



MARGARET AMATT



Free Hugs



and

Old-Fashioned



Kisses X



A SHORT STORY



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and
Old-Fashioned Kisses

A short story

By

Margaret Amatt

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One

Livvi

Tears flowed thick and fast now that Livvi had left the ballroom bar for the quiet corridor beyond. She tried to calm herself, but it wasn't happening. What a terrible week. Make that month. Or why lie? She couldn't remember when things had last been anything better than ok. Pressing her hand to her lips, she looked around. If this wasn't going to stop, she had to find the toilets or somewhere quiet. The modern hotel in the centre of Edinburgh was chic and definitely her kind of place, but not somewhere she was familiar with. She'd come in a different door with the other evening reception guests. Now she wasn't sure where she'd emerged, and tears clouded her vision. She just wanted a hug. Some basic raw comfort. But from whom? Her mother? She was thousands of miles away, throwing lavish parties on her yacht in New York. Anyway, even if she'd been standing two feet away, Mother wasn't noted for her hugginess.

Breathe. Livvi fanned her face. This was silly. The girls were just teasing. She'd taken their words too much to heart. Normally she'd let it wash over her. But her week had gone from bad to worse. Thursday, she'd had a near miss with a cyclist causing her to drop her phone, smash the screen and almost break her ankle. Friday, she'd missed out on securing a prestigious

client – much to her father’s displeasure. Today, having her supposed friends give her a verbal bruising about how she should *grow up, stop being so clingy and be more independent* was the last straw. Though perhaps it was true.

The door behind her opened, letting out a blast of music from the ballroom bar. She turned her face away. Crap. Who was it? An innocent passer-by, or one of her so-called friends come to commiserate? An apology wasn’t likely. They thought it was funny. *Oh, Livvi, stop being a baby and make a decision for yourself! She can’t even decide which cocktail she wants. Why not phone Daddy for advice!* They were probably still laughing. But why? It was horrible. She stifled more tears. Maybe they were just jealous. Her father bought her privileges. Other people didn’t always like it.

‘Oh, excuse me,’ said an unfamiliar male voice with a slight cough. A soft tread on the carpet. He’d moved closer.

Livvi didn’t turn around. Surely he’d just walk on. Wiping her eyes with her fingertips, she tried to look calm, like she was just a dippy girl who’d lost her way. Which wasn’t far from the truth sometimes.

‘Are you ok?’

‘Fine, sure.’ She sniffed. ‘Just em... fine.’

She caught the edge of a pleasant scent, fresh with top notes of lemon and mint. Fragrances were her business and she knew her stuff, but she didn’t

recognise this. Perfumes reacted differently to different people. This one worked well on this man. Curiosity forced her head around. Her eyes widened and she fiddled with her bracelet as she looked at him.

He nudged a pair of narrow glasses higher onto his straight nose. Blue irises twinkled through the lenses and his thick blonde eyebrows lifted cautiously. ‘I er...’ He gestured around the wide corridor, then ran his hands through his blonde curls. ‘Was just looking for the bathroom, but are you sure you’re ok? I heard, well, you’re the girl those women were—’

‘Laughing at.’

‘Yes.’ He nodded. ‘I wasn’t listening, but our table was right beside yours.’

‘Oh, god.’ Livvi pressed her hand to her forehead. ‘So embarrassing.’

‘Not at all. It sounded pretty mean. But it’s none of my business. If you want me to go away, I will. But you look in a bad way. Do you need—’

‘A hug?’ Livvi gathered her long caramel ombre hair into a ponytail and slowly let it go, spreading across her back.

‘No.’ He froze, his mouth slightly open. ‘Not that, no. I wouldn’t presume. I meant someone to call you a taxi or something.’

With a weak smile, Livvi shook her head. ‘Thanks, that’s so thoughtful, but I’ll be ok.’

‘Well, if you’re sure.’ He raked his curls again. ‘And for what it’s worth, those women at your table aren’t worth it. I know they’ve probably had one too many but harping on like that until someone snaps is frankly not cool.’

Livvi ran her palms down her short silver dress. The confidence she usually drew from looking lithe and dainty in figure-hugging strappy dresses had evaporated. She looked up at the man. ‘Thank you. You’re possibly the nicest person I’ve spoken to for quite a while.’

‘Right.’ He cleared his throat.

‘And thanks. I don’t need a taxi. Right now, I’d rather have the hug, though I get the whole random stranger thing is off-putting – for you.’

He cocked his head with a quizzical glance. ‘It’s unusual, I grant you. I’m not sure off-putting is the right word though.’

Livvi sighed and looked around. What to do now?

‘But, hell, why not?’ He opened his arms. ‘You only live once and all that.’

