

## TRANSLATED BY ROMY FURSLAND

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For Sonja

So there I stood, exhausted, in the snow, as the sound of violins drifted toward us from the ballroom. Around my neck was a thirtyfive-carat diamond that didn't belong to me, and in my arms was a sleeping child who didn't belong to me, either.

Somewhere along the way I'd lost a shoe.

People always say that in an emergency you don't feel pain or the cold because of all the adrenaline coursing through you, but it's not true. The wound in my shoulder was throbbing like mad, the blood was running down my arm and dripping onto the snow, and the cold gnawed painfully at my foot. The muscles in my arms and shoulders were burning from carrying the child, but I didn't dare put her down again in case she woke up and alerted our pursuers to where we were.

People also say your brain works best in moments of great danger, arming you with razor-sharp insights. But that wasn't true in my case, either. I couldn't tell who was good and who was bad anymore. And the only razor-sharp insight I'd had recently was that silencers on guns really do what they say they will.

And that there were definitely better moments for a kiss than this one.

I had no idea whether the boy kissing me was one of the goodies or one of the baddies, but either way, I felt my strength returning.

"I've been wanting to do that since the first time I saw you," he whispered.

## BIENVENUE. WILLKOMMEN. BENVENUTO.

## WELCOME TO



Enjoy your stay.



y first day as a hotel babysitter was shaping up to be a complete disaster.

"You are without doubt the worst babysitter in the history of the world, Sophie Spark," was Don's verdict, as I dashed past him yelling, "Boys! This is not funny! Come back here, please!"

"Yes, please, please, please!" said Don, mimicking me. "Or I'm going to get fired!"

It was entirely possible. But I'd only taken my eyes off them for a minute. In my defense: It's easier than you think to lose sight of children in the snow when they go sneaking off wearing white parkas, white ski pants, and white hats. It ought to be illegal to dress kids like that.

They couldn't have gotten far. Up the hill from where I was standing, the glistening blanket of snow was untouched. But here on the west side of the hotel, there were plenty of hiding places where a pair of very small and devious children could have gone to ground, decked out as they were in camouflage gear. There were lots of snowdrifts they could be crouching behind and various trees, woodpiles, and walls that also offered ideal cover.

I squinted against the light. The weather forecast had said more snow was due to fall tonight and over Christmas, but for now the sky was still bright blue and the snow gleamed as if it were trying to outsparkle the windows and the copper-clad turrets and dormer roofs. The valley below, on the other hand, had been shrouded in thick

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mist since yesterday morning. Weather conditions like this were what had given the hotel its nickname: *Castle in the Clouds*.

"Strangely quiet, isn't it?" said Don Burkhardt Jr., reminding me that now really wasn't the time to be admiring the Swiss mountain scenery. "I just hope those sweet little boys haven't already frozen to death."

Don was sitting on the big sled that was used to transport firewood to the basement door, swinging his legs and licking an icecream cone he must have sweet-talked out of someone in the kitchen. The firewood itself he'd simply tipped out into the snow beneath the WELCOME TO A CASTLE IN THE CLOUDS sign.

The ice cream gave me an idea. "Hey, boys! How about a nice ice cream?" I called.

But I was met with absolute silence.

Don giggled gleefully. "You shouldn't have let that handyman distract you from your duties, Sophie Spark."

"You'd better pick that wood up if you don't want to get in trouble," I said.

Although Don was small and skinny and looked sweet and perfectly harmless with his little snub nose and soulful brown eyes, I was secretly afraid of him. He was always coming up with things you'd never expect to hear from a nine-year-old, and it was doubly disconcerting because of his high-pitched little voice, cute Swiss accent, and equally cute lisp. His odd habit of calling people by both their first and last names, sometimes accompanied by description and age—"You've got a hole in your tights, Sophie Spark, seventeenyear-old high-school dropout"—had something weirdly menacing about it, like in a mafia film when someone murmurs "I know where you live" and later deposits a horse's head in your bed. If you're lucky. Don and his parents were regular guests at the hotel, and Don knew the place like the back of his hand. He'd spend all day roaming around the building, eavesdropping on people's conversations, and stirring up trouble, behaving as though the hotel and everyone in it belonged to him. He seemed to know everything about everyone, guests and staff alike. It was creepy the way he managed to remember everything, right down to the tiniest detail. Freight elevators, offices, the basement—Don's favorite places to loiter were the ones guests weren't supposed to have access to, but because he was so small and sweet he rarely got in trouble for it. Whenever he came across someone he couldn't charm with his innocent doe eyes, he put the fear of God into them by reeling off their full name and mentioning, as if in passing, his fabulously rich father, Don Burkhardt Sr., and his father's friendship with one of the Montfort brothers, who owned the hotel.

That was what he did with me, anyway. And even if I tried not to show it, his mafia-style methods were pretty effective. Just two days ago, I'd caught him wiping his chocolatey hands quite coolly and deliberately on the embroidered velvet drapes in the little vestibule on the second floor. He met my outrage with a superior smile. "Oh, high-school-dropout Sophie Spark clearly has a *penchant* for hideous curtains!"

That made me even more outraged: All the curtains and cushions on the second floor were made from the same fabric, a beautiful crimson material embroidered with birds and floral patterns in soft gold thread. You didn't have to be an expert to realize how valuable they were, even if the red had faded slightly over the years. When you ran your fingers gently over the velvet, it felt almost as if it were stroking you back. "Anyway, isn't it your job to keep things clean around here, temporary chambermaid Sophie Spark with the funny freckles?" Don had asked. Two days ago, I hadn't yet started my babysitting duties; I'd still been assigned to the housekeeping team. "How much money d'you think my dad spends in this hotel every year? And who do you think they'd kick out first—you or me? If I were you, I'd be glad it's only chocolate and try to get these stains out quickly before Fräulein Müller reads you the riot act again." (Where on earth did he come up with these expressions? Not even my grandma talked like that.)

"And if I were you, I'd get out of here quickly before I whack you with this duster!" I'd replied, but Don had sauntered away with a grin on his face, knowing full well that he'd won. I was more afraid of Fräulein Müller, the head housekeeper, than I was of him. And as I scrubbed the chocolate stain out of the velvet curtain, I did actually feel a certain relief that it was only chocolate and nothing worse.

"If anyone's going to get in trouble around here, it's you," Don remarked now, licking his ice cream. "You were flirting with Jaromir Novak, thirty-eight, mustache-wearer, instead of looking after the children. I saw you."

"I wasn't flirting," I corrected him at once. "I was just quickly helping Jaromir untangle those Christmas lights. Which happens to be part of my job." After all, I wasn't just a babysitter; according to the job description, the hotel intern was supposed to turn their hand to "a variety of roles" and be "flexible and adaptable at all times."

Don shook his head. "You smiled, tucked your hair behind your ear, and exposed your throat—all key signals in the body language of female mating behavior."

"Rubbish!" I said indignantly. "Jaromir is far too old for me

and has a wife and child in the Czech Republic who he loves very much." And even if he'd been twenty years younger and single, I'd never have flirted with him. I didn't flirt with anyone, out of principle. Even the word *flirt* made me cringe. "Anyw—" I broke off. It was obvious from the expression on Don's face how much he was enjoying this, seeing me defending myself so vehemently. It was yet more proof that I took him seriously. And that was the last thing I wanted him to think. "Well? Have you seen the twins or not?" I asked tersely.

Don immediately changed tack. "Yes. I even know where they're hiding." He fixed me with a butter-wouldn't-melt look even Bambi would have been proud of. "I'll tell you if you say 'please, please' very nicely."

"Please," I said, against my better judgment.

"Please, please!" Don demanded.

"Please, please," I said through gritted teeth.

Don laughed delightedly. "I'll tell you why you're such a bad babysitter: You just don't project any natural authority. Kids pick up on that kind of thing."

"And I'll tell you why you don't have any friends: You just don't project any natural niceness." I'd blurted it out before I realized how mean it actually was. I bit my lip in shame. I really must be the worst babysitter in the world, having managed to lose two small sixyear-olds just by turning my back on them for a minute and then having felt the urge to hurl personal insults at Bambi himself. And I was pretty sure I'd only gotten the internship at the hotel in the first place because I'd mentioned my experience looking after my two little brothers and given the impression that I was particularly good with, and fond of, children. "Ouch!" Don had nearly tripped me from his sled, but somehow I made it past his outstretched leg without falling over. Fond of children, my arse. Children were little pests, as far as I was concerned. But that didn't change the fact that I now had two of them to recapture. And the third I would simply ignore from now on.

"Boys! Hello!" I tried to make my voice sound friendly and relaxed, as if we were just playing hide-and-seek. Not a peep. And to think that before this they hadn't been able to keep their mouths shut for so much as a second and had chattered away constantly in rhyming gibberish. If only I could remember their stupid names! They had trendy, wannabe-American names like . . . "Josh? Ashley? Where are you? Don't you want to finish your snowman? I've found an extra-special carrot for his nose!"

