



Chapter One

Atticus decided he really couldn't stay in bed a moment longer. He'd twisted the expensive bedclothes into ropes, had tried sleeping diagonally, sitting up, and with his head at the bottom end of the bed but it was no use. He looked at the clock. It was, according to the luminous green numbers, 6am. It was, in Atticus's brain, somewhere between lunchtime and tea. Yesterday.

He got up, wrapping a strange man's luxurious towelling robe round him, noticing how much taller the robe's owner was. The hem of the elegant garment trailed behind him as though he were an emperor, or a monarch awaiting coronation. Taking care not to trip over it, he made his way across the room, and out into the open-plan living space beyond. Light from the early morning was already flooding the room, which was floor-to-ceiling glass on two sides, and a combination of exposed brick and steel on the other two sides. The roof was glass too, it was rather like sitting in a greenhouse. Although the actual square footage of the apartment was relatively modest, it somehow made Atticus's own flat, in London, seem boxy and unimaginative. Outside, and a long way down, was a city.

"It's what they call a loft," Jasper had said, "I was lucky to bag it. Everybody wants one. Especially in The Village."

Along one of the open brickwork walls was a marble kitchen counter-top, supporting a row of sleek and apparently unused kitchen appliances. Atticus scanned their superb, black-and-chrome ergonomically-designed contours

and operating levers, and wondered vaguely if any of them was a kettle. His head was spinning and he couldn't remember if he had slept at all.

Eventually, by a process of elimination, he was able to identify a coffee machine, a space-age hub, which hummed invitingly as he managed to follow the tiny diagrammatic instructions on its many arms and legs. He put a small foil bulb into a matching slot, rather as a child puts a square peg eventually into a square hole, and waited. Remembering just in time that coffee would need some sort of cup, the only thing he could find quickly enough was a row of eggcups on a shelf, requiring some deftness of movement to fill each one in turn, hoping that they didn't run out and that he hadn't ordered more than a pint of coffee from this industrial-scale machine.

The apartment filled with the marvellous smell of good coffee and Atticus started on the first eggcup, moving over to the window. The world was quiet, yet he knew that out there, everything was happening. It was like being on another planet.

“Greetings from across the pond!”

Just ten days ago, in his boxy apartment in London, Atticus had opened the email with some trepidation, given the subject box which had read, ‘Operation Family Rescue Mission’, and which therefore surely promised a scam of some sort, a plea for cash to be paid into a bogus account to save some fictitious uncle from the slave trade, or somebody demanding a deposit in order to release millions from a fake inheritance fund in Bolivia. Only the sender's address had persuaded him not to delete it immediately. There was something familiar about gallon@gallon.com although he couldn't quite think what.

“Bet you can't remember who I am,” the email had continued. **“The thing is, cousin (sort of) that I need a massive, and the fab Rebecca put me onto you. She's awesome isn't she?”**

So this mysterious sort-of cousin knew Ma. That was curious, she'd never mentioned any cousins. Except for the Irish branch, of whom one spoke in whispers and never in public obviously. And what exactly was ‘a massive’?

Gallon. Of *course*. This must be some connection of Godfather Horatio. Which explained the ‘sort-of’ bit. Horatio had been Atticus's godfather, although they weren't in fact related by blood. And Atticus had much to thank Horatio for, not least a substantial inheritance, although he would have

exchanged every penny of it for another summer with the marvellous man who took him camping and sailing and showed him rare books and talked about explorers as though he knew them personally, and... well all that and more.

“I’ve sort of double-booked myself. There’s a big shindig at the Gallery in a couple of weeks, and I have to be out of the country. In another country. Brazil actually. Not for the show itself obvs, but for a few days ahead. It’s all in hand, but I need someone to hang out in the shop while everything goes up, make sure it’s all shipshape and all that. I’ll be back for the opening night. All exes paid of course. Flight ticket follows. Toot toot. Jas.”

Atticus glanced at his pile of unopened mail. He usually had to steel himself to go through the post, and tended to save it for a moment when he felt up to facing the inevitable bills, catalogues and the empty financial promises of banks. Sure enough, here was a stiff white envelope franked with an American postmark and bearing his address in a wild scrawl.

“Oh *sorry* Darling!” Rebecca said when she eventually answered the phone. “I meant to mention it. I’d go myself but I’m still on my *Soul of the Sea* project and New York would be a distraction, much as I love it. Anyway it’ll be good for you to do a bit of work now you’re back from your lovely sailing holiday.”

Sailing holiday. Atticus thought back to his recent experience in the Canary Islands. There had indeed been a bit of sailing, but only after some decidedly less relaxing events. He smiled at Ma’s ever-present ability to see only the best bits of life.