‘Seriously? Wow.’ With a deep breath that took in his beautiful scent, Livvi smiled through her puffy eyes and stepped into his hold. Her arms wrapped around his firm waist and she spread her fingers across his back. Heat radiated through his crisp white shirt. His wooden posture softened as she rested her cheek on his chest. ‘Thank you. It’s been a long time.’

‘What has?’ His words fell softly in her right ear.

‘Since someone gave me a hug.’

The pressure of his palms increased on Livvi’s narrow back. ‘My pleasure,’ he said. Together, they stood for a minute, maybe more. Livvi’s eyes closed. Her breathing calmed. She soaked up the warmth. A window to a whole new world slipped open in her soul. This was exquisite.

Two

Jakob

Jakob stepped back, releasing the beautiful woman he'd followed out of the ballroom bar. How long had they stood there? Just holding each other without a word. He felt empty now she'd moved aside. She looked down, smoothing her short dress.

When he'd followed her, the less tactful of his colleagues had wolf-whistled and cat-called, deliberately misreading his intention to go to the bathroom. Which he was about to do, of course. The fact he'd gone straight after her was coincidental – kind of. He'd be a liar to say he didn't find her attractive. And after wincing as her friends had taken the mickey until she'd run off, clearly distressed, he'd felt subconsciously obliged to check her well-being. His colleagues had sniggered along throughout the verbal bashing, some of which was clearly meant to be funny – to those dishing it out. But Jakob had been the butt of 'humorous' remarks like that before – and they hurt.

Only wanting to satisfy his conscience and check she was ok and not about to throw herself under a bus, it stunned him to be standing beside her after indulging in such an unexpected and quite heavenly hug. Back home, his mum always propounded the benefits of a good hug. But Jakob didn't

advocate hugs with strangers or anyone outside his immediate family – he was a private guy; he took his time getting to know new people. Hugging random women was way out of his comfort zone, yet oddly refreshing. His usually steady pulse rate had gone haywire.

‘Are you going back in?’ he asked, trying to sound casual and wanting to shove his hands into his pockets, though he resisted – it always looked rude. But it meant his hands were dangling about like great useless things.

‘I want to, but I also don’t. That makes no sense.’ She covered her face with her long fingers, a sparkly bracelet slipped down her bronze arms.

‘Makes perfect sense to me. You don’t want to see them because they’re innately horrible, and you do because you don’t want to let such low-lives get the better of you.’

She smiled with perfect pink lips. ‘Spot on. You’re smart.’

Jakob tipped her a salute. ‘Nope, just Jakob. Jakob Hansen, computer programmer un-extraordinaire.’

‘Livvi Karam.’ She held out her hand, and he took it. As she gripped him, her wide brown eyes took him all in. She resembled a film star – way, way, way out of his league. Yet, here she was, holding his hand, asking for a hug. *Jeez, the heat in here.* Jakob freed his hand and tugged his shirt collar. ‘That’s an unusual name.’

‘My father’s half Lebanese, he lives in Dubai. My mother lives in New York. They divorced years ago.’

That explained her unplaceable accent. ‘So, you’re a long way from home.’

She nodded. ‘I don’t have a home. I was born in America, but I’ve lived all over the world. I don’t belong anywhere. I may be here for a few months, maybe years, I’m never sure. I’ve just started in business, with my father’s help. I was going to try London, but my father thought Edinburgh would be more niche. That’s what caused the hilarity in there. I’ve never done anything on my own, and I haven’t mastered the whole putting down roots thing.’

‘Well, there’s more to living life than where you live. Sometimes I miss home. Not the place as such, but the people. I miss my family, friends that I’m close to. I like where I live now, but it’s not quite the same without those familiar faces.’

‘I don’t even have that. I’d love to have a close friend, but I panic that if I get too invested it’ll hurt when I move on. I’m so used to moving around. It’s hard to shift the mindset. People always think I’m either too needy or too shallow. I never quite get it right. Sometimes I just feel really lonely.’ She looked away, pressing her lips together.

‘Hey.’ Jakob swallowed, stepped forward and put his hands on Livvi’s upper arms. ‘I know how you feel. I lived a pretty sheltered life, growing up. And I’ve found it hard to fit in in new places. I always feel,’ he shrugged, ‘alone... and different.’

‘Does it bother you?’

‘Sure, sometimes. Most of the time, people are ok. I just take a while to warm up.’ He rubbed one hand through the front of his hair, keeping the other tight on her arm, hardly able to believe he was saying this stuff. ‘And you know what?’

‘What?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with being different. Those silly people in there are not worth it. Rise above it.’

She smiled and drew in a breath. ‘Yes. You’re right. Thank you, Jakob Hansen. I feel better now and I’m going to face them again.’

