support mothers who have suffered a miscarriage. Shall we vote?' she said, an ever-so-slight catch in her throat.

Recovering, Sophie listed the charities again, and the group raised their hands. Sophie's mother's charity was the runaway winner and Sophie made a note of it, as if she'd ever forget. She breathed out and smiled.

'OK. We'll wait for Nigel to finish setting up and wheel the piano out and we'll make a start. Last wees and teas before we start, folks.' It sounded flippant, but for some of the town's residents, they wouldn't be able to begin without a final opportunity to visit the bathroom.

'Sure I can't convince you to audition?' Kate asked, as Sophie sat down again.

'Ha! No.'

'Ooh!' Lulu responded in her thick American accent. She sat in front of them every week and turned around now that there appeared to be something interesting going on. Sophie liked that Lulu's hair, habitually fashioned into a 60s beehive, ordinarily hid her out of view of the musical director.

'Are you thinking of auditioning, Sophie, honey?' she asked.

Lulu was probably a hundred years old. Her face was

laced with the ghost of plastic surgery past, and she oozed a Hollywood glamour that you didn't see in the sleepy Cotswold town of Cranswell. As always, her face was made up perfectly, with a bright red slick of lipstick not quite disguising her thin wrinkled lips. Her eyes were bright and sparkling, blue and full of life. She often talked about her vibrant youth as an MGM musical star and Sophie had whiled away many an afternoon since her move here just listening to Lulu's stories.

Sophie shook her head. 'No. It's just something that Kate' – she said her name through gritted teeth and shot her a sideways glance – 'is determined to make me do. She won't shut up about it!'

'Well, you should. I know you've got a lovely voice.'

'Well, thank you, Lulu.' Her inner songstress locked away the compliment. It meant a lot coming from Lulu van Morris.

'Are you really thinking of auditioning?' Greg asked, turning around to face them. He slid his glasses up his thin nose. He was Lulu's equally old, equally nosy comrade. But he was not, however, nearly as glamorous. He was wearing a faded navy and slightly holey cardigan, the sleeves baggy from where he'd pushed them up regularly throughout his day in the coffee shop.

'God, no!' Sophie cried, a little louder than she'd expected. A couple more singers from the row in front turned to listen.

'You should, you know,' John said.

'Lovely voice,' said Ethel.

Kate smiled, sat silently and watched on as the sopranos on the front row ambushed Sophie. Sophie pulled a face that told Kate she'd regret it later on. Kate shrugged and shot her a smug smile.

‘I think I’ll be a bit too busy organising the concert itself. I can’t be centre stage *and* make sure that everything runs smoothly, now, can I?’ Sophie said, hoping everyone would find something different to talk about – and soon.

Lulu and Greg genuinely seemed to consider her question.

‘No, I suppose not,’ Lulu said, her long red fingernails clutching her fur (faux, hoped Sophie) and pulling it up around her. ‘It’s a damned shame, though.’

Lulu offered round a paper bag of Werther’s Originals. It was hard to imagine Lulu in her youth when she went and did ‘old people’ things like that now and then. Sophie was relieved to see that everyone’s attention had moved elsewhere.

‘I hate you, Kate,’ Sophie said.

‘You love me really.’

Sophie rolled her eyes.

The piano sailed into the hall, unaccompanied, and didn’t stop when it arrived in its usual position. A gasp went around the room, and one soprano yelped. Nigel ran in after it and dived into its path, holding his arms out to stop it from crashing into the front row.

‘Sorry about that, ladies and gents.’

Hang on a minute. That wasn’t Nigel’s voice.

The man who had saved the lives of the front row singers smiled at the room, flushed from his altercation with the piano.

‘Whoops.’ He reached over and stopped his music stand (another casualty of the runaway piano) toppling over and taking out the altos sitting on the front row – all two of them.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ he said, holding a hand up.

This man was not Nigel, their musical director of goodness knows how many years. This man, possibly in his early forties,

stood the music stand back up and brushed a hand through his dark curls. He was shorter than Nigel, now that he was standing, but broadly built like a rugby player. He rolled up the sleeves of his tan turtleneck and rested his music on the stand, which he'd retrieved from the front row with a handsome smile. In that split second, Sophie glanced at his eyes: the most beautiful hazel eyes she had ever seen. In fact, they reminded her of . . . surely not. Oh God. It couldn't be, could it? It wasn't the first time she'd seen those beautiful eyes.

In one smooth movement, Sophie lifted the music up to cover her face as she simultaneously slid lower in her seat. She played with her hair as an extra barrier against being noticed.