Don giggled again. "You don't even know their names, screw-up Sophie. You can stick your carrot where the sun don't shine. Why don't you just give up now?"

I pretended not to hear him. There was no way I was giving up. In the last three months, I'd risen to plenty of other challenges. And this situation was actually nowhere near as bad as it looked. My job was to take the Bauer twins (Laramy? Jason?) out for some fresh air and keep them entertained, leaving their parents free to do their packing and check out of the hotel in peace. If you thought about it, that's exactly what I was doing: These kids were having the time of their lives out here, now that they'd managed to hide from me. In the fresh air.

"Ever heard of culpable negligence, soon-to-be-ex-intern Sophie Spark?" Don licked his ice cream again. "I hope you've got good insurance. If I were you, I'd be praying they don't both fall into a crevasse. If it starts snowing again, soon even the tracker dogs won't be able to pick up their scent."

I resisted the urge to put my fingers in my ears. This child really did have an evil streak. As far as I knew, there were no crevasses around here, but even I could hear how shrill and anxious my own voice sounded when I called to the twins again. "Do you want to pet a squirrel before you go?"

"They're not going to fall for that one." Don flicked his halfeaten cone into the snow. "Oh, go on then, I'll help you: They went that way." He pointed to the new ice rink next to the antique children's merry-go-round, which Old Stucky and Jaromir had conjured up over the past few days. "I think they were planning to hide in the ski cellar."

I wasn't completely stupid. I didn't follow the direction he was pointing but plodded resolutely the opposite way. And sure enough, I'd only gone a few feet when I heard muffled giggles and saw a branch jiggling about in the old half-moon fir tree. Jaromir and Old Stucky had decorated the tree with strings of Christmas lights during an intrepid climbing expedition that November; or rather, Jaromir had climbed the tree and Old Stucky had held the ladder. It had been nicknamed the half-moon fir tree because only the branches facing the hotel had lights in them. The same strings of lights had been in use for thirty years, I was told, but since trees grow over the course of thirty years and Christmas lights don't, they were now only long enough to cover half the tree. This meant that one side of the fir tree twinkled in the darkness as if trying to go one better than the blazing windows of the hotel, while the side facing the valley stayed black and still, blending into the night sky—just like a half moon. The tree also marked the threshold between the hotel's well-tended, well-lit grounds and the mountainside beyond, where nature was left to its own devices. There wasn't much difference between them at the moment, though, because everything was buried deep under a thick blanket of snow.

The tree really was the perfect hiding place if you were only four feet tall. The branches fanned out in thick, sweeping layers reaching almost to the ground. It was probably soft and dry under there, a bed of moss and fir needles untouched by the snow.

Not wanting to scare the children off, I approached the tree in an unobtrusive, meandering way. "Those clever Bauer twins really are very good at hiding," I said in a stage whisper. "It's just such a shame I can't find them and show them the big surprise I've got for them. And it's not even anything to do with squirrels..."

Whispers from beneath the fir tree. I couldn't hold back a grin. But my joy didn't last long.

"Don't be fooled, Jayden and Ash Bauer!" cried Don from right behind me. He'd jumped down off the big sled and followed me, clearly with the intention of making my life even more difficult. "She doesn't have a surprise for you! And she certainly doesn't have any squirrels! She just wants to catch you, and then you'll have to go home with your parents and all the fun will be over! You should make a run for it!"

"Jayden and Ash are too clever to listen to stupid old Don," I said hopefully, but already the children were scrambling out from under the tree and racing across the parking lot, laughing and hooting as they went. Don clapped and cheered. I had no choice but to set off in pursuit. Unfortunately, my little charges were headed in the wrong direction—away from the hotel and toward the road. They leapt nimbly over the wall of dirty snow and ice formed by the snowplow, crossed the road, and climbed over another bank of snow on the other side.

"No! That's dangerous!" I called as I clambered after them. And it really was. Although the road ended here at the hotel and there were never many cars on it, the asphalt wound its way down into the valley like a shiny black ribbon in a series of alarmingly steep hairpin bends. Steeper still was the slope they cut across, which was covered in fir trees and which the children now began to slither down, laughing as they went. They grabbed at the low-hanging branches like clever little monkeys, swinging themselves down the mountainside at lightning speed. Unlike the twins, I was too heavy for the thick snow that had thawed and frozen so many times: With every step, I sank into it at least up to my knees, to the sound of loud crunching. It was like trying to walk across the caramel crust of a giant, tilted crème brûlée.

"Stop," I cried despairingly. "Please!"

"Please, sneeze, nibbleknees, nibblechitter, chotter, cheese!" the twins bellowed delightedly. Don was right. I projected absolutely zero authority.

The children had already reached the next bend in the road and were soon scrambling across it.

"You really need to stop now!" I hastily pulled my foot out of a particularly deep hole in the snow and tried taking bigger steps. "There are ... there are bears around here!"

"Bears, snares, nibblenares, nibblechitter, chotter—oops!" One of the twins had lost his footing—he slid down the hill a little way on his butt and collided with the nearest tree, laughing his head off. His brother thought it was so funny that he sat down and started sliding on his butt, too. "Don't do that!" I cried in alarm, already having visions of them hurtling down the steep mountainside unchecked until they either crashed into a tree trunk and broke their necks or fell into the road and got run over by a car. I was convinced I could hear the sound of a car engine already and redoubled my efforts to catch up with them. But that only made me lose my balance, too. I landed on my belly in the snow and was immediately transformed into a human bobsled. With my increased surface area and slippery coat, I practically flew across the snow. As I went speeding down the mountainside, neither my outstretched arms nor my panicked shouts—something unimaginative along the lines of "Nooooooooooo!"—could stop me. I shot past the twins, was flung over the top of the next wall of snow, and landed slap-bang in the middle of the road. It all happened so quickly there wasn't even time for my life to flash before my eyes.

The children came flying over the top of the wall, too, and fell in a heap on top of me. If their exhilarated laughter was anything to go by, they hadn't done themselves any harm. I wasn't so sure about myself, though. But before I could check to see if I was still in one piece, I heard the screech of brakes. And a moment later, a furious voice shouted, "Are you out of your minds? I nearly ran you over!"

I shoved a twin's leg out of my face and tried to lift my head. Just a few feet away from us was the bumper of a car. It was a small, dark green car with a Zurich license plate. The door was wide open and the driver, a boy not much older than me, was standing over us. He looked scared to death, and I could understand why.

Now the shock of it all made my teeth start to chatter. That really had been a close shave.

"Is anyone hurt?" asked the boy.

I picked myself up, surprised to find that my body was still

working properly. It had been a hard landing, but my padded coat and thick gloves had saved me from grazes or anything worse. "I don't think so," I said, and gave the twins a quick once-over. No blood, no twisted limbs, and their front teeth had been missing already. They were all shining eyes and rosy cheeks: the picture of happy children.

"Again!" they cried. "That was so much fun!"

Just to be on the safe side, I grabbed hold of them by the hoods of their still snow-white parkas.

"That was incredibly stupid and dangerous," scolded the boy. "You could all have been killed."

God, yes. "You're absolutely right," I stammered, between chattering teeth. "I'm so sorry. It's just that once you start sliding down the hill, it's practically impossible to—"

"And it would have been my fault," the boy broke in. He hadn't been listening to a word I'd said and was clearly speaking more to himself than to me. He stared grimly past us into the distance. "There would have been a trial and all the witnesses would've been dead and I would probably have had to go to prison and I would've lost my driver's license and my dad would have—" He broke off with a shudder.

I cleared my throat. "Well in that case, I guess we should all just be thankful we're still alive!" My teeth weren't chattering quite so hard now, and I ventured a smile. I would have liked to put my hand on his arm, too, to bring him back from his bleak vision of a parallel universe in which we were all lying dead in the road, but I didn't dare let go of the children. "Like I said, I'm really sorry we gave you such a shock. Could you possibly do me a huge favor and give us a lift up to the hotel? That is where you were going, isn't it?" Of course that was where he'd been going. It was the only building for miles around. He was probably one of the six extra waitstaff the hotel had taken on to work in the restaurant over Christmas.

"You guys are from Germany, right?"

"Yes, cress, pinklepress, pinklepankle, ponkle, fess," said Ash. Or perhaps it was Jayden. They were absolutely identical. The boy nodded as if that explained everything. He opened the back door for the two kids. Just to be on the safe side, I didn't let go of their hoods until they were firmly strapped in.

"Phew!" I closed the car door with great relief and gave the boy a grateful smile. "Child lock! The best invention since the printing press."

"Your brothers like running away, do they?"

