

A COUNTRY
VILLAGE
CHRISTMAS
EPILOGUE

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September, nine months later

'Everyone, may I have your attention, please!' A woman with short dark hair addressed the crowd assembled in the courtyard garden and spilling from the annexe of Hugh's old house, and her smile was broad as the silence grew. 'Thank you. I'll keep this brief as I'm sure you'd much rather be listening to Tom and not me. I'm Lucinda, Tom's agent, and it gives me huge pleasure to welcome you all to the launch of *Unhallowed Island*.'

She held up the hardback in her hand. 'Here it is, looking fabulous with that stunning cover. This is Tom's second novel and of course his first in a series of five thrillers featuring the enigmatic detective Niall Costello. We're so excited to kick things off today here in Thorndale, where some of the book was written. But that's enough from me, so would you please welcome our author, the simply brilliant Tom Bellingham!'

Olivia felt a wave of love as Tom gave her fingers a quick squeeze before making his way to the front to enthusiastic applause. He'd come through a difficult time to reach this point, and she was so proud of him and the life they'd made together. Annie and Jon were nearby, and Jon was trying to persuade their squirming baby daughter Hannah to settle on his shoulder instead of giggling at Annie. Most of the village had turned out to celebrate Tom's book launch, and the September weather had obliged with warm sun. Charlie and Sam Stewart were further back, their daughter Esther left at home with Charlie's mum for today, and Sam had her hand on another baby bump.

Lucinda shook Tom's hand and moved aside as he took his place at the front, his grin back in place, the once-famous actor's voice needing

no microphone to be heard. 'Thank you, Lucinda and everyone, that's quite the welcome. Very generous and I appreciate it.' He caught Olivia's eye and she gave him an encouraging nod. Her dad, Hugh, was sitting beside her, and a glance at him was enough to recognise the pride shining on his face as Tom continued.

'There were times when I doubted this book would ever be in print, and I'm very grateful to Lucinda for taking me on. She found the perfect publishing home for the series and brought together a fantastic team to get the book in front of readers. And if you're one of those who've already left a great review, then cheers for that, it means a lot to me. But even if the book had never seen the light of day, then those long, dark nights hunched over a laptop would still have been worth every second for the constant support of the two people who always believed in me and whom I love very much.'

Tom took a mouthful of water, and his eyes went to Hugh as he put the glass down, and Olivia swallowed. She knew Tom had made some notes about what to say for the launch and she hadn't pressed him when he didn't offer to share them with her beforehand. She'd wondered if he'd be nervous about speaking, but there was only confidence and pleasure radiating from the man she adored.

'It's fair to say that the book probably wouldn't even have been written without Hugh Bradshaw's kindness in offering me the use of his house last Christmas when I needed somewhere to go. His friendship means a great deal to me, and I'm delighted he's here to see the book officially launched through the Thorndale Arts Initiative. Thank you, Hugh, for supporting me down the years and never losing faith in me or my writing.'

Tom's gaze left Hugh's to rest on Olivia's and she gave him a quick wink, making him smile again. 'And by insisting I also share his house with someone else whilst neglecting to tell each of us about the other, Hugh's also indirectly, or more probably directly, responsible for my falling in love with his daughter.'

Tom paused as a ripple of laughter echoed through the crowd and Olivia felt Annie's arm nudge into hers. 'If Hugh is the reason I was able to finish the book, then it's because of Olivia, my wife, that I can stand here today and share it with you. She provides endless encouragement, helps me find a way forward when sometimes I'm not sure and makes quite certain that I don't take myself too seriously. Meeting Olivia when I did was definitely a Christmas miracle and I'm so grateful to be sharing our lives together.'

Olivia felt tears rushing into her eyes at Tom's tribute and she blinked them quickly back as Hugh patted her arm. She loved standing at Tom's side as they found ways to support one another through the ups and downs of life. The crowd oohed as they glanced at her, and she blew Tom a kiss, making him grin.

