

CHAPTER EIGHT

ARRIVING AT THE Primrose Hill venue at 8:00pm on the last Saturday in September, Hannah arranged with the cab driver to pick her up at midnight. Wearing a blue sequinned dress accentuating her figure and small waist, she stepped out of the car, carrying a bouquet of flowers and Belgian truffles. As she entered the foyer of the large premises to be surrounded by strangers, she heard someone call her name.

“You must be Hannah, Mel’s friend?”

Turning to see who it was, she found herself gazing into the friendliest pair of blue eyes.

“My name’s Matthew Jacobs – Mel’s fiancé and associate – I’m pleased we finally get to meet.” With his tall, athletic build, short brown hair and big smile, it was easy to understand why Melanie had fallen in love with him.

“Mel’s instructed I take extra good care of you! She’s busy with all the guests.” Taking her arm, he proceeded to introduce her to groups of people, all curious to know what it was like to live in Sweden. A passing waiter offering sparkling champagne. Discreetly watching her take a sip, Matthew agreed with his fiancée. She was completely oblivious of her own beauty and of everyone

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staring at her, the red hair reminiscent of a rich burgundy wine.

Engaging in small talk, Hannah asked if he minded Melanie having a career.

“Not at all. I want her to be happy, she’s the woman I love.” Just then, they were interrupted.

“Hannah! Just look at you. That dress is simply divine.” Embracing one another, Melanie exclaimed, “I’m so happy you’re here!”

“Your fiancé’s been very nice to me. Congratulations on turning twenty-five and getting engaged!” Hannah handed her the flowers and chocolates.

“How wonderfully decadent! Sweets aren’t good for the figure . . . What the heck, it’s not every day one gets the opportunity to celebrate!”

“You’ve nothing to worry about – I’ve never seen you as gorgeous as you look tonight.” Radiant in a red gown, with matching lips and nails, Melanie wore her hair in a sleek pageboy cut, emphasising her dark blue eyes. Steering Hannah towards the back, she put an arm around her.

“What do you think?”

“Wow! I never saw anything like it!” Hannah gasped at the sight of pink tablecloths on the buffet, candles and roses.

“There’s someone I want you to meet . . .” Walking arm in arm in the direction of a small group of people talking amongst themselves, Melanie made a formal introduction. “This is the girl I’ve been telling you about. Hannah Stein – Benjamin Isaacs. Ben’s my oldest friend, Hannah’s over on a gap year, staying with an adorable lady in Golders Green.”

His eyes glued on the pretty woman in front of him, Ben replied, “Mel’s been singing your praises, Miss Stein. Now I know the reason.”

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Eyes locking, both felt an instant chemistry, quite unlike anything they'd experienced before. Tall, dark and handsome, Ben bore an uncanny resemblance to Sean Connery, each muscular with dimples in their cheeks. What attracted her most was his impeccable accent, deep voice and big brown eyes, seemingly looking behind the exterior into her soul.

From a distance Hannah heard Melanie say, "I'll leave you to it, you're bound to have plenty to talk about. . ."

"I'm honoured to sit next to you, Miss Stein." Flattered that he'd pulled out a chair for her to sit, Hannah felt his eyes on her. Overwhelmed by her presence, beauty and charm, Ben was acutely conscious of the fact he'd never met anyone like her; the fiery red hair, delicate features and emerald green eyes.

Dinner consisted of melon with port, rack of lamb and sorbet with almond biscuits; everything tasting delicious. Ben entertained Hannah with stories of the time he and Melanie were enrolled at nursery, while Hannah told him about her country, silently comparing his interest in everything she told him to Mark, who rarely listened to anything she had to say.

After dinner there were birthday speeches, including one from Ben, who told everyone how fortunate he was to have such a caring, loyal friend in Melanie.

"She's a lousy loser, though. I lost track of all the times I let her beat me at a game," he teased, raising his glass in a toast to her and Matthew, before returning to his seat.

Touched by his words, Melanie blew him a kiss across the table. They'd celebrated her and Matthew's engagement at her parents' house the previous weekend. At twenty-seven, Ben was the brother she had never had.

Turning his attention to Hannah, Ben asked, "Are you planning on leaving in the near future?"

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“Not until after Christmas. Then I’m enrolling at university.” Relieved she’d be staying a while longer, Ben enquired about her career subjects. “I always wanted to teach.”

“Good for you!”

It felt wonderful opening up to him about her future plans. Un-like Mark, Ben seemed genuinely interested and non-judgmental.

“I miss home and my family – it’ll be great to go back.”

“I bet they can’t wait to see you. Mine missed me a lot when I travelled to France and America. Tell me to mind my own business but I have to ask, how old are you?”

“I just turned nineteen.”

“I gathered as much. You’re extremely mature for your age.” Blushing, Hannah asked what he did for a living. “I’m a solicitor, working at my father’s law firm – hoping to start my own one day.” He proceeded to tell her about his younger sister and brother, who were both still at college. “Mum’s preoccupied with her secretarial temping agency. She and Dad are the perfect couple.”