"Oh, they're not my brothers. I'm not a hotel guest—I'm the intern, here on a one-year placement. And today's my first day on babysitting duty." I laughed. "Not the best first day, as you can see. Me and children are not a good combination. I actually preferred working in the laundry, to be honest, even though I burned myself on the rotary iron the very first day. And ruined a monogrammed napkin." I wasn't usually so talkative with strangers—it must have been the shock I'd just had and my sheer joy at still being alive to tell the tale. And the boy had a trustworthy sort of face. "Just don't tell anyone these kids nearly got run over on my watch, will you? Or I'll definitely get fired." I took off one of my gloves and held out my hand to him. "I'm Sophie, by the way. Sophie Spark." I very nearly added "high-school dropout," so well had Don Burkhardt Jr. succeeded in getting inside my head.

"Ben." The boy took my hand and shook it. My chattiness

seemed to have calmed him down a bit, and he even managed a smile. "Ben Montfort."

"Oh, that's funny," I said. "The owners of the hotel are called Montfort, too. Gordon and Gilbert Montfort. They're brothers . . ."

Oh, God. Oh, God. I stared at him in horror. "Please, please tell me you're not related to them."

Ben shrugged apologetically. "Sorry," he said.



was sorry, too. Sorry for myself, I should say. As if it hadn't been bad enough getting catapulted into the road along with the two little kids who'd been entrusted to my care, it had to be the son of one of the hotel owners, of all people, who'd nearly run us over.

As I walked glumly around the car to get into the passenger seat, I replayed in my head everything I'd said to Ben just now. I'd already provided him with two white-jacketed reasons to fire me, plus a scorched monogrammed napkin. But it could've been worse. If, for example, I'd said *Montfort—like the owners of the hotel? Gilbert and Gordon, or as I call them: Gutless Gilbert and Grouchy Gordon.* 

There was a paper bag full of carrots on the passenger seat, which I lifted onto my lap as I sat down.

Ben must be the son of Grouchy Gordon, the elder of the two brothers. I knew Gordon had a son from his first marriage who lived with his mother in Zurich, but I'd pictured the son as a small boy, not a nearly grown-up man. Gutless Gilbert didn't have a family he lived alone in a small apartment under the eaves on the fifth floor of the hotel. As Denise from Reception had told me, it was common knowledge that he'd lost the love of his life in tragic circumstances when he was young, and since then he'd lived like a monk. What those tragic circumstances were, Denise didn't know, but the story certainly explained Gilbert Montfort's drooping, hunched posture and troubled look. He always nodded in a friendly way when you ran into him around the hotel, though, and had a melancholy smile for everyone. His brother Gordon's smile, on the other hand, was reserved exclusively for hotel guests. If you were an employee, he'd either completely ignore you (if you were lucky) or go ballistic at you (if you were unlucky). The most trivial thing could set him off. So far, he'd always studiously ignored me, but ever since September I'd been dreading the day I might fall victim to one of his rages.

Perhaps today would be that day. If Gordon Montfort could yell at someone for fifteen minutes just for having a speck of toothpaste on their uniform or fire an employee for leaving cigarette butts outside the back door of the hotel, what on earth would he do to someone who launched the children of hotel guests into the path of his son's oncoming car?

As Ben started the engine, I shot a sideways glance at him. A certain family resemblance was undeniable: blue eyes, high forehead, strong nose, firm chin, thick brown hair—all just like his father. But a younger version. And a nicer version. Even from the side he had a trustworthy sort of face.

In spite of that—or perhaps because of it—I felt I should proceed with caution. I mustn't let myself think he was harmless just because he had a nice face. He might still be planning to rat me out to his dad. Like father, like son and all that . . .

Perhaps he'd forget what had happened if I could distract him with my sparkling conversation. I rustled the bag of carrots. "That was good thinking, bringing a few snowman's noses with you. Especially as there's supposed to be more snow coming this evening."

He promptly smiled again. "The snowman's noses are for Jesty and Vesty."

Oh dear—he really did make it difficult to be suspicious of him. Now it turned out he was an animal lover, too! Jesty and Vesty were the hotel horses, a pair of friendly Norikers whose full names were Grand Gesture and White Vesture. In the summer months, they galloped across the mountain meadows, their pale manes streaming out behind them. When it came to idyllic Alpine clichés, they gave even the fluffy cows with bells around their necks a run for their money. In the winter, they pulled the vintage sleigh that Old Stucky had polished up to a beautiful shine. They loved taking the guests out for sleigh rides, so I was told. I was still hoping my internship would include some time in the stables because Jesty and Vesty were by far the friendliest horses I'd ever met.

"Oh, they'll like that," I said. "Old Stucky's put them on a diet—he says they've put on too much weight while they've been in the stables." I was probably partly to blame for that. I'd been known to bring them bananas now and then, which they loved. And they loved me, too. They snorted happily as soon as I entered the stables, and I always felt mean if I didn't have anything to give them. "But they're going to have plenty to do over the next few weeks—Monsieur Rocher has already taken loads of reservations for sleigh rides."

"And I always worry hauling a sleigh full of people will be too much for them." Ben sighed. "When I was little, I could hardly bear to watch—I used to wish I could have pushed the sleigh instead of them having to pull it." As we drove up the mountainside, he steered the car around the bends so slowly that the twins in the back called "Faster, plaster, minklemaster, minklebunkle, bonkle, blaster!" and put their heads together, giggling.

"So you're visiting your dad?" I continued, a little more boldly now. "I don't think he's there today." Gordon Montfort didn't live in the hotel but with his girlfriend in Sion, about a forty-five minutes' drive away. (I'd gotten that from Denise, too.) Because he didn't work regular hours, you never knew whether and when he was going to turn up at Castle in the Clouds, or how long he was going to stay. I hadn't seen him yet today. Another reason to be thankful: What if I'd fallen in front of *his* car?

"Doesn't matter. I'm here for the whole holidays," said Ben.

"Here? But not in the hotel!" I exclaimed.

"Day and night." He cast a sideways glance at me. "Is that a problem?"

No, of course not. I just wondered where he was going to sleep. Perhaps in his uncle's apartment? The hotel was completely full for the Christmas season. Every single one of its thirty-five rooms and all the suites were booked. We'd even had to put extra beds in Rooms 212 and 213. And the staff accommodation was full, too, with all the temps who'd been brought in.

"Do you know which room you're in?" I inquired cautiously.

Ben laughed. "Yes, of course. I've booked the Duchess Suite," he said sarcastically. "Don't worry, I've always managed to find somewhere to sleep. And anyway, I'm not here to sleep, I'm here to work—as my dad would say."

"To work?" I echoed.

"Yes, to work—go figure!" Ben sounded rather irritable now. "On my vacation. As usual. This is my last Christmas break before my exams. Everyone else is going to be sleeping late and going to parties and getting spoiled rotten by their parents, while I'll be waking up at five thirty every morning and not even getting paid for it."

"I know the feeling," I murmured, but Ben was so worked up by now that he didn't even hear me.

"You may be here on a one-year contract, but I'm here on

a lifetime one. Uncle Gilbert has me down to cover for Denise at Reception this time, but I can chlorinate the swimming pool and change the beds, too, if necessary. And I know how to operate a rotary iron—even Big Edna."

"Oh," I said, impressed. Big Edna had rollers five feet thick and—along with Tired Bertha, a washing machine dating back to the previous century, whose drum could comfortably have housed a small family—was the inner sanctum of the laundry room. "Pavel must think a great deal of you."

"He does." Ben smiled proudly, and I decided once and for all that I liked him, even if he *was* Grouchy Gordon's son. A warm feeling of friendship came over me. Any friend of Pavel's was a friend of mine.

Pavel was master of the washing machines, dryers, mangles, and folding machines in the basement of the hotel. He was a tall, burly, bearded bald man with arms covered in tattoos of skulls, snakes, and pentagrams. It was easy to imagine him working as a bouncer in some dingy hellhole of a nightclub. Until you saw him lovingly ironing the collar of a chambermaid's uniform, that is, and singing "Ave Maria" at the top of his voice. Pavel had a lovely clear baritone, and his cantatas and operatic arias were legendary. Sometimes I'd just listen; other times I'd sing along. By the end of my time in the laundry, we'd pretty much nailed Papageno and Pamina's duet from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, accompanied by six washing machines on spin cycle.

Ben took the last bend a little faster, and we came out of the shadowy woods at last. Ahead of us, on the sunlit plateau, lay Castle in the Clouds in all its glory, with its many high windows, its turrets and stone ledges and balustrades. As always, the sight took my breath away for a moment, and I got the feeling it was the same for Ben. Or perhaps there was another reason for his deep sigh.

He drove past the entrance to the underground parking lot, and, instead of taking the winding road to the doorway, he stopped in the lot at the side of the hotel. "I can drop you right outside the front door if you want, of course." He shot me a sideways grin.