His arms wrapped around her one more time. She slipped her fingers round his waist and his stomach clenched. He breathed her sweet perfume and gave her slender back what he hoped was a fortifying rub, while trying to remain composed. ‘You’ve got this,’ he said, standing back and opening the door for her. With a grateful smile, she pushed back her shoulders and sailed in, appearing quite serene. About to let the door fall shut, he caught

her glancing round. With a firm nod and a smile, he closed the door as the music and dancing swallowed her.

On his return to the table, he skirted around his co-worker in her wedding dress.

‘You came back? You idiot,’ said Al – an extremely cringe-worthy colleague – before Jakob was within ten feet of the table.

‘Of course, did you expect me to stay in the bathroom all evening?’

‘Like that’s where you actually were! Why didn’t you get a room? Or did she not like you?’

‘Bugger off.’ Jakob tapped his finger, trying to avoid checking out Livvi’s table.

‘I went over and chatted to her pals,’ said Al. ‘She’s a toff, got loadsa’ money, her daddy buys her into everything, but she’s thick as mince.’

‘Not nice, Al,’ said Jakob.

‘Yes, you shouldn’t say things like that,’ said Jane from admin.

‘Who cares?’ Al laughed.

‘Me,’ said Jakob.

‘Ooooh! Did you ask her out?’ Al chuckled.

‘No.’

‘Why the hell not? What the hell were you doing with her in the lavvy? You were ages.’

‘Really, Al,’ said Jane.

‘Well, apparently she only dates rich guys. Daddy’s orders. But you might have at least tried for a quickie.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Which island do you come from again?’ Al circled his thick finger around his glass.

‘Mull.’ Jakob sighed.

‘Why not tell her you’re some prince of Mull, guaranteed she’ll fall for it. No one’s ever heard of the place anyway. It’s your ticket to getting laid.’

‘Not happening,’ said Jakob as Al laughed. Jakob caught Jane’s gaze and she rolled her eyes. Al was the office tosser. ‘I need another drink.’ Standing up, Jakob edged his way through the tables and past the dancefloor to the bar in the corner, where there was a jumbled queue and no noticeable system. As he waited, his eyes lingered on Livvi’s table. Like she was aware, she turned to survey him, giving him a smile just as a group of guests moved between them. Jakob lost sight of her and turned his gaze to watch the dance floor. How could anyone find dancing enjoyable? His eyes wandered back to Livvi. If he had more gumption, he could have asked her out. Did he dare? Wait. Why was Al sitting beside her? Jakob gritted his teeth. Al’s confidence in his own charm blinded him to what was clear to everyone else. The women’s hacked-off faces said it all, but Al looked

oblivious. What an idiot. Jakob edged closer to the front of the queue. Leaning his arms on the bar to mark his place, he waited for a free server. After a few minutes, a barman looked over and Jakob ordered. Before he got his wallet out, a hand touched his arm.

‘I’ll get that.’ Livvi stood beside him, smiling.

‘No, there’s no need.’ But, wow, she was beautiful.

‘Please, it’s a thank you. You were so kind.’

‘Well, I didn’t do it for a drink. I did it for free. But I...’ He swallowed. Ok, so he was shit at this kind of thing. He’d never asked anyone out in the flesh, only by email or text. This kind of face-to-face was... well, embarrassing. He was a word-clumsy idiot, and she was a classy woman. ‘But, if you’d like to join me.’ He swallowed. ‘I’d like that.’

‘Yes.’ Without another word, she sidled in and ordered a rhubarb gin. Silence. And it was golden. Plenty of other noise filled the room; music, chatter, laughter, glasses clinking, but not from her. She just stared and smiled. Jakob looked back, spellbound, unable to blink. She edged nearer. Then, as if she’d anchored a hook at the back of his neck, Jakob slipped forward. Barely an inch of air separated them. *Does she want to kiss me?* A thrill of panic and excitement shot through his chest. Never had he kissed anyone he’d only met half an hour before. Was that even ok? Didn’t it break a hundred and one dating rules? *Like I would know!* His last relationship

had ended after a few months, when his ex had complained that he shouldn't be annoyed at her seeing other men as they weren't exclusive yet. *Seriously?* Livvi's eyes twinkled. Jakob inched closer.

'That's six eighty,' yelled the barman.

Jakob pulled back quickly, fumbling for his wallet. Livvi put her tanned hand over his. 'I'll get it. You've done enough for me already.' She flashed a card across the machine before lifting her glass. Jakob clinked his pint on the side of her elegant gin glass.

'Jakob.' She took a sip and glimpsed around. 'I wonder. Would it be really forward of me to ask if I could see you again?'