'We have an announcement to make and even though she's not expecting this, I'd like to ask Olivia to share it with you. As Hugh's daughter, I think she's exactly the right person. Olivia?'

What? She shook her head with a smile as Tom held out a hand to encourage her forward. She weaved through the crowd, and he slid an arm around her waist to draw her close and kissed her cheek.

'I knew you were up to something,' she murmured, staring up into his blue eyes, softened in merriment. 'What if I mess it up? I thought you were going to do it.'

'You won't. And if you do, so what? Try again.' Tom dropped the words in her ear and stepped back.

Olivia huffed out a laugh to the sea of faces before her and saw Jon's encouraging thumbs up as Annie took Hannah from him. 'Thanks for that, Tom. It's fair to say he does like to keep on surprising me. For anyone who doesn't know, this was my dad's house until the arts initiative took it over earlier this year.' She took a second to compose herself as memories flooded back in. 'My dad loves books. He loves reading, the ability to escape into another world and learn new things. He loves a book's ability to inform, challenge, entertain and bring happiness to its readers. He loves writers too, and this one in particular.' The crowd laughed as she nudged Tom, and he smiled.

'So, we're delighted to confirm that next year we will be holding the first Thorndale Festival of Books here in the village. The festival will run over five days, and celebrate all things books, readers, booksellers and writers.' Olivia paused to enjoy the satisfaction on Hugh's face. 'And this is the bit we haven't told my dad yet.'

She took a deep breath, trying to hold in the emotion suddenly threatening to steal her voice, and not quite daring to look at her dad. 'To conclude the festival, I'm so excited to announce the Hugh Bradshaw Award for New Writers. Throughout his many years as a bookseller, my dad found much pleasure in supporting debut authors and doing all he could to promote their work. He became lifelong friends with some of them and I'm glad to see a few here today. We missed his shop very much when it closed, and we're thrilled to be supporting a new writer in his name and honouring the work that

meant the world to him through the festival. Thank you.'

Olivia allowed herself another look at Hugh now she had got the words out as Tom returned to her side. Hugh wasn't easily surprised these days and a glance was enough to recognise they had stunned him. He was open mouthed as the people nearest to him shook his hand and offered their congratulations. She hadn't found handing over her childhood home to the arts initiative easy, and she knew they'd made the right decision to honour her dad in this way. The old bookshop in the annexe was gone but the board were planning to hold a pop up now and again, and the little old shop was certain to make a comeback for the festival.

Olivia let go of Tom's hand as people began to approach him. 'I'd better go and pick my dad's jaw off the floor. I asked Annie to get a picture of him so we can send it to Ellie and Logan.' Olivia also saw Lucinda coming over. 'And it looks like you're needed for some official duties.'

'Yes, I think I have to sign some books. Sorry.'

'Please don't apologise. It's your day, you've worked very hard for this, and you should enjoy every moment.' Olivia touched Tom's chest with her palm, feeling for a pocket. 'Got your pen?'

He grinned, reaching into his blazer to produce a silver and navy ballpoint pen. 'Are you kidding? I never leave home without it. I never know when I might need to sign a book.'

'Or an old poster of Harrington or a DVD.' She laughed as Tom pulled a face. 'Champagne at home later, just us? Annie's dropping Dad back as she and Jon are going into town.'

'Perfect, building site notwithstanding.' Tom raised a hand to Lucinda beckoning him to a table laden with books and a growing queue.

'I love our building site because I'm sharing it with you.'

'Yeah? That's not what you said when you found out you were sharing your dad's house with me.'

'But I soon changed my mind.'

'You did, I remember. The moment you discovered I can cook better than you.' Tom's eyes were amused as he started to edge away. 'I've got a lot to thank your dad for. Not least an incredible wife who makes me happy every day.'

'Really? Even when I took a sledgehammer to the wall in the barn and nearly flattened the fireplace in the bedroom?'