'Where the hell is Nigel?' Sophie whispered through gritted teeth.

'Not sure.' Kate shrugged. 'Sophie, are you OK? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'I have. The ghost of dates past.' She pointed a finger towards their apparently new musical director.

Kate looked at him, then back at Sophie, who adjusted her music again to hide her face from the MD's view. Kate, for once, appeared to be speechless, but was clearly enjoying the moment, judging by her smile.

'Right. Let's make a start,' said the man. The choir shuffled and quietened until there was silence. He had an instant command of the room.

Sophie felt a pang of envy at his cool exterior.

'Good evening, everyone. My name is Liam. Nigel asked me to step in tonight – he's had to rush up north to stay with his elderly mother. I think I'll be with you until the concert itself, which is exciting. I'm sure we all wish Mrs Calder well, though.'

Sophie watched, open-mouthed, as the choir seemed to collectively welcome Liam into the fold without question, nodding that they too wished Nigel's elderly mother all the best.

There was too much to process. What was Nigel playing at? And why had he left this Liam to tell everyone his whereabouts? Sophie grimaced at the thought of everyone else wondering why she hadn't known this was happening. How was she supposed to organise a charity concert if nobody communicated anything to her? She pulled her phone out to see if she'd missed a call or a text from Nigel. But there was nothing – the background of Sophie and Kate with wine glasses the size of their heads usually made her smile, but instead she winced. Not to mention the fact that only a week ago, she'd been sitting across the table from Liam with a bunch of helium balloons bobbing between them. She felt a fresh wave of embarrassment warm her face.

Liam continued. 'Nigel said that you've had the music for a couple of weeks, but tonight's the night he planned to start rehearsing properly for the concert. So, shall we begin by singing them through? Take your parts if you can, but otherwise the melody is fine to get us warmed up. Shall we stand?'

As Liam raised his arms with the baton in his hand, the choir stood as a group. Sophie joined them, standing a little slower, glancing around to see that no one was questioning Liam's appearance. And that Liam hadn't spotted her. She sighed heavily. She supposed they'd have to talk eventually – they were in effect organising a concert together at this point – but a few more moments of preparation wouldn't go amiss.

The choir's first sing-through was a discordant mess. Sophie sang along, but inside she was panicking. Did Liam even know what he was doing? It was more like a carol shout than a concert of beautifully sung hymns and Christmas songs. She'd said no to organising the last concert for fear of things not going as planned, and she didn't want anything to go wrong on her watch. Liam hadn't bothered teaching them any of the parts or the harmonies. He'd not even gone through the notes in the melody. He'd simply assumed that everyone in the room would know each of the song choices. She had to admit, they were fairly well-known hymns and carols, but even so, she was concerned at Liam's apparent lack of musical understanding.

Relieved when it was break time, Sophie hurried up to collect two teas in polystyrene cups for her and Kate, ducking and diving through the crowd to avoid Liam. Greg provided the breaktime beverages, utilising his skills and retired equipment from the coffee shop.

'There you go, Sophie, love. Just as you like it.' He passed the two cups through the hatch from the kitchen, a slight tremble in his hand causing one cup to spill a little. 'Don't you worry about that,' he said, reaching for a cloth and wiping the surface.

'Thanks, Greg.' Sophie turned and stopped abruptly when she found her face buried in the muscular torso of the new musical director.

'Woah!' Liam said, stepping back. His hands came up in defence. 'Careful. Are you OK?'

Sophie cleared her throat. 'Sorry.'

'Sophie, isn't it?'

‘Yes, that’s me,’ she said eventually, taking a couple of steps towards Kate and the comfort of their seats. ‘And you’re Liam.’

‘I’m Liam,’ he repeated with a nervous smile.

Ah, so he remembered their horrible date too. He was just choosing to ignore it. Sophie would obviously follow his lead.

‘Sorry I barged you. I’m just taking this over to my friend.’ She indicated Kate, who, at their glances in her direction, gave a little wave.

‘Nigel told me you’re running the show,’ Liam said before she could run away. He ran his hand through those curls again.

‘He didn’t tell me you were.’ It sounded unkind, but she’d been surprised by his arrival.

‘He told me to apologise. It was all a bit sudden, really.’

‘Is everything OK?’ She felt bad now. It was genuinely odd that Nigel would disappear like that. He’d been musical director for the choir for years now, certainly longer than Sophie had been living in the town.