Steadying his glass, Jakob narrowly avoided sloshing half the drink down his front. 'No, well, yes... I mean, I don't think it's forward, well, it is a bit, but what I'm saying.' He stopped. Why was she smiling? Putting his hand to his forehead, he closed his eyes. One corner of his lip twitched. 'Ok, I should shut up. Yes, Livvi. I'd like to see you again.'

'Good.' She closed her hand over his. 'Because I think you're exactly the kind of guy I've been looking for.'

Three

Livvi

If Jakob thought her choice of venue was unusual, he didn't say so. Livvi strolled through Princes Street Gardens, two paper cups warming her hands, her breath billowing in clouds. Gold and brown autumn leaves clung to the trees in the still air. Along the path, she saw Jakob sitting on a bench, his long legs crossed at the ankles. Padded in a thick grey coat with the neck of his knitted white sweater right up to his jaw, he was engrossed in his phone.

'Hey.' Livvi approached, and he instantly looked up.

'You're early,' he said, shoving his phone into his pocket.

'So, what does that make you?'

The wry smile on his face was beautiful. Livvi couldn't help but return it. Warmth spread through her veins just seeing him.

'Cautious, nervous.' He rubbed his nose under the bridge of his glasses.

'Completely paranoid.'

'Why?' Livvi sat down, smiling. 'And I hope you like cappuccino.' She handed him a cup.

'Thanks.'

'So, why are you paranoid?'

'You know.' He gave a one-shoulder shrug and lifted the cup lid, sniffing it rather suspiciously. 'It's not every day a guy gets asked out by, well,

someone like you. I thought you might not show.'

Leaning forward, she rested her hand on his thigh. Despite his attempt to disguise his sharp intake of breath, she heard it. How endearing. For someone who gave such delicious hugs, he was jumpy about human contact. 'Of course, I showed. Why wouldn't I?'

'I don't know. Just self-doubt and all that.'

'What's to doubt?'

He let out a brief snort. 'A lot.'

'Why? You're kind. You talk good sense. And you give beautiful hugs. I wouldn't mind another one if you were up for it?' She blinked, deliberately batting her long dark lashes. Why not? Why lie? She liked him. And it had nothing to do with the ridiculous story his colleague had spun at the wedding about him being the millionaire son of a wealthy landowner. Of course, it may be true. Life could be strange. But it didn't matter. Why care what Daddy had decreed about the men she could and couldn't see? Time to decide for herself. Up until now, she hadn't given the future much thought. Maybe it was her reaction to a nomadic childhood, but she couldn't grasp how to plan for life. Things just happened – or they didn't. She may not know Jakob Hansen in a few months, but right now, she did, and she liked him.

He was examining her closely, his blue eyes searching. ‘Well, since you asked so nicely.’ He lifted his arm and placed it around her shoulder. Shuffling closer, she didn’t stop until her thigh bumped against his. Her snug wool coat wasn’t a patch on the heat radiating from him. He was like the biggest fluffiest blanket and hot water bottle imaginable. Ironic, given he didn’t ooze warmth at first glance. If anything, he seemed stiff. As she leaned on his shoulder, he relaxed and rested his head on hers. His soft curls tumbled across her sleek hair and his lightly stubbled cheek brushed her forehead. As she looked out over the gardens, taking in the tourists, dog-walkers and businesspeople passing by, she felt suddenly at home. This was somewhere she could grow to love. Not just the location with its iconic view of higgledy-piggledy old buildings, the unusual Swiss-style flats and the dramatic castle perched on its mound, but her current position – safe with Jakob.

‘Talk to me,’ she said, nuzzling against his shoulder.

‘About what?’ The words lifted a wisp of her hair.

Smoothing it back, she closed her eyes. ‘You.’

He gave a little grunt. ‘Me? What can I say? I come from an island called Mull that you won’t have heard of. I have a mum, a dad and two brothers. I don’t smoke. I don’t have a pet. I drive an Audi. I live in a flat in Stockbridge. That’s about it.’

Pressing her lips together, she stifled a laugh. He was too cute, listing his facts like a resumé. ‘Stockbridge? Is that the posh place with the fancy charity shops?’

‘I really don’t know.’

‘One of my friends talks about them, they stock nearly new designer labels at bargain prices.’ Not that she needed them, but she liked magical finds in quaint little stores.

‘I can’t help you. Shopping and me, well, we’re not the best of friends.’

Snuggling right in, Livvi soaked in the warmth, the strength of his hand on her shoulder, his head on hers.

‘Your turn,’ he said. ‘Tell me your story.’

‘How long have you got?’