I grinned back. "That's very kind of you, but we can walk from here, can't we, boys?"

"Look, there's stupid Don." The twins were pointing to Don Burkhardt Jr., who was standing in the sun in front of the half-moon fir tree with his arms crossed, seemingly waiting for something.

For us, to be precise.

I groaned. "You have my permission to stick out your tongues at him," I said, and the twins did so immediately with great gusto. They also took the opportunity to lick the windows of Ben's car.

"You've got this babysitting thing down to a T." Ben squinted at Don. "Is that the Burkhardts' little brat?"

"The very same."

Don had spotted us now and was ambling toward us, looking inquisitive.

"They've been here nearly three weeks already while they have some work done on their house. I just keep wondering how they managed to take their child out of school for so long. It wouldn't be easy to do that in Germany."

Ben shrugged. "Old Burkhardt probably bribed the headmaster. And if that didn't work, he'd probably have just bought the whole school. He buys anything he can get his grubby little hands on."

He sounded rather bitter, and I would have loved to ask why, but the children had already undone their seat belts and were now climbing out of the car. I hurried after them and instinctively grabbed hold of their white hoods.

"Don rhymes with prawn and yawn, by the way," I said.

I heard Ben laugh out loud. "You really do love children, don't you?"

I stuck my head back inside the car. "Maybe not. I do have a knack with Tired Bertha, though. Just ask Pavel!" I would have liked to shake Ben's hand again, but my fingers were buried in the twins' hoods, so I just lowered my voice and said, "Thank you. For not running us over. And for not telling your dad."

For a moment he looked back at me just as earnestly. "Of course I won't. We interns have to stick together."

I beamed. I knew it: Anyone Pavel trusted with Big Edna couldn't possibly be a bad person.

"I'm glad you're so nice even though you've got such an awf—" I began effusively, but then bit my tongue. However nice he was, perhaps it was still a bit too soon to tell him I was glad he didn't seem to take after his awful father. "Even though you must have gotten a shock just then," I finished rather lamely, as I closed the car door.

"Oh, look. It's Sophie Spark and the children she was meant to be looking after, getting out of some stranger's old rust bucket of a car with no car seats." Don had caught up with us now. He watched Ben's car as it turned onto the road that led to the stables. Ben clearly wanted to hand over the carrots right away.

Don turned back to me. "I wonder what Mr. and Mrs. Bauer will think about this. Do you want to ask them, or shall I? Here they come now, look."

With a malicious grin, he pointed to the Bauers' snow-white Mercedes, which was pulling up as he spoke and soon came to a stop beside us. Mrs. Bauer got out and waved her white Dolce & Gabbana handbag cheerily. "Yoo-hoo! There you are, my little snowflakes. What perfect timing! Did you have fun with the nice babysitter?"

"Nice babysitter indeed! Just be glad your sons are still alive," said Don, but Mrs. Bauer couldn't hear a word he said because one of the twins was crowing loudly, "Don, yawn, pitterpawn, pitterpatter, potter, prawn!" and the other was shouting, "Agaaaiiiin!"

Mr. Bauer had also gotten out of the car and now pressed a rolledup banknote into my hand with a jovial smile. "Thank you for looking after our little monsters so well."

"Ha ha ha," scoffed Don. "That's like thanking a shark for only eating your little toe instead of biting your whole leg off."

Luckily, Mr. Bauer wasn't listening because his sons were both hanging on to his legs and gabbling something about a supersteep mega-slide.

"It was a pleasure," I assured Mr. Bauer, and at that moment I actually meant it. I watched fondly as—damn it, what were their names again?—climbed into the car with their parents and drove off, waving to us as they went.

Once they'd disappeared around the first bend, Don let out a disappointed sigh. "You've got a pine cone in your hair by the way, Sophie Spark, and it looks really weird," he said.

I forced myself not to put a hand to my hair, and instead unrolled the banknote Mr. Bauer had given me. It was a hundred Swiss francs. I gasped.

"No way," said Don.

Yes way. Ha! "Well, my first day as the worst babysitter in the world hasn't turned out so badly after all," I said. Although I knew it was stupid to take so much pleasure in this little moment of triumph, I couldn't resist giving Don a patronizing pat on the head. "Don't you agree, little Donny?"

Don pursed his lips (he made even that look cute) and smiled. "Luckily, the holidays are only just beginning," he said, his lisp a little more pronounced than usual. Against my will, I felt goose bumps rising on my arms. Don's smile broadened. "You know what? I'm going to tell my parents that starting tomorrow I want to come to day care, too. I'm sure you're going to play some great games with us." And then he fixed me with his best butter-wouldn't-melt look and added: "Somehow I get the unmistakable feeling that something bad is about to happen to you, Sophie Spark."

It was infuriating, but somehow I got that feeling, too.



slipped through the ski cellar into the hotel and scurried up the back stairs to my room, hoping not to meet anyone who might take exception to my disheveled state. The last person I wanted to run into was Fräulein Müller. Her old-fashioned title—the German equivalent of *Miss*—didn't fit with her imposing, angular, immaculate appearance at all, and being in her early forties she was much too young to remember a time when all unmarried women got called *Fräulein*. But she absolutely insisted on being addressed that way, and what you might have thought would sound ridiculously old-school actually inspired great respect and was even a little intimidating when applied to Fräulein Müller.

She'd once sent me back to the laundry just because the hair bands in my braids were different colors. "Whatever will the guests think?" she'd said with distaste. "This is a respectable establishment."

I'd been overcome by a burning sense of shame, and so as not to sully the hotel's honor and reputation any further, I'd immediately thrown out every hair band I owned apart from the black ones.

I guessed I must have lost one of those hair bands during my trip down the mountainside just now because my neat ponytail had come undone and my hair was loose over my shoulders, tangled and full of pine needles. I didn't have to look in the mirror to know that even an easygoing type of person would probably have tutted disapprovingly at the sight of me.

But I was in luck. The only creature I came across was the Forbidden Cat, who stretched herself out on the floor in front of

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me so I could tickle her tummy. Pets in general were not allowed in the hotel, but cats in particular were forbidden—Gordon Montfort couldn't stand them. Nobody knew where the Forbidden Cat had come from. Monsieur Rocher, the concierge, who knew all the hotel's secrets, said she'd always lived there. And she acted like it, too, as if the whole hotel belonged to her. She herself, on the other hand, didn't appear to belong to anybody. When she was hungry, she'd wander into the kitchen for some food, and when she wanted attention she'd go and find somebody to pet her, as she'd done with me just now. The rest of the time she spent sitting about or lying in a highly decorative fashion on windowsills, steps, and armchairs, harmonizing beautifully with her surroundings.

Oddly enough, even though she roamed freely around the hotel and often chose to sleep in some pretty public places, Gordon Montfort had never set eyes on her. Sometimes-as I'd seen to my astonishment-they missed each other by just a few seconds, as if the Forbidden Cat knew exactly when the hotelier was going to appear and when she needed to make her exit. Guests would occasionally mention something to Gordon about the pretty ginger cat they claimed to have petted on the third floor or seen sleeping on the grand piano in the ballroom, and this would reignite his suspicions that one of the staff might have flouted his ban and secretly acquired a pet cat. Whenever that happened, he'd turn up unannounced in the staff quarters and threaten whoever had dared to disobey his cat ban with "something much worse than being fired." (There were numerous theories about what this might be.) But given that he'd never actually seen a cat anywhere in the hotel, he must also have felt slightly paranoid.

In his shoes, I'd definitely have thought my employees were

leaving stuffed cats around the place just to annoy me and drive me insane. Either way, it was a miracle that in all these years none of the staff had ever thought to turn the Forbidden Cat in to their boss; they'd almost certainly have gotten a promotion for it.

After a couple of minutes petting the Forbidden Cat, I went around the back way and made it to the staff quarters in the south wing without encountering Fräulein Müller.

There were all sorts of back ways and back stairs-even hidden elevators-in Castle in the Clouds. It had taken me weeks to discover them all, and although I knew my way around very well now, I was sure there was still plenty of uncharted territory in the hotel-particularly in the basement, which was built into the rock like a multistory labyrinth. Legend had it that the hotel was haunted, and I could well believe it. I'd listened with bated breath to every ghost story I'd been told since I'd arrived there. As well as a questionable "moontin ghoarst" that Old Stucky claimed to have seen whenever he'd drunk too much of his brother-in-law's homemade pear brandy, there was the Lady in White, who was said to float around the hotel at night in search of a kindred soul, making the chandeliers tinkle as she passed. The Lady in White had been a guest at the hotel, or so the story went-an unhappily married young woman who'd thrown herself out the window of the highest turret with a broken heart. And now there were two versions of the legend: One said the Lady in White would never be at peace until she'd lured another unhappy soul into jumping off the turret just like her; the other (much nicer) version had it that she simply wanted to comfort anyone else who was lovesick and to dry their tears. No one is worth jumping out a window for, after all.