‘His mum took ill overnight and his dad told him he needed to get up there quickly. I don’t think it’s looking very good.’ He swayed on his heels, hands in his pockets like he couldn’t keep still. Was this conversation as awkward for him as it was for her?

Sophie tried to focus on what he was saying and not relive their awful date, or concentrate on his endearing, lopsided smile. With nothing else to say, she took a sip of her tea. It scalded her instantly. She felt compelled to fill the silence.

‘Well, Nigel’s right. I am organising the concert this year, so if you need me to talk over anything or go through the songs or whatever, just let me know, I guess.’

Why couldn't she form sentences?

'I think I'll be OK,' he said. He flashed that smile again and stepped over to the hatch where Greg was waiting to pass him a tea.

Across the hall, Kate was miming for Sophie to hurry up. She looked back at Liam to see him busy charming Lulu, and sat back down.

'That didn't look like a fun conversation,' Kate said, taking her tea from Sophie and drinking it instantly. 'Well, not for you, anyway. I enjoyed it immensely.'

Sophie stared into her drink, both hands cupped around it for warmth. 'Liam is the guy I went on a date with last week, not that either of us acknowledged it just then.'

Kate pulled a face. 'God,' she said, sipping her tea again.

'I know. Very awkward.'

'He didn't seem too awkward just then,' Kate said.

'No, Kate, awkward for me!' Sophie pushed out her bottom lip like a teenager. She was only half mocking.

Kate laughed. 'Why was it so hideous? You never said.'

Sophie sipped her tea again and looked around like she was about to share MI5 secrets. Happy that she wasn't in earshot of anyone likely to gossip, she turned to Kate.

'So, he turned up to the pub with this enormous bouquet of balloons, which, as you know, I am genuinely terrified of. So, it was a bit of a terrible start. He was late too, which annoyed me.'

'Of course it did.' Kate nodded in agreement, knowing her friend well.

'Anyway, the pub was packed, and I had this stupid great big bouquet of balloons with me. We managed to find a corner table, and I was hopeful that it would be quiet enough for us

to talk – maybe I could forgive the balloons if there was good conversation, you know? But it was a tiny table, and he's . . . well, you can see,' she said, looking over to where Liam now stood, cornered by Lulu. 'He's huge.'

Kate raised an eyebrow.

'Don't be rude,' Sophie said, blushing. 'I mean you can see he's big-built, muscly. So, we sat down at this tiny table on little stools. His knees came up to his ears. We must have looked so ridiculous – him scrunched up so that he could fit into the furniture, and me with a bouquet of red helium balloons.' Shiny metallic ones, of course, Sophie remembered with a shudder. She rubbed a hand over her face as the embarrassment crept back into her consciousness.

Kate's face had frozen into a grimace.

'So, it was awkward then,' she said, stating the obvious.

Sophie nodded. 'It gets worse.'

'Surely it can't get any worse.'

'After the glass of red wine I'd obviously drunk before I got there . . .'

'Obviously,' Kate said, agreeing with the strategy.

'I thought he was quite good looking.' Sophie closed her eyes, cringing.

'Ah, so you liked him.' Kate smiled knowingly.

'At that point, I thought I might like him, yes. For a moment I sort of dared to hope that it might go well and that he'd like me too. But then the conversation got going, or rather it didn't.'

'Oh no.' Kate put her hands over her face in exasperation and peeped out between her fingers like she was watching a horror film.

‘Oh yes.’ Sophie nodded. ‘Between twenty rogue helium balloons, the world’s smallest table and stools, and conversation that a librarian would have tolerated, I’m sorry to admit that, when Mum called, I used it as an excuse to leave – and you know I normally avoid answering the phone to her if I can.’

‘Oh, Sophie, I’m sorry. It sounds like a bit of a nightmare.’

‘It could be worse,’ she said sarcastically. ‘He could have just turned up to MD the Christmas concert that I’m organising! Or I could have palmed him off with a fake number . . .’ Sophie felt her face colour with a fresh blush.

Kate snorted into her tea, and a couple of people looked up from their conversations. ‘So, when he needs to call you about the concert, he’s going to think he has your number, but actually, he has a false one that you gave him at the end of your date?’

‘Oh God!’ Sophie groaned, curling up in her chair and resting her head on her knees. ‘Yes!’

‘It’ll be fine,’ Kate said, patting Sophie on the leg. ‘You just said he’s ignoring the fact your date ever happened. If he’s not making it a thing, then you shouldn’t either.’

‘But I make everything a thing,’ Sophie complained from under her cocoon.

‘Good point.’