He placed his cappuccino on the bench, leaned across her and wrestled up his coat sleeve to check his watch. Livvi’s breathing hitched and a pleasurable tingling sensation flooded through her as he enveloped her. ‘It’s two-twenty on Saturday afternoon.’ His lips were so close to her now. ‘I don’t need to be anywhere until nine o’clock on Monday, so we have the best part of forty-two hours. Will that be enough?’ He side-eyed her with a grin that made the cutest little dimple in his cheek.

Livvi laughed. He returned the look with a completely unsuccessful attempt at appearing serious while keeping her caged. ‘I don’t know how

you worked that out so quickly, or if it's even accurate, but if I'm to delve into my full story, I'd say it's nowhere near long enough.'

'Well, you better summarise then.' He moved his arm from across her chest and rested his head back, running his hand through his hair.

'I will.' She poked him in the ribs.

He smirked.

With a swift movement, Livvi slid her fingers across his cheek, pulling him back to face her. Momentarily, he stiffened but didn't break eye-contact. 'Before I talk, could I...' She leaned up.

He nodded infinitesimally, closed his eyes, bent towards her, and met her lips. The way he'd angled his head so his glasses wouldn't get in the way made the kiss feel so erotic. She went all Lois Lane as he cautiously moved in deeper and she responded with as much finesse as the visceral desire rippling through her body would allow. If she ripped off his glasses, she was sure to discover a superpower highly unsuitable for use on public park benches. But why rush? Slowly melting into a long languid kiss on an October afternoon as the leaves fell around was too perfect to be possible in the messed-up world of Livvi Karam.

And Jakob Hansen wasn't a man to be rushed, which Livvi found refreshing. Most men would have been eager to move things along after such a long pleasurable kiss, but he was happy to walk and talk. Or not talk

in his case, but he was a good listener. After a pleasant meal in the West End, he walked her home, not pushing for anything more. After standing awkwardly at the bottom of the stairs for a few moments, Jakob moved forward and embraced her. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she didn't want to let go. Upstairs, Molly, her flatmate, was in. The lights glowed in the lounge window. After a long time, Livvi let him go with a sigh. 'Will I see you again?' Why did she sound so insecure? *Because I am!* She mentally chided herself.

'Well, I hope so.' Jakob rested his hands inside his pockets, quickly removed them again and shuffled his feet. 'I rather thought. Well, I'm hopeless at dating and stuff. I don't understand the rules. I don't get the difference between seeing someone, dating someone, going out with someone, and hooking up.' He threw up his palms and shrugged. 'Just like I don't understand snogging, making out and getting off with someone – seriously what is that? What's wrong with plain old-fashioned kissing?'

Livvi raised her hand to her mouth to cover her growing smile. For a man she knew to be twenty-eight, just three years older than her, he was profoundly innocent at times and it was perfectly adorable. 'Nothing, Jakob. And whatever method of kissing you want to use, you can try it on me any day.' She pushed onto her tiptoes and kissed his cheek.

‘All right.’ He placed his hand on her upper arm. ‘I’ll bear that in mind. But you just tell me what we do next because I’m likely to get it wrong. If today was a one-off, then say so. If you want to do some more dates...’

‘I do.’ She took his face in both hands and pulled him towards her. The kiss sizzled with desire. She wanted him so badly. *And you want me.* She could feel it. ‘Oh god,’ she whispered, pulling back to draw breath.

‘Nope, just Jakob,’ he said.

‘Well, just Jakob. If that was old-fashioned kissing, I’m a convert.’

He grinned and adjusted his glasses. ‘How about I come for you tomorrow? We can drive somewhere.’

‘Yes, let’s.’

After sneaking one last kiss, she waved and ran up the stairs to the door, her heart bubbling with anticipation and energy.

Four

Jakob

‘You told her what?’ Jakob jumped up and stared at Al across the workstation. Did Al think he was deaf? There he sat brazenly informing Jane that at the wedding reception three weeks ago, he’d told Livvi that Jakob was some suave millionaire.

Jane blanched at the sight of Jakob glaring over the divide, but Al sat back and grinned. ‘Didn’t you wonder why she suddenly rushed over? The minute she heard you had a few bob in the bank, she was up like a shot. Apparently, Daddy approves of men with a mill’ or more.’

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake.’

‘So, did it work?’

Jakob bent over his desk, taking deep, steadying breaths.

‘Come on let’s have it. Did you or didn’t you get a bit of action out of it?’

‘Al, pipe down,’ said Jane.