'Even then. I don't think there's anything you could do that would

make me love you less.'

'You old romantic. I thought you might be all out of romance after Paris.'

'Less of the old, thanks.' Tom lowered his voice as he watched her. 'Have you forgotten that weekend already?'

'You might need to jog my memory, it's all a bit of a blur.' Olivia pushed him gently, smiling at the pretend outrage on his face. 'Go, before they drag you away. And as we still haven't sorted out the honeymoon yet, why don't we have a look this evening?'

'Cape Verde?' Tom was grinning as he backed up.

'Sounds wonderful. Just not snow, I'd like us to be somewhere hot.' Olivia winked as she accepted a glass of champagne and made her way back to her dad. Hugh was very nearly overwhelmed at the news of the award in his name and wanting to know all the details.

It hadn't been the wedding they'd wanted. She and Tom were making plans for the beachfront ceremony they'd imagined when her dad had fallen dangerously ill with pneumonia after a fall. When there were doubts about his rallying, Olivia's daughter Ellie and partner Logan had come home from their travels, Tom's friend Harry from his acting days had rushed north, and Olivia and Tom had hurriedly arranged a ceremony in the town where Hugh lived.

A blessing was conducted days later by their friend and vicar of Thorndale, Charlie Stewart, at the nursing home where Hugh was slowly recovering, and they'd eventually held a small party at a hotel when Hugh was well enough to attend. Between her dad, Tom's book, the hurried wedding and the house she and Tom had bought, plus moving Ellie and Logan from university, their honeymoon had been all but forgotten.

The months since their wedding had been a blast of busyness as they'd settled Hugh back into his flat with some support and absolutely determined to maintain his independence. Ellie and Logan had very recently moved to Queensland to study for their masters' degrees in marine science and, although Olivia was content they were happy and thriving, she missed Ellie terribly. Even though her daughter had always travelled, often to see her father in the Caribbean, Ellie had always come home. A thirty-six-hour journey was now a huge distance between them, however much time they spent online, and Olivia and Tom got to see Ellie and Logan's surroundings and new apartment from afar.

Olivia was still busy with her career finding properties, and she and Tom were overseeing work on their new house with every spare moment, as he developed plans for the writers' retreats in Hugh's old house, wrote his second book and researched a third, which so far had involved two short trips to Ireland and another to Norway. She had gone to Ireland with him and they'd both loved the old cottage in Kerry where he'd stayed before. He had been welcomed back by the locals as an old friend and accepted the teasing about being a prodigal now returned in good humour.

Once the last of the guests had left the launch party, Olivia and Tom were glad to offer their thanks and make their way home too. It had been an exciting time and he was in demand once again for bookshop visits, festivals and there was the possibility of a Canadian tour in the new year. But for now, they had three precious weeks free to spend together and they'd been looking at locations for their long-overdue honeymoon.

She had tried to persuade her dad to come with them for at least part of it if they didn't stray too far. Hugh had been adamant that he would not, the demands of travel being too much, and he'd insisted they must have the time alone, and privately Olivia was relieved. So, this evening after champagne, she and Tom were supposed to be deciding on a destination and making a booking before time ran away with them once again.

When they reached home, the farmhouse looked even more appealing than it had when they'd first discovered it last December. Back then it was a sad old place, empty, unloved, and waiting for new inhabitants to write a new story for its history. Once Olivia had put her apartment in Manchester on the market and it had sold quickly, Tom had suggested the farmhouse and she'd loved the idea at once.

They'd been excited to see it properly that first time as they'd made plans how best to modernise it and utilise the barn attached to the house. They'd found a brilliant young architect and she'd drawn up plans to extend the house at the back, creating a huge, bright kitchen and family room, where they spent most of their time at home.