Denise from Reception swore that once, just after she'd had an

argument with her boyfriend, she'd seen something white and translucent floating through the lobby in the middle of the night, and it had waved at her. But she admitted she'd dozed off shortly before it happened. Other people only ever said they knew somebody who knew somebody who'd seen the Lady in White.

Only Monsieur Rocher maintained that the legend was complete nonsense. Nobody had ever jumped out of a turret window in this hotel or any other window for that matter. Broken heart or no broken heart.

He was probably right (Monsieur Rocher was usually right), but it was a bit of a shame, if you asked me. I'd have preferred to run into a real ghost than some of the living inhabitants of this place.

The corridor leading to the staff quarters was deserted. Relieved, I pulled the door marked *PRIVÉE*, STAFF ONLY, and NO ENTRY shut behind me and hurried through to my room. Officially I now had three hours off before I had to be back for my evening shift in the spa. If I was quick getting changed, I could run down to the laundry and take Pavel a slice of his favorite apple and cinnamon cake, then be back in the lobby in time for an afternoon coffee with Monsieur Rocher in the concierge's lodge. This would also be a good opportunity to find out as much as possible about the various guests who were due to arrive. I spent my breaks with Monsieur Rocher whenever I could. Not only did he keep me supplied with a constant stream of wonderful anecdotes and useful information, but I also always came away from our meetings feeling full of confidence and the joys of life. I have no idea how he did it.

To me, Monsieur Rocher was the heart and soul of Castle in the Clouds. On my very first day, he'd comforted me, treated the burn on my hand, and reassured me that I wasn't a failure and that Pavel and I would soon be best of friends. Anything he said in his soft, quiet voice you couldn't help but believe. And I was more than happy to take advantage of his seemingly boundless knowledge of the hotel and the guests.

The guests I was most curious about were the aging British actor (everyone but me, on hearing his name, had exclaimed "Oh, *him*!") and the family of a business mogul from South Carolina who'd booked six rooms and suites with a total of twelve beds (or thirteen if you counted the cot in Room 210). That evening we were also expecting a famous figure skater, a gold medalist who'd been invited to host the hotel's annual New Year's Ball. It was her first time at Castle in the Clouds, and she'd insisted on bringing her two toy poodles with her.

"Oh, there you are, Work Experience!" a shrill voice rang out. I'd celebrated too soon. True, it wasn't Fräulein Müller who now came charging out of the bathroom, blocking my path before I could get to my bedroom door, but Hortensia was almost as bad. Probably worse, in fact. She'd only been here two days, but she'd clearly made up her mind to hate me from the moment she'd arrived, for reasons I couldn't fathom. She and her friends Camilla, Ava, and Whatsername were students at the hotel-management college in Lausanne. Fräulein Müller had taken them on as extra chambermaids over the holidays. So far, I hadn't been able to work out whether their work counted toward their studies or whether they were simply being well paid for this temporary job. They seemed to think they stood way above me in the hotel pecking order, at any rate, and that this entitled them to push me around.

"See this, Work Experience?" Hortensia thrust a long coppercolored hair in my face. "I just found this in the sink. It's disgusting." She pronounced it *dizgusting*. "It's bad enough having to stay in this horrible old dump, in these appalling conditions. So if you want to carry on sharing this *prehistoric* bathroom with us, then please clean up after yourself! Understood?"

I gulped. Nobody else around here had long red hair, so it must be one of mine. I didn't like finding hairs in the sink, either, and I always tried not to leave any behind. But there was a reason I hadn't managed it this time.

I took a deep breath. "You actually threw me out of the bathroom this morning, remember, so that you four could all come in and brush your teeth together? So I didn't get a chance to—"

"Blah blah blah! I never want to have to pick another one of your dizgusting hairs out of the sink again, all right, skank?" Hortensia flicked the hair off her finger and gave me a revolted look. "Oh my god, are those pine needles in your hair?"

I gulped again. It was the first time anyone had ever called me a skank and really meant it, and for a moment it floored me. My friend Delia and I had made up a game to be used in difficult situations. It was called "What would Jesus do?" but the idea was that you could replace Jesus (we'd gotten the idea for the game during a very boring religious-studies lesson) with anyone you liked. Jesus wasn't ideal as a practical example, because it was pretty difficult to emulate him—not only could he walk on water and turn water into wine, but in this instance he'd probably also have just laid his hand upon Hortensia and miraculously cured her of her bitchiness. I could give that a go, of course. She'd probably be a bit taken aback if I laid a hand on her head and murmured something like *Pass out of her, demon!* She'd probably also give me a slap. And then, of course, I'd have to turn the other cheek. "What's wrong, Work Experience? Cat got your tongue?"

I pondered. What would . . . er . . . Mahatma Gandhi do in my situation? Oh, damn it. I really wasn't very good at this today. On the other hand, wasn't it Gandhi who'd said "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate"?

All right then. Smiling benignly, I straightened an imaginary pair of Gandhi-style glasses on my nose. "Let's talk about this like adults, my dear Hortensia. If you want me to clean up after myself, all you have to do is not throw me out of the bathroom until I'm finished. Can we try that tomorrow?"

But I could see straightaway that Hortensia was not impressed; on the contrary, Gandhi seemed to have put her in a more aggressive mood than ever.

Perhaps I should just do what she would have done, I thought, as she said it again: "Blah blah blah!" I knew mirroring people's behavior was supposed to be a good way of defusing tension. So I put my hands on my hips, narrowed my eyes menacingly, and said, in an unpleasantly nasal voice: "Blah blah blah yourself! And don't you dare call me a 'skank' again. Or 'Work Experience.' Got it?"

"Or else what?" Hortensia stuck her chin out even farther than mine. "You'll go and rat us out to Müller? You're welcome to try, but I'm afraid she likes us more than she likes you, Work Experience." With a triumphant smile, she added, "Camilla happens to be Müller's niece. Her favorite niece!"

Ah. That certainly explained a few things.

It was definitely a sign that I'd been spending too much time around the little brat, but at that moment I actually wondered what Don Burkhardt Jr. would have done in my situation. And then I heard myself say: "For your information, Hortensia Haughtypants, temporary cleaner from Lausanne, I've been here longer than you and I have quite a few friends in this hotel." Oh, that was good! I sounded just as ominously friendly as Don when he mentioned his dad's relationship with Gordon Montfort. But without the Swiss accent and cute lisp, of course. "Friends who would be very unhappy to see me being treated unkindly," I went on, "or to hear someone referring to this venerable building as a 'horrible old dump.'"

Hortensia opened her mouth to retort, but at that moment a gust of wind swept along the corridor and the bathroom door fell shut with a loud bang.

We both jumped, but as Hortensia looked around, startled, I felt in some strange way that my words had been borne out.

"I'm glad we understand each other," I said, and strode past Hortensia to my room at the end of the corridor. It was a little worrying (and I felt bad for Jesus and Gandhi) that I'd adopted the questionable tactics of a nine-year-old delinquent, but you had to admit they worked like a charm.

I closed the bedroom door behind me emphatically, took off my coat, and started picking the pine needles out of my hair.

When I'd arrived at Castle in the Clouds that September, I'd had my pick of the free beds—for most of the year, the staff accommodation wasn't even half full. There were no single rooms, and certainly none with en suite bathrooms, but the little bedroom I'd chosen was so small it could almost have been classed as a single. Nobody had wanted it because the radiator was broken and there was an old water pipe in the wall that, I'd been told, emitted a spooky moaning sound. (Or perhaps, said Denise from Reception, it wasn't the pipe at all but the Lady in White, trying to lure souls up into the turret.) I didn't care; the main thing was that I had my own room. And I still thought I'd made a good choice. I liked the faded lilac striped carpet and the dormer window in the pitched roof that looked out over Obergabelhorn, Dent Blanche, and Zinalrothorn, the mountains that could be seen from the hotel. It was exactly the same view for which the guests staying in the Panorama Suite on the floor below had to pay a small fortune. (Although they did get a panoramic window for their money, along with a panorama terrace.)

Even though there was no heat in my room, I still liked to sleep with the window open. Snuggled up under a thick down comforter and two woolly blankets, I hadn't felt the cold yet even on the chilliest of nights. And as far as the spooky moaning noises were concerned, I'd only been woken up twice in the night by a sort of gentle sighing, and both times I'd been having a bad dream anyway and was positively grateful for the interruption.

I used the second bed under the pitched ceiling as extra shelf space, and I'd been afraid I'd have to clear it over the Christmas holidays to make room for one of the temps. That really would have been a tight squeeze, because apart from the beds there was no space for any other furniture in the room, and there were only two shelves on the walls. I'd piled up a few of my clothes on these shelves, but the rest of my stuff was still in my suitcase under the bed (including a bathing suit that I'd packed in the misguided—and very naive belief that hotel staff would be allowed to use the pool during their time off).