‘Yes, just shut up.’ Jakob sat down, blocking Al from view. He heard him laughing and Jane tutting and muttering. But inside his head, a million voices clamoured for attention. Was that the reason Livvi came over that night? They’d seen each other the past two weekends, texted each other frequently, and discovered they had lots in common – they enjoyed history, walking, music, and each other’s company. But was it real? Jakob raked his

hand through his curls. Was she putting on an act because she imagined he was a filthy rich catch? Had he at any point given her reason to believe he was anything other than an average guy? Ok, he made good money. He owned an Audi, but it was third-hand. His flat was in a good area, but it was in the cheaper end and it was tiny. He rarely bought new clothes and put away as much as he could. But millionaire he was not. Was that what she wanted? He picked up his phone. Ask her? How? *Do you really like me or is it only because you think I'm loaded?* Even in his mind, it sounded stupid and way too abrupt – even for him. There must be a subtler way.

That evening he checked through every message, trying to feel their true meaning. So many kisses. He enjoyed them; her kisses were beyond special. It would be a heart splitter to discover this was all for nothing. He continued to read: *“Can't wait for a hug. You're such a cutie. Want to see you. Miss you.”* Easy words to write. What did they really mean? With the amount of hair he'd tugged, he'd be bald by the time he'd stopped analysing. *What do you feel?* he asked himself. *You know, in here.* He pressed his hand to his chest. *I really like her, I think she likes me, but I could be all wrong.* Oh jeez. Now, he was questioning everything.

Waiting until Saturday was the best plan, only two days. When he saw her in person, they could talk. He was better at messages, but he wanted to see her reactions, gauge her responses before wading in.

Rather than taking the bus, he walked home to his less than glamorous 1960s apartment block to give himself headspace. As he strode along the principal shopping street in Stockbridge, he focused on the shop fronts, consciously noticing, for the first time, the numerous charity shops Livvi had spoken about. Had that been a test? Maybe if he'd claimed to know about them, she'd have stalked off – people who shopped in second-hand outlets were beneath her! But she wasn't like that, was she? He knew her history, she'd talked at length about her life, her unsettled upbringing, boarding school, how she was shunted from pillar to post and how she often felt unwanted and abandoned. The opposite of him. He couldn't have had more supportive parents and he'd never lived anywhere other than his little island until university and what a culture shock it had been. Edinburgh was huge to him, but small to Livvi. *What will she make of Mull? Will she visit my family with me? Why am I thinking that?* That implied something a lot more serious. *Am I ready? Does she want me? Especially after I burst her bubble.*

Their date on Saturday was a corporate do arranged by his company. Taking Livvi was a confidence booster. How could he do it without her? She fortified him just by being there. Her kind heart and friendly words. *How can it all be fake? I care about her too much.*

Passing the shops had also made him realise he'd worn the same white shirt every time they'd gone anywhere smart. He had nothing else, except his day suits. Leaving work early on Friday, he decided to do something about it. On his way home, he pushed open a charity shop door and headed to the small menswear section. Now he was inside, he didn't have a clue what to buy. He tugged out his phone to look up the shirt labels and check their designer status. Livvi liked designer clothes, he wanted to get it right. A message flashed.

LIVVI: You won't believe what's happened. My father has decided to pull the plug on my business. I lost another client and he doesn't think it's going anywhere. I'm not sure what to do. I'm so glad we met. Just in time. Without you, I'd sink. XX

What? His brow furrowed. Was it just as Al had said? Did she expect him to bail her out? Hanging the shirt back on the rail, he left the shop, his head pounding and his heart aching.

Five

Livvi

Jakob's silence was unnerving. Every time her phone made the slightest noise or lit up, Livvi lunged for it. Why didn't he answer? She needed him. Just one hug would do the trick. At least in the interim, though it wouldn't really be enough. No one in her life had ever cared like him. Cared enough to hug her, to listen to her, to be interested in her for something other than her money, or to take her to the castle and kiss her on the battlements as the cannon fired its one o'clock salute and the autumn leaves whipped around.

It wasn't even six o'clock. Maybe he was still at work. Late for a Friday. Their relationship hadn't developed into overnight stays, yet. She was working on it. But his silence was scaring her. He'd said he was clueless about dating protocols, but surely he knew how she felt? She hadn't made it a secret.

After spending the night in, much to the dismay of Molly, her party-fanatical flatmate, she got up on Saturday morning, shaking through lack of sleep and panic. First, her father had dropped the business bomb. Now Jakob's freakish silence. He always replied to messages. She quickly thumbed out another one.

ME: Are you ok? Did you get my message? I'm so worried. See you later at the party. XX

Restraining the urge to add several more kisses and gushing professions of love, she put the phone down. Tears welled, and she hugged her knees, huddled under her duvet. ‘Because I do love you, Jakob,’ she told the wall. The feeling permeated every bone in her body, and whatever it took, she was willing to do it to keep him. At a buzz, she almost knocked the glass of water off her side table, lunging to grab her phone.