The project wasn't quite finished yet, and they enjoyed doing some of the work themselves. The barn was still being renovated and eventually it would be a library for Tom to write in, a snug for Olivia and a guest suite with two bedrooms, one on the ground floor for her dad and another upstairs for Ellie and Logan or friends coming to stay.

The renovations had been a labour of love as they'd discovered

stories of the farm's past in the details that had been left behind. Ancient account books in a drawer in the kitchen, two unframed paintings of haymaking on the land, and an immaculate china tea set, which Olivia loved and now had pride of place in the kitchen. The garden was still a disaster and they'd offered the meadow to a local young farmer just gathering her first flock of sheep.

'I think that was a success.' Tom dropped on a sofa in the family room and closed his eyes as she brought their champagne across. 'Kind of glad it's done, though.'

'It was wonderful, and the book is flying. I'm so pleased for you.' She snuggled next to him, tugging him around until he was lying down, and she began to massage his shoulders gently.

'Thank you. I couldn't have done it without you or your dad.'

'You could. We just helped when you needed it.'

'You really did, Liv.' Tom's voice caught and he gripped one of her hands. 'I don't think you'll ever know how much I value your support.'

'I do, because it's the same for me. I have a much better life because you're in it.'

'I'm glad you think so, because I love you.' He let her hand go and she returned it to his shoulder.

'I love you too. You're amazing.'

'I think that's you, especially when you're doing this, it feels wonderful. Please don't stop.'

'I won't, just enjoy it.'

'I already am. Give me one second.' Tom sat up and Olivia was laughing as he unbuttoned his shirt and quickly pulled it off. 'You always say it's easier to massage without a top in the way.'

'I do.' She felt a kick in her pulse as he leaned against her, let her hands drift beyond his shoulders. 'But that's when I'm giving you a proper shoulder massage and now you're distracting me.'

'Good.' His voice was low, and she heard the smile in it. 'Glad I still can.'

'And you always will.' She murmured the words against his ear, let her lips explore the skin on his neck where she knew he was most sensitive, smiling as his hands found hers to slide them lower.

'Where's your passport?'

'What?' Olivia was still thinking about Tom and how her plans to give him a soothing massage after a busy day had already disintegrated. 'Upstairs, in my business bag. Why?'

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'Because you'll need it tomorrow, that's why.'

'Seriously?' Her hands fell away, and he sat up to face her with a triumphant grin. 'Where are we going? I thought we were having a look tonight!'

He leant forward to kiss her, placed a hand on her cheek. 'Do you trust me?'

'Of course I do! But where are we going?'

'I'll tell you later.' His lips followed his hand to kiss the corner of her mouth.

Olivia closed her eyes, barely listening now as he kissed the opposite corner, and her protest was weak. 'Tom, I need to pack if you've arranged something.'

'Won't take long.' He was reaching for the zip on her dress, and she was already lost. 'But this might.'

'Upstairs?'

'Nah.' He slid the dress from her shoulders, letting his eyes follow his progress. 'This sofa's much more comfortable than that old velvet thing. I'm glad you saved it, though.'

'I love that old velvet thing. It holds a lot of happy memories.'

'It does. And I love making new ones on this sofa.'

Six days later Olivia leapt out of their hire car and slammed the door. She was getting used to the heat now and she loved the sun pouring down to warm her through the breeze rippling the air. It was a balmy twenty-six degrees and Tom was beside her moments later. He'd insisted on driving this time so she could appreciate their surroundings during the journey from the mainland and she was almost dazzled by the light, certain she'd never experienced such a view in her life. Tantalising glimpses of sparkling water glittered between tropical palms and plants, and half of the house before them was made of glass and offered a panorama from every angle. They had ten glorious days all to themselves here, perched on a hidden headland above the ocean on Magnetic Island off the coast of Queensland in Australia.

'Well?'

'Tom, I don't know what to say!' Olivia darted across to hug him and they were laughing as he spun her around. 'It's incredible, how did you find it?'