So far, though, it looked as if I'd be allowed to keep my little room all to myself. There were a lot more male temps than female, so it must have been even more crowded in the men's quarters than it was here. As I stripped down to my underwear to try to get rid of all the pine needles, I checked my phone for messages.

My mum, as she did every day, had sent me a smiley face. "Dad, Finn, Leon, and I hope you have a lovely day in the mountains. Hopefully you'll get some time to relax and enjoy the great outdoors."

Sure, Mum—scrubbing skid marks off toilets, working your way through mountains of dirty laundry, running after naughty children, and getting harassed by snooty chambermaids from Lausanne is the perfect way to relax. It's practically like being on holiday.

The message from my friend Delia wasn't much better, though. "Holidays at last! I'm not even going to pick up a textbook or think about finals for at least a week. I'm going to binge Netflix all day and drink and go out dancing—that's the plan anyway." I couldn't help thinking of Ben's bitter words about his friends' vacation plans and grinning. "How are things at your fancy hotel?" Delia went on. "What are the cocktails like? And have any cute guys checked in yet? Perhaps a couple of young millionaires looking for a lovely intern to marry? I get first dibs on the brother, remember. Thanks. Hugs and kisses, D."

I sighed. Delia and I had been best friends since kindergarten; we'd always done everything together, and we'd even picked the same classes at school so we could spend all day every day in each other's company. When I'd failed junior year and gotten held back, being separated from Delia was the worst thing about the whole situation. She said it didn't make any difference because I'd still be sitting next to her in spirit and it really didn't matter whether I did my college entrance exams a year earlier or a year later. But that simply wasn't true. I'd never felt lonelier than when I had to repeat junior year. Just the thought of being stuck in town with another bleak year ahead of me, after all my friends had left school and gone out into the world, was too depressing for words. So I'd beaten them to it.

Okay, so ideally I would've liked to do something a bit cooler and more spectacular than an internship in a hotel, but in order to get a job at a cheetah sanctuary in South Africa or work with whale sharks in the Maldives or spend a year as an au pair in Costa Rica, I would have had to be eighteen. In the end, I'd been glad to find something I could get my parents to agree to, which didn't cost any money and which was still a decent distance away from home.

A quiet tap on the windowpane interrupted my train of thought. Two black button eyes peered in at me, and I hurried to open the window.

This was yet another reason why I loved my little bedroom. The windowsill was a favorite perching place for the mountain jackdaws, probably because whoever had slept here before had been secretly feeding them. It was a habit I'd wholeheartedly embraced as soon as I'd moved in, even though it was technically forbidden. But it wasn't like we were talking about huge flocks of pigeons here. (Apparently there were so many pigeons in Saint Mark's Square in Venice that they eventually were going to cause the whole city to collapse because they pooped on everything and corroded the marble.) We were only talking about seven jackdaws, and they weren't doing anyone any harm. To be honest, I'd never even seen them poop. They were exceedingly well-mannered birds that presumably flew off into the woods when they needed to do their business. I'd christened them all Hugo, because at first—with their yellow beaks, shiny jet-black feathers, and intelligent black eyes—they'd all looked utterly identical to me.

Over time, though, I'd learned to tell them apart. So now there was Melancholy Hugo, Unbelievably Greedy Hugo (they were all greedy, but Unbelievably Greedy Hugo was just . . . unbelievably greedy), One-Legged Hugo, Kleptomaniac Hugo (he'd already stolen two of my hair clips and the lid off a plastic bottle, and had nearly made off with my phone charger cable, too, but secretly he was still my favorite), Chubby Hugo, Hopping Hugo, and Suspicious Hugo.

"Hello, Hopping Hugo! Have you come to visit Super Sophie?" It was a good thing no one could hear me, because I always spoke to the Hugos in baby talk—and what was more, I referred to myself in the third person to help them learn my name. I'd heard that jackdaws were so clever they could actually learn to talk, and I patiently awaited the day when one of the Hugos would look at me and caw "Hello, Super Sophie. I'm very well thanks, and how are you?" That day was probably some way off, though. Hopping Hugo only hopped up and down and gazed at me expectantly.

The sun was shining less brightly now. The wind had come up, and the bank of clouds drifting across the mountaintops from the west was already starting to break up into scraps of mist that gleamed with a milky light.

"What do you think? Is it going to snow before it gets dark?" I asked, crumbling up a milk roll and scattering it over the windowsill. According to an online ornithologists' forum I'd consulted, milk rolls were easy for jackdaws to digest in comparison to normal bread, and unlike sunflower seeds, oats, and nuts, which I'd also tried offering them, the Hugos couldn't get enough of milk rolls.

While I carried on getting changed, One-Legged Hugo and Suspicious Hugo landed on the windowsill and helped Hopping Hugo polish off the crumbs. I took a few photos of them on my phone and sent one, of all three Hugos gazing adoringly into the camera, to Delia with the caption: "Yep, this place is full of cute guys. I just didn't tell you about them before because I couldn't choose between them. But you can definitely have the brother."

I sent the same photo to my mum. "The great outdoors begins right here on my windowsill. And just think, Mum: These birds didn't go to college and they're still perfectly happy."

Even after they'd vacuumed up all the crumbs, the three Hugos stayed sitting on the windowsill and watched as I wriggled into one of the ten pairs of opaque black support tights I'd recently acquired. Fräulein Müller insisted that we wear black tights with our black uniforms. I'd persevered for a while with thinner tights that didn't make me look quite so much like a grandma, but they'd all ended up with so many runs that I got sick and tired of having to replace them. To say nothing of their other disadvantages. Woe betide anyone Fräulein Müller caught pulling up a pair of tights that were falling down! So I had to resort to the support tights. Passion-killers they may have been, but once you'd gotten them on, they were supercomfortable and stayed put all day without falling down. And they made my legs look good. Although there wasn't much leg to be seen, since the black uniform, which I now slipped on under the curious gaze of the three Hugos, came down to just below the knee.

This so-called "front of house" uniform was a phenomenon: On the hanger it looked like nothing more than a buttoned cotton smock with a white collar, but the moment you did up the buttons at the front it was transformed into a decidedly stylish piece of clothing. High-necked and close-fitting at the top and flaring slightly from the hips, the dress looked as though it had been tailor-made for me, and although it was very simple, the snow-white collar, starched cuffs, little gold buttons, and embroidered crown emblem of the hotel made it look really quite elegant, even when I had a feather duster in my hand. I automatically stood up straighter when I was wearing it. However mad (and sad) it might sound, I'd never been more elegantly dressed than I was in this housekeeping smock and a pair of support tights.

I glanced in the mirror that hung on the back of the door. Satisfied with my appearance, I pushed a final hairpin into my bun, now free of pine needles, and turned to the three Hugos. "This would be a good moment to whistle appreciatively."

They didn't whistle, but they did manage an appreciative look before flying off when I went to shut the window. I had to, if I didn't want to come back and find a snowdrift on my bed. I always found it fascinating how suddenly the weather could change here. The sky was a little darker now, and the outlines of the mountains outside my window looked hazy. The bank of clouds had moved a little closer and the wind was picking up. The weather forecast said we were going to have "prolonged snowfall even in low-lying areas" all week, and although that was bound to make it more difficult for the guests to get to the hotel, I couldn't help but be pleased.

This was going to be by far the snowiest Christmas I'd ever had. And the first Christmas away from my family.

I'd been expecting to feel homesick at the thought of having to work on Christmas Day and spend it with complete strangers, but in fact all I felt was an excited tingling in my stomach.

Because one thing was for sure: This Christmas was going to be anything but boring.



Ithough pets were expressly forbidden at Castle in the Clouds (*in the interests of all our guests in need of rest and relaxation*), we checked in no fewer than three dogs that day. Together with the pug belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Von Dietrichstein in Room 310, who'd arrived the day before, that made four exceptions to the rule. They had all been personally approved by Gordon Montfort himself, however.

"There are guests and there are guests," he would say. "And for *certain* types of guest there are no lengths we won't go to."

The Von Dietrichsteins were definitely *certain* types of guest. Not only were they bona fide aristocrats, but they also worked in the media—he was a photographer; she was a freelance journalist—and for years they'd been granted exclusive coverage of the New Year's Ball and the various celebrity interviews that went with it. To be fair, the Von Dietrichsteins' pug wasn't really an issue when it came to guests in need of rest and relaxation. He was so quiet and placid that the first time I saw him I thought he was a stuffed dog, or an eerily lifelike candy box where you had to unscrew the head to get to the chocolate inside. He didn't even slobber, which was most unusual for a pug.