JAKOB: I'm ok. Sorry about your business, but I really can't help you. Whatever Al said about me was rubbish. I'm not your millionaire. I'm just plain Jakob. As for the party, I'm obliged to go as it's a work thing. But I get that you might not want to now. Sorry to disappoint. x

She reread it six times. Even then, it didn't completely make sense. She'd never believed he was a millionaire. What she believed in was the way he made her feel. Why would he disappoint her? As the penny dropped, she laughed. Silly man. So hyper-intelligent with his computers, so daft with people. She didn't want his financial help. Was that what he thought?

Maybe she hadn't been direct enough. Well, she'd just have to tell him, the good old-fashioned way.

Six

Jakob

Adjusting the cuffs of his same old white shirt, that still crisped up enough to look respectable, Jakob strolled into the SKYbar. The dramatic view of Edinburgh Castle filled his vision while spotlights highlighted the ancient stone walls as it guarded the city below. After growing up in such a remote place as Mull, city life didn't always agree with him, but as the lights started popping on across the city, he inhaled deeply, feeling his chest expand. There was such beauty here, twinkling below.

'Hey, dude! You on another planet?'

'What?' Jakob turned to see Al and co waving from the bar. Wasn't there somewhere quieter? More hidden. He'd deliberately arrived late, hoping to avoid as much of this as possible.

'Where have you been? We thought you weren't coming.'

'Yeah, I was... I got...' Lies and excuses didn't come easy. 'Oh, never mind. I need a beer.' He approached the bar and ordered, hoping Al would move off so he could sidle into a corner, like the one where Jane and another admin assistant were currently chatting. As two married women over forty, they were generally safe bets, even if they liked to pry and question whether he coped living on his own and if he was dating anyone. If only the answer could be yes.

‘What happened with Miss Posh Totty,’ asked Al, displaying no intention of moving off. ‘Did she up and leave when she discovered you weren’t really Lord Hoity Toity and heir to the vast Island Estate at Balamory?’

‘Just shut up, ok.’ Jakob downed almost half his pint. ‘I don’t want to talk about this.’

‘I bet you don’t. But why not just tell us the juicy bits?’

‘What juicy bits?’

‘You mean there weren’t any? I thought you got her out on a date. You didn’t waste your time wining and dining her, did you? Should have gone straight for the goods.’

‘For Christ’s sake,’ muttered Jakob, rubbing the bridge of his glasses up and down. ‘No wonder you’re single, Al.’

‘Cheeky.’ He leaned in and Jakob backed away as he whispered, ‘I might have scored tonight. Eyes at eleven o’clock. She works in PR. Dancing will start in a few minutes, think I’ll ask her to join me.’

Jakob scanned over the group containing Al’s unsuspecting victim and hoped she appreciated thirty-something Danny DeVito lookalikes, who danced like Barney the Dinosaur. The music kicked off and Al rubbed his hands together like he was about to go wrestle a crocodile. *Why did I bother coming?* Jakob’s boss was nowhere in sight – the boss that insisted this kind of event was important but didn’t bother showing face himself.

Maybe I could leave. He'd only wanted to attend when he thought Livvi would be with him. Her silence since the morning told him everything. As soon as she knew he wasn't the loaded young heir she imagined, she was offski. *God, I'm a fool.* Ready to order another beer, he focused on the lift door. Leaving might be the better option. The doors parted. Jakob's jaw fell. Livvi emerged. *Oh crap.* Jakob steadied himself on the bar. She looked awesome in a one-shouldered figure-hugging red dress. Her caramel ombre hair shimmered under the lights as it coiled over her shoulders in film star style waves. Was there anywhere to hide? Why he'd ever believed someone like her would look twice at him was a mystery. And why was she here?

She'd seen him. Her glossy lips quirked into a brief smile, but her eyes appeared sad and wary. As she walked towards him, she took confident strides in her strappy heels. *She's coming for me. Shit. What should I do?*

'Hi, Jakob.'

'Hi.' He fiddled with the leg of his glasses before giving her his full attention. 'So, what brings you here?'

'You invited me.' She batted her long dark lashes.

'I did, but, well, I rather thought, given the circumstances...'

'Shall we dance?' Holding out both hands, she proffered ten perfect nails in his direction.

‘Me? Oh no, seriously, I can’t.’ He realised she wouldn’t accept his refusal. She took his hands in hers and gave him a tug. He followed. Well, he’d follow her anywhere for one of those smiles. ‘You got my message, didn’t you?’

She stopped at the dance floor edge, turned and deliberately placed her hands on his shoulders. He froze like he’d been set upon by a tigress. ‘Yes.’

‘So, you know that—’

‘You don’t own an estate or have millions put away. I knew that anyway. I didn’t believe what that man said. He was drunk. Isn’t that him there, doing the John Travolta impression with some poor woman?’