'Online, with some local advice from Ellie, she said we'd love the island.' He put Olivia down and they were hurrying to the door to find

the keys. 'We can do as much or as little as we please. Swimming, snorkelling, riding, walking, relaxing, you name it, it's here.'

'And you,' she murmured, sliding an arm around his neck. 'You're here.'

'I am, and entirely yours, for the next ten days at least.'

'This honeymoon just gets better and better.'

When Tom had finally revealed the plans he'd been making back in Thorndale, with a little help from Ellie and Logan, Olivia had been almost speechless with joy. She and Tom would have some precious time alone, occasional emails about his new book notwithstanding, and they'd already spent three days in town with Ellie and Logan. The young couple were settling brilliantly into their new university and throwing themselves into everything on offer as usual. It was still a very long way from Thorndale, but Olivia already felt much happier now she had seen Ellie and Logan in person, and they were planning to fly to Kimberley to meet Logan's family before they left Australia.

'What are you doing?' Olivia was laughing as the front door flew open and Tom scooped her into his arms.

'Carrying you over the threshold, obviously. Aren't I meant to?'

'You already did that when we moved into the farmhouse.'

'So? I thought I could do it again. Stop complaining.'

'I'm really not.' She was wriggling and he set her down. 'But I can't wait to explore! Wow!'

The house had looked small from the front, a series of clean lines clad in timber and held together by white metal beams, adding to the modern architectural vibe. Inside it was much larger, every wall white, with windows providing a glimpse of the blue ocean, rocky headland and outline of the mainland across the water. Olivia saw a modern kitchen, comfortable sofas, felt the cool tiles beneath her feet now she'd shrugged out of her shoes. They opened bi-fold doors and emerged on a deck that ran the width of the house, laughing again, blinking at the view as the heat of the day rushed to greet them.

Trees and taller plants offered some shade from the sun and seats had been placed between the rocks, rammed into the headland to catch the best of the light. The water glimmered differing shades of blue and the mainland rose from the horizon, making Olivia feel as though she, Tom and this house were hidden from the world and its realities. Steps hewn into the rocks led to the water's edge and she spotted two recliners on the path halfway down. She heard the ripple of waves gently hitting the rocks, spotted a yacht in the distance and felt a

complete and utter sense of happiness as she caught Tom watching her with eyes full of love.

'It looked exceptional online, but this is just incredible.' He reached for her hand and raised his other arm. 'See down there, on the left between those boulders? That's our jacuzzi, with the pool next to it.'

'Wow. I don't know what else to say. It's completely stunning, Tom, thank you.' She leant into him, and he wrapped both arms around her. 'I can't believe we've got all this time here. How will we manage a Thorndale winter after this?'

'Because it's home,' he said simply. 'And we can come back, spend time with Ellie and Logan again next year.'

'I'd love that.' Olivia was wistful, and she turned to face Tom. 'I've got something to tell you. I've been expecting an email and it arrived when we got off the ferry.'

'Work?' He was amused. 'Don't tell me you're thinking of expanding property finding to Australia?'

'Actually, it's kind of the opposite.' She shrugged. 'Julian and I had an enquiry about the company recently and the email was confirmation of a formal offer.'

'Seriously? But you love your business.' Tom let out a long breath as he stepped back. 'Have you thought what you're going to do?'

'Yes. I didn't tell you straightaway because I wanted to get the idea clear in my mind and see if Julian and I were on the same page before I talked to you.'

'And are you on the same page?' Tom still hadn't managed to remove the surprise from his voice.

'We are.' Olivia slid her arms around him. 'And I'm only mentioning this now so you can tell me what you think before I commit, and I want it out of our way before we settle in here.'

'Liv, it's entirely up to you.' He pulled her close. 'I'll support you, whatever you decide. You've made a huge success of your company and I know how much you love it.'

'I do. And I'll miss it, up to a point.'

'You're going to accept the offer?' Tom's eyes were searching her face. 'You're sure?'