The two poodles belonging to Mara Matthäus, the figureskating gold medalist, were a lot more lively, but even they behaved themselves impeccably while their owner was checking in. And this was despite the fact that Gordon Montfort, who'd arrived at the

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hotel a short time before, wouldn't leave them alone and kept ruffling their ears like there was no tomorrow.

I'd watched the ball hostess arrive from my hiding place in the concierge's lodge. From here, I had a perfect view of the whole of the lobby and the forecourt beyond the revolving doors. I could hear what was being said at Reception, which was diagonally opposite, but I felt safe behind the wood-paneled counter. If necessary I could disappear from view entirely by taking one step to the left, which I'd done with all possible speed when the hotelier had appeared. Though he tended to ignore me whenever he saw me anyway, to be fair.

"Champion little dogs, these, just like their champion of an owner," he said jovially to Mara Matthäus, laughing at his little play on words.

His son, Ben, at the reception desk, grimaced very briefly, but his face soon regained its bland expression.

Clearly Ben hadn't had any time to unpack after he'd fed the horses but had started his shift at Reception straightaway. Either he was unusually conscientious, or his father terrorized him the same way he did his other employees. Still—if it was true that Ben worked for free, then at least Gordon Montfort couldn't exactly threaten to fire him or dock his wages.

From my hiding place I'd also witnessed the rather chilly greeting between father and son. Gordon Montfort hadn't smiled at his son half as warmly as he'd smiled at the two poodles, and Ben hadn't smiled at all, just looked anxious. He'd walked in to find his father laying into Anni Moser for having had the audacity to cross the lobby.

"What have I told you?" he'd hissed at her.

"That you don't want to see my wrinkly old face anywhere I

might alarm the guests?" Anni Moser was the oldest chambermaid on Fräulein Müller's team—perhaps the oldest chambermaid in the entire world, to judge by the wrinkles on her face and the liver spots on her hands. Anni Moser would never tell anyone how old she was, only that she had no intention of leaving Castle in the Clouds until she was too old to wield a feather duster. Which certainly wasn't the case yet: Nobody, not even Fräulein Müller, wielded a feather duster as energetically as Anni Moser, nobody climbed ladders more fearlessly to clean curtain rails and cornices, and nobody knew more tricks for getting stains out of carpets and furniture.

"I'm sorry—it won't happen again," she'd muttered, and hurried away under Gordon Montfort's scowling gaze as he turned to greet his son.

I hadn't heard what Ben had said to Gordon, but whatever it was he hadn't seemed to like it much. He'd continued to scowl, and instead of hugging his son, he'd given him a brief, awkward clap on the shoulder, which Ben had returned just as awkwardly. Then Gordon Montfort had spotted some greasy fingerprints on the glass of the revolving door and flown into one of his frequent rages, complete with bulging veins at the temples. (The fingerprints, incidentally, to judge by how low down they were, belonged to a certain diminutive nine-year-old boy.)

Ben must have been used to his father's temper tantrums—he hadn't batted an eyelash at any rate, when Gordon had started yelling his head off. The new bellhops, on the other hand, had fled in terror to fetch a cloth for the glass. One of them was trembling even now.

Standing behind the reception desk in his black suit, Ben looked older than he had before, and I was fairly sure he hadn't had a side part in his hair when I'd first met him, either. He handed Mara Matthäus her room key with a nonchalant smile.

Castle in the Clouds still hadn't arrived in the age of digital magnetic key cards—in fact, when it came to locks and keys, it was stuck in the nineteenth century. Some guests found this outlandish and outdated, but most thought the ornate wrought-iron keys, just like the heavy gold tassels that served as key rings, were all part and parcel of the hotel's ingenious nostalgic decor.

"Please allow me to personally escort you to your room so I can make sure everything is to your satisfaction," purred Gordon Montfort, snatching up the key before the (very attractive) Ms. Matthäus could reach for it. "Jakob here will see to your bags."

"Jakob here" was in fact Jaromir, an unfamiliar sight in his doorman's uniform with top hat and braided frock coat. You'd never have guessed it from his stoic expression, but I knew he felt exceedingly uncomfortable in this getup because he'd spent most of the past two days complaining about it. As a result, I'd learned some Czech vocabulary I was fairly sure didn't appear in any Czech textbooks, as well as the wonderful phrase: "I'm a bloody handyman, not a bloomin' ringmaster!"

Jaromir had actually gotten off quite lightly in comparison to Jonas and Nico, two young temps who'd been recruited for the holidays, like Hortensia and her friends, from the hotel-management college in Lausanne. Their bellhop uniforms consisted of funny little waist-length jackets and ridiculous caps. But that was little consolation to Jaromir.

Only when I'd reminded him of the big tips he was likely to get thanks to his new uniform had he cheered up a little. And that was probably why he tipped his hat to me now and winked as he wheeled the luggage cart toward one of the staff elevators.

For most of the year, the hotel didn't employ bellhops, doormen, or porters. When guests arrived, whoever happened to be working at Reception at the time was responsible for greeting them and helping them with their luggage. But over the holidays, when the hotel was full of illustrious visitors, these traditional posts were filled again and the old uniforms were brought out of storage. Weeks ago, in the laundry room, I'd helped Pavel take these precious treasures (most of them old enough to be in a museum) out of their cloth bags. Together we'd steamed the heavy wool fabric and polished the brass buttons. As we worked, I'd learned the aria "Il Mio Tesoro" from *Don Giovanni* and the lovely word *epaulet*—which was the name of the fancy shoulder decorations that were stitched onto the uniforms. I'd been waiting for an opportunity to impress somebody with it ever since.

Once the antique grille and doors of the elevator had closed with their usual clank and rattle behind Gordon Montfort, Mara Matthäus, and the two well-behaved poodles, a collective sigh of relief went through the lobby. I was finally able to emerge from my hiding place.

Monsieur Rocher winked at me over the top of his glasses. "As long as they don't bark or chase cats, I have nothing against dogs," he said. "I just always think it's such a shame about the nice white snow."

I giggled. "That's true! That's the first thing my mum ever taught me about snow: Avoid the yellow patches. But in the valley where I live, the snow doesn't usually last long enough to get peed on." Monsieur Rocher looked at me sympathetically.

"Especially at Christmas," I said. "It always rains at Christmas."

"That's terrible! Another marzipan truffle?" As if to console me for my snowless childhood, Monsieur Rocher held out a silver bowl full of chocolates whose outer shells the hotel pâtissière had deemed not perfect enough for the guests.

"Yes, but this really is the last one!" I closed my eyes in rapture as the chocolate melted on my tongue. Luckily for the staff, who got fed all the chocolates she wasn't happy with, the pâtissière Madame Cléo was a pedant and a perfectionist. A snippet of grated orange peel in the glaze was enough for her to declare a petit four a failure, and she'd once rejected an entire tray of éclairs because she said they looked like penises.

"Was your first day as a babysitter as bad as you thought it would be?" inquired Monsieur Rocher.

"It exceeded even my worst fears." I rolled my eyes dramatically. "And I only had two kids to look after. But from tomorrow on, I'll have a trained teacher with me, and I'm sure she'll know what to do when the children would rather run away and fling themselves in front of cars than build a snowman." Childcare at Castle in the Clouds worked in the same way as the bellhops and the doormen for most of the year it wasn't offered (unless somebody expressly requested a babysitter, and then the hotel would arrange it for them). But during the holiday season, a kindergarten teacher came every day from the nearest village to entertain all the guests under the age of twelve, from nine in the morning until four thirty in the afternoon, including Sundays and public holidays. And this year she'd have me as an assistant.

"Hmm." Nobody said hmm as kindly as Monsieur Rocher.

He always sounded so encouraging, never disapproving or doubtful. "If this weather keeps up, you'll probably have to stay indoors tomorrow anyway. And we can open up the game room if necessary. The key's just inside, on the ledge above the door. In case anyone tries to escape."

"Or break in," I said, thinking of Don Burkhardt Jr.

We fell into a companionable silence as we sipped the cappuccinos I'd brought with me. The drinks had gone a bit cold by now but it was such good coffee that it still tasted nice and I could feel myself relaxing as I drank it.

Monsieur Rocher was like balm for the soul. I had no idea how he did it, but in his presence I always felt calm and confident. Problems didn't completely disappear, but they suddenly seemed a lot more manageable. And my argument with Hortensia and the nastiness in the bathroom that morning felt so insignificant now, so unimportant, that I didn't even feel the need to tell him about it.

It was hard to guess at his age: His long, pale face had hardly any wrinkles, apart from a few smile lines, but his gray hair and grandfatherly wisdom and kindness made me think he was older than his smooth skin would suggest. I'd asked him once how old he was, and he'd looked at me with a rather bemused expression and said, "Oh, you people! You're always so fixated on numbers." Which had confirmed my suspicions that he was older than he looked.