‘Yeah.’ Al’s target from PR wore a deep scowl as if she already regretted falling for his dubious charms.

‘Jakob.’ Livvi moved closer, leaning up, so her sweet breath brushed over his neck. His eyes flicked back to her. He drew in his lips. ‘What I didn’t understand was why you thought you couldn’t help me.’

‘Well, it’s obvious. If you know I don’t have money, you must appreciate that I can’t help you. I’m not saying I’m poor. I earn a good wage. I like to be sensible and consider the future. But there’s no way I can bail out a company.’

Livvi nodded, blinking her wide brown eyes. ‘I know that. I didn’t mean that. All I meant was...’ She looked away, her face suddenly taut, flattening

her lips. 'I meant I needed someone to help me just by being there for me. Someone who cared, someone just to hold me.'

Jakob swallowed. 'That's all?'

She nodded. 'Just that. With you in my life, I feel strong enough within myself to break out on my own in business.'

Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her tight. She linked her hands behind his neck and melted into him. 'All that from a hug?' he said.

'Well, I might need quite a few.'

'Just as well hugs are free.' He increased the pressure.

She stroked her glossy head over his chest. He leant down and kissed her forehead, his lips lingering over her soft skin.

'Now, just gently sway,' she said. 'Move with me.'

'Why?'

'Then we're dancing. So far, your hugs have been spectacular and your kisses out of this world. I don't think there's any reason to doubt your dancing.'

'For you, I'll try.' Allowing her to lead him a little further, they gently revolved together. Jakob even managed to block out Al's whistle. *Jealous git*. Jakob smiled into Livvi's silken hair. 'I do care about you,' he whispered.

Her grip on his neck tightened. 'I'm glad, because, well, I might just have fallen in love with you.' She glanced up, probing his eyes as if pleading for his reaction.

Cocking his head, he leaned in and planted a kiss on her lips. She tasted divine. He couldn't get enough of her without crossing lines not meant to be crossed in public. Kissing her in front of his colleagues was a whole new level of bravery. Breaking apart, he stroked her hair behind her ear. 'You know about my complete naïveté when it comes to dating rules. But right now, I feel like I want to see an awful lot more of you.'

'Let's get some air.' She led him to the lift.

They grabbed their coats from the cloakroom and headed for the cool air in the street below. Taxis rushed past disturbing puddles made by earlier rain.

'Livvi.' Jakob put his arm around the shoulder of her fur coat. 'I'm happy to see you again, as often as you like. Every minute of every day won't be enough for me. But no matter what I do, I'm never going to be a millionaire.'

Livvi curled into his open jacket, snaking her arms inside it and anchoring them on his waistband. He held her tight, stroking his hand down her velvet soft coat. 'I never cared about the money you may or may not have,' she said. 'Only the way you make me feel.'

‘But what about your business? What will you do?’

‘I’m going to keep trying. Who knows, I might be able to do it without my father’s help. Though I’m not sure I can do it without yours.’ She buried her face in his chest and he kissed the top of her head. ‘And I don’t mean the money kind.’

‘Just as well, because, unless I win the lottery, I’m staying just Jakob.’ He closed his eyes and drew in a sharp breath as her hold on his waist tightened.

‘You’re rich in so many more important ways and that’s what I need in my life.’

‘Well, I’m no expert, but...’ He flicked his eyes across the street as a car horn honked. ‘I think, just maybe, I love you too.’

She beamed up at him, still holding tight. ‘You think? Well, I’ll just have to convince you then.’

‘Please do. Perhaps I could introduce you to the bright lights of Stockbridge?’

‘It sounds wonderful.’

They broke apart and he swung his arm around her shoulder, smiling as they walked slowly towards Princes Street. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘now you can enjoy as many free hugs and old-fashioned kisses as you fancy.’

She raised her perfectly shaped eyebrow, her eyes twinkling in the streetlamp. 'That's the best news I've had all year. Because I fancy a lot.'

The End

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A Hidden Gem

A Striking Result

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About the author

I'm a writer, mummy, wife and chocolate eater (in any order you care to choose). I live in highland Perthshire in a little house close to the woods where I often see red squirrels, deer and other such tremendously Scottish wildlife... Though not normally haggises or even men in kilts!

It's my absolute pleasure to be able to bring the Scottish Island Escapes series to you and I hope you love reading the stories as much as I enjoy writing them. This short story was written as a fun exercise but I loved the result so much I wanted to share it. It's harder writing a short story than a full-length novel! Writing is an escapist joy for me and I adore disappearing into my imagination and returning with a new story to tell.

If you want to keep up with what's coming next or learn more about any of the books or the series, then be sure to visit me on the following platforms! I look forward to seeing you there.

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