'We are.' She smiled. Saying it out loud made it even more real. 'It just makes sense. Julian and his partner have always wanted to sail, and this would free them up to give it a go. I don't want to be working all hours forever and it would be wonderful to have more time to visit Ellie and Logan. I've thought about it and I'm sure. It's time.'

'So what will you do?' Tom was amused as he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. 'I can't imagine you sitting around the house waiting on me hand and foot.'

'You wish!'

'No, I really don't.' He tried to wriggle away from the fingers she was poking into his ribs. 'We're a team and we both like it that way. There's no rush, you could take some time out to decide if you want to.'

'Actually, I've got my eye on something.' Olivia was laughing at the look of surprise flying across Tom's face now. 'The Book Festival are looking for an operations director, and I thought I'd throw my hat into the ring.'

'Liv, I think that's brilliant, you'd be wonderful. You should definitely give it a go; they'd be mad not to offer it to you. Olivia Bellingham, Festival Operations Director. Sounds perfect. Let's try the jacuzzi.' He caught her hand and they hurried to the steps leading from the deck. 'All that sunshine is making me want to be in the water. Now we're here, I'm wondering if Costello needs to investigate a murder on an Australian island.'

'Oh, I think he definitely does. Someone with Irish connections and of course you'd need to do a lot of research.'

'I would. Starting with his hot new love interest.'

'What are you thinking this time?' She was watching as Tom pulled off his shirt and shorts to drop into the jacuzzi, and her own sundress followed.

'Not sure. Maybe a gorgeous company director who gets in his way.'

'And she'd find him impossible to resist?' Olivia gasped as the water slid over her warm body.

'Always. Good thing it's so private here, I'm not putting this on Instagram.'

'I should hope not.' She wound her arms around Tom's neck as she kissed him. 'Harrington's fans would be hollering for a comeback if they could see you now.'

'Haven't you heard?'

'Heard what?'

'Harrington might be making a comeback after all.'

'No!' Olivia gaped at him. 'You're not serious! What, some television production company has persuaded you out of retirement and offered you loads of money to play him again?'

'Of course not. It was someone far more persuasive and with a much

lower budget.’ Tom slicked back wet hair and rolled his eyes. ‘I can’t believe I’ve let her talk me into it. I meant to surprise you again, but I don’t think it’ll keep until Christmas.’

‘Go on.’ Olivia had a sneaking suspicion and wanted to hear him say it out loud. ‘What delectable treat have I got to look forward to?’

‘Mrs Timms has finally worn me down. I’ve promised her Harrington will make a strictly one-off guest appearance at the final night of the Thorndale pantomime as she made certain to tell me they’re raising money for Parkinson’s research. I must be mad; it’ll ruin my reputation as a serious actor forever.’

‘Probably but who’s going to worry about that when you’re strutting your stuff in the village hall and on your way to being a best-selling novelist? And I know you’ll be thinking of your dad.’ Olivia was nearly weeping with laughter. ‘Oh, Mrs Timms isn’t daft, she’ll be able to charge whatever she wants for the tickets. Even I’d pay to see you in breeches just this once. Can I be on the front row?’

‘Not unless you’re prepared to fight the Knit and Natter group for the honour. Mrs T has apparently already sold the tickets, sworn them to secrecy and set up a waiting list. Anyway, it’s months off. All I want to think about for the next ten days is you, me and this view.’

‘Agreed.’ Olivia tipped her head to one side. ‘There’s just one thing I wanted to ask you before we forget about work.’

‘Go on.’ Tom narrowed his eyes.

‘If I do get the job, we’re going to need a red-hot author to open the festival.’

‘Oh?’ He smirked. ‘And you thought you’d invite me?’

‘Don’t be silly.’ She was already laughing at the look of outrage he was trying and failing to suggest, and his grin followed. ‘I wondered if you knew of anyone and could put me onto them.’

The End

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