“But what is it all about?” he protested.

“Oh for goodness sake Darling, does it matter? You just pop over to New York, stay in Jasper’s little flat, pop into the Gallery. After all, it *is* part of your inheritance, Horatio made a good deal of his money from fine art you know. Well that and...well he did. Anyway, you never know, it might turn out to be your thing.”

“My thing,” Atticus echoed.

“Well darling you have to admit, you haven't really found your niche in life yet have you? Hilly has the *darling* children...”

“And her law career.”

“Well of course. Anyway, she’s always been able to find something useful to do.”

“And I haven’t.”

“Don’t be dull Darling. You know what I mean. Anyway in the meantime, it’s a good chance to make yourself useful. Who knows, you might meet some new people.”

“You mean I might meet a suitable girl.”

“That too Sweetheart. It is rather time, isn't it?”

Atticus thought of Flora. Sometimes he wondered if the memory was fading, but then he realised it was just lurking behind a sofa, ready to leap out at the least encouragement. He didn’t deserve a suitable girl. Not after what happened. Not after what he had done.

“Ma, I’ll go. Of course. I just wish you’d asked me first, before telling this cousin Jasper I would.”

“Dear Jasper. Such a card. Huge fun. God knows what he’s doing in Brazil. Anyway, I’m sure it’s very important. And with you to hold the fort in New York, what could possibly go wrong?”

“You lucky beast!” Hilly rang almost immediately after had finished speaking to Ma.

“How come everyone else knows about this before I’ve even agreed to go?” Atticus said. He could hear what sounded like a bulldozer in the background. “What the hell is that noise?”

“It’s a bulldozer,” said Hilly. “They’re digging the front garden up.”

Atticus pictured his sister’s family’s elegant, if slightly faded, Victorian semi, on its leafy street on the outskirts of Cambridge. “The less clever bit,” Hilly always said.

“Why?” he protested, “I like the front garden! Tell me you aren’t paving it over for parking.”

“That would be a great idea if Hal wasn’t too embarrassed about the state of the car to have it parked right outside the front door. *I’d* love it if I didn't have to carry twins and shopping and the entire contents of the Early Learning

Centre half a mile up the road every time I came home, but no, sadly it's British Gas."

"Gas? Are you alright?"

"Oh yes. It isn't actually leaking, but the gas man said he thought it might leak sometime soon and the council have said they won't take the risk. Little did they know."

"Little did they know what?"

That the twins would decide it's more exciting than Christmas. They are insisting on driving the bulldozer, and the bulldozer driver decided that was better than hearing them yelling, so now they're both up there in the cab with him, in hard hats. I'm having a heart attack just imagining what could happen and Hal's gone off to a case. The irony of his having a career in which he deals with children who are consistently exposed to danger by their parents isn't lost on me. Anyway. What do you care, you're off to New bloody York. To stay with the amazing Jasper!"

"Is he amazing?"

"Don't you remember him? I suppose you wouldn't. He came to us once, one of the summers. With Horatio. You would have been about five. You and Jas are the same age I think."

"Horatio brought him? Is Jasper Horatio's son?"

"I don't think so. Horatio never married. Not that *that* means...But he does have the Gallon name, so I always imagined he was a nephew or something. Ma probably knows, why don't you ask her?"

"*Soul of the Sea*. Part three I believe."

"Oh right. She's back at work. Fair enough. Have you *seen Soul of the Sea* parts one and two? I know! Never mind. Well I'm sure Jasper'll fill you in when you get there."

"I don't think so. From what I gather, he's in Brazil. That's why I'm going to New York."

"Brazil? Great. Is *everyone* having a more exciting life than I am? You'll probably catch up with him when he gets back. Anyway I'm green with envy of course. Oh - hang on!"

Atticus heard the sound of breaking glass. “That’s the sitting room window,” said Hilly surprisingly calmly. “I suppose I’d better go.”

The little line of mini-coffees pretty much exhausted, Atticus put the egg cups into what might have been a dishwasher but might equally well have been a cupboard. Or a rotisserie oven. Then he decided to brave the industrial bathroom, where he had a shower which would have jet-washed centuries of graffiti off a war memorial, and staggered, red-faced, into cord trousers and the better of his two soft blue shirts. None of this went any way to shifting the feeling of unreality that only jet-lag can induce. The flight, the bad-ass-movie-style arrival through US Homeland security channels, the weirdly slow-motion yellow-cab ride from Newark airport up through the badlands, New Jersey and a sea of scrapyards, all seen through the grimy window. They were all part of a film of Atticus’s life which had already taken on the veil of fiction.

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