After all the noise and chaos of a few minutes earlier, a soothing sense of peace had descended upon the lobby, and the fact that it was the calm before the storm made me appreciate it even more. Ben was sorting through some papers; Mr. and Mrs. Ludwig from Room 107 sat on the sofa by the crackling log fire, rustling their newspapers now and then; and the two bellhops stood around in the lobby looking slightly lost. In those ridiculous outfits, they looked as though they might be about to launch into "March of the Tin Soldiers" from *The Nutcracker* at any moment.

We were expecting most of the guests this evening or at some point tomorrow, although some had arrived already. A nondescriptlooking older man, traveling alone, had checked in shortly before Mara Matthäus—and I'd immediately have written him off as boring if it wasn't for Monsieur Rocher.

"That gentleman is anything but boring," he'd murmured. "Just look a little closer. Perhaps you can't see it very well under that coat, but he's extremely fit and well-built, as if he's been in training. Watch the way he walks, his tailored clothes, his practiced eye as he subtly checks out his surroundings—and do you see that bulge under his arm? That's a shoulder holster with a pistol in it."

"Oh," I'd whispered excitedly, as I briefly caught sight of the bulge, too. "A hit man? Or a . . . er . . . romance scam artist who's . . . er . . . carrying a gun for some reason? Shouldn't we let someone know there's a man wandering around with a pistol? What if he's planning to raid the hotel?"

But Monsieur Rocher had just smiled. "Given that he's checking into Room 117, right next door to the Panorama Suite, I think we can safely assume he's a bodyguard employed by the Smirnov family."

"Oh, right." That was rather less exciting, but a lot more reassuring than a hit man. The Smirnovs—the Russian family who'd booked the Panorama Suite—seemed to be very unusual indeed: unusually rich, at least. They were definitely a *certain* type of guest. On top of the six-hundred-franc deluxe welcome package they'd ordered, consisting of a bouquet of roses plus champagne, truffles, caviar, and Japanese strawberries, they'd also paid for an extra flower arrangement made up of thirty-five white amaryllis and a quarter pound of steak tartare made from Charolais beef. This last item must have been for the dog. Dog Ban Exception Number Four, along with the Von Dietrichsteins' pug and the two poodles. (At least the Smirnovs' dog must only be a little one—very little, judging by the amount of steak tartare they'd ordered. Or perhaps he was on a diet.)

I set my empty cup down on the counter. Dusk was falling now and, as if she'd simply been waiting for a quiet moment, the Forbidden Cat came sauntering down the stairs to keep us company. She settled herself between the bell on the counter and my proppedup elbows, graceful as a Ming vase. Well, as a purring Ming vase that licked its paws occasionally.

Mr. and Mrs. Ludwig nudged each other conspiratorially at the sight of the cat and smiled. I'd secretly decided that the white-haired old couple from Room 107 were my favorite guests. They were always holding hands and reading poetry to each other and generally being adorable. He called her "my beautiful" and she called him "my love," and they both looked a little dowdy with their old-fashioned haircuts and clothes, which were probably supposed to be elegant and chic but which actually just looked a bit dated. It was clear they weren't used to being waited on and found it embarrassing to have other people doing things for them. Every day they left five francs on the chest of drawers in their room and a note saying: "This is for you, dear Chambermaid!" I always left two complimentary chocolates on their pillows instead of one and placed the money virtuously in the tip jar in the staff office, even though it was definitely meant for me. After all, the other chambermaids were not actually very nice, and the Ludwigs were always showering me with praise for doing perfectly ordinary jobs, like bringing them a firmer pillow or waterproofing their shoes.

Ever since she was a young girl, Mrs. Ludwig had dreamed of dancing the waltz at Castle in the Clouds' New Year's Ball, wearing a beautiful gown and a tiara. For years, she'd been studying the photos in the glossy magazines showing crowds of rich, famous, and beautiful people dancing, laughing, and drinking champagne in the huge ballroom.

"I could just *hear* the violins," she'd confided to me one day.

"She could, you know," Mr. Ludwig had added and gazed lovingly at her.

When she'd met Mr. Ludwig, at the age of twenty-one, there'd been no doubt in her mind whom she wanted to dance with at the ball one day, and the pair had married just four months later. Because the Ludwigs were neither rich nor famous, there was no way they could afford to stay at Castle in the Clouds, but that didn't stop them from being happy. The years passed and they brought up three children, built themselves a small house, and worked hard to pay off their debts.

"But she never stopped dreaming of Castle in the Clouds," Mr. Ludwig chimed in at this point in the story (I've shortened it a bit), and Mrs. Ludwig added, "Dreaming is good—it keeps you young."

And so for thirty years, Mr. Ludwig had put money aside and secretly taken dancing lessons until, at last, he'd saved up enough to afford a room at Castle in the Clouds.

"He even wanted to buy me a tiara for the ball," Mrs. Ludwig said, laughing as she patted Mr. Ludwig's hand. "But I said that would just be too much. I'm going to be the oldest but also the happiest girl ever to dance at this ball, isn't that so, my love?"

"You'll be the most beautiful girl of them all," Mr. Ludwig replied, and I secretly wiped away a tear. If that wasn't romantic, I didn't know what was.

The fact that the two of them were now sitting reading the paper in the lobby, keeping a close eye on the revolving doors, was no coincidence. They were at least as curious as I was and keen to catch a glimpse of any celebrity guests. They'd been delighted to see Mara Matthäus arrive, as well as the millionaire businesswoman and patron of the arts known as the Ball Bearings Baroness, who'd checked into Room 100 along with her much younger boyfriend. With any luck, the British actor, the American textile mogul with his extended family, and the extravagant Russians from the Panorama Suite would also show up before dinner.

I looked over at Ben. Now that his father was gone, I plucked up the courage to speak to him.

"Would you like a chocolate?" I called softly.

"Oh God, yes, toss them over here," said Ben. "I'm half starved."

For a second, I was tempted to take him at his word and hurl the truffles across the lobby. But, first, the reception desk was quite far away; second, I'd have had to somehow throw them around a pillar decorated with garlands of fir tree branches; and, third, the truffles were far too precious to risk dropping on the floor.

"Go on," said Monsieur Rocher, as if he'd read my mind. "I've eaten enough marzipan truffles today to last me a hundred years."

And because it was still so quiet and peaceful, I took the bowl and left the concierge's lodge. If I didn't want to climb over the counter (which would have been much quicker, naturally, but not really appropriate) I had to go through the back door into a little staff room with no windows but plenty of doors, and from there into the lobby.

It had started snowing outside. The snowflakes danced gently in the light of the lamps. From the bar on the east side of the hotel, the soft sound of piano music drifted over to us as I offered the chocolates to Ben, the Ludwigs ("Oh, how lovely! What wonderful service you get here!"), and the two bellhops.

One of them, Nico, hesitated for a moment. "We're not allowed to eat while we're on duty," he said.

"Hmm," I said, and my *hmm* didn't sound nearly as forgiving as Monsieur Rocher's.

Nico was about to scratch his head indecisively but couldn't because of his silly bellhop's hat. "If Mr. Montfort catches us, he'll fire us on the spot. You heard him yelling about those fingerprints just now. And I think his brother's back there in the office." He pointed to the door behind the reception desk. "They say he's not as strict, but still, I don't want to get on the wrong side of both my bosses on my first proper day at work."

Ben and I exchanged a glance. Clearly Ben hadn't made his relationship with the two hoteliers public yet.

"They might have put hidden cameras up there." Nico pointed at the ceiling. "Though most of this place is hopelessly out of date when it comes to technology. I've never seen elevators like that anywhere except movies. And the boilers in the staff bathrooms—"

"In the time it's taken you to make your mind up, you could have eaten the whole bowlful," I broke in, and made to take the bowl away from him. "And FYI, *Food and Travel* magazine has rated Madame Cléo's truffles the best in the world." (Well, they would have done so, if they'd ever been here).

Nico hastily shoved a chocolate into his mouth. "You're Work Experience, right?" he asked with his mouth full. "The intern. Camilla and Hortensia told me about you."

Work Experience! I was so fed up with being called that, no matter by whom.

"We don't say *work experience* here. Or *intern*. The technical term is . . . *epaulet*." Sometimes these crazy notions just came over me, and I couldn't help myself. Delia called these my "mental moments."

"Epaulet?" echoed Nico. "I've never heard it called that before."

I raised my eyebrows. "What's it called again, the degree you're working on?"

"Bachelor of Science in International Hospitality Management," said Nico like a shot, and you could see him swelling with pride for a moment. Until he remembered his bellhop's uniform.

"Well, I'm sure you'll be learning all the terminology soon," said Ben, grinning as he leaned forward with his elbows on the desk. "Are there any chocolates left, Epaulet?"

"Two," I was about to reply. But at that moment, the peace of the afternoon was shattered, and all hell broke loose.