“What a strange coincidence both our fathers are solicitors,” said Hannah. “My mother’s a housewife and extremely proud of it. She speaks several languages. My younger brother, Peter, and I are very close. My maternal grandmother moved to London when she was in her seventies.” It struck her how effortlessly they communicated with one another, again, totally unlike Mark who wasn’t interested in anyone but himself.

Listening to her, Ben felt much the same, thinking she was special in every way. “I own a flat not far from here,” he said. “It’s a typical bachelor’s pad. I only use it to sleep in.” He deliberately wanted her to know he was single, praying she was as well.

Time passed quickly, and while they were engaged in conversation, the other guests drifted into an adjacent room, to drink tea and dance.

“Would you care to join me for a dance, Hannah?” Ben asked shyly, as John Paul Young’s ‘Love Is In The Air’ began to play. She was on the verge of accepting when Melanie approached them.

“Please forgive me for being such a lousy hostess – I’m like a headless chicken,” she told them, looking flustered. “Tonight’s great!” She went up to Hannah, kissing her cheeks. “May I borrow her for a couple of minutes? I promise to bring her back to you.” Sensing Ben’s disappointment, Hannah followed her into a corner of the room.

“Ben’s completely smitten with you,” Melanie enthused. “I never saw him this happy. You’re a striking couple. Didn’t I tell you you’d be perfect for each other?” She was so excited; she couldn’t stand still.

“Before you continue, there’s something you should know. I’m in a relationship . . . I’m sorry I never let on.” Hannah felt awful she had kept it from her.

“But I was under the impression . . . my mistake. I’m really gutted.”

“It’s early days but we’re committed to each other,” Hannah whispered.

“Is it someone I know?” Mel looked as if she was about to burst into tears.

“I don’t think so. His name’s Mark, we only just met.”

“Are you sleeping with him?”

Blushing at her friend’s blunt question, Hannah bowed her head in response.

“I see. What a pity. Men like Ben don’t come along often. If I

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were you, I'd not rule anything out just yet. I sure hope that guy appreciates you. . . .”

“How about that dance you promised me earlier?” Standing behind her, Ben refused to take no for an answer.

“She's all yours – talk to you later!” Melanie told him, leaving.

“Are you alright?” Ben's eyes probed Hannah's.

At that moment Hannah wished things weren't so complicated. “I'm alright . . . I'd love to dance with you.” Taking her hand in his, Ben led her to the dance floor, Burt Bacharach's ‘Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head’ echoing in the room.

Keeping a respectful distance between them, Ben commented, “That song goes straight to my heart.” What he meant to say was that she had already captured his. Feeling him so close to her, breathing in the masculine scent of his aftershave, Hannah felt a sense of belonging.

Twenty minutes later she looked at her watch, exclaiming, “I'm sorry but I have to leave, a cab's awaiting me outside.” Ben was visibly disappointed.

“Can't you call and cancel it? I'd be pleased to bring you home.”

“That's impossible, seeing as it's booked. . . .”

“Tonight's special. Will you let me take you out to dinner?” He'd been telling himself she was a lot younger and the last thing he wanted was to scare her off, but he just couldn't help himself.

Not sure how to respond, Hannah started to panic. “Listen, I really enjoyed spending time with you Ben, but I'm leaving soon – take good care of yourself – you're the perfect gentleman.”

“Please wait!” His eyes pleaded with her to stay. “Are you telling me you don't wish to see me again? The least you can do is explain.” He looked every bit as upset as she was feeling.

HELENE FERMONT

“It’s nothing to do with you – I’m seeing someone.”

Ben’s face dropped, the same devastation in his eyes as in Melanie’s. “I see . . . That explains everything.”

“I’m sorry I gave you the wrong impression.”

“Me too.” His voice faltered. “I guess it wasn’t meant to be. I hope whoever it is realises how lucky he is. Thanks for being straight with me.”

Their eyes locked for a split second and Hannah knew without a shadow of a doubt the only thing coming between them was that they’d met at the wrong time.

“You’re definitely an item?” he asked, eyes sad.

“We are – yes.”

Taking a deep breath, Ben replied, “I wish you every happiness. You’re an outstanding young lady, inside and out.” He gave her a card with his number, adding, “I’d love to keep in touch. . .”

Listening to him made Hannah feel less upset; the idea of not seeing him again, too difficult to comprehend. “I’ll keep it in mind but you mustn’t expect it . . .”

As he bent to kiss her cheek, both felt the same chemistry as when they’d first laid eyes on each other. She was on the verge of changing her mind and agreeing to meet up with him, when Mark’s face appeared in her head.

“Goodbye, Ben. I’ll see myself out.”

Waving at Melanie, who was busy talking to a guest, Hannah walked out of the venue and towards the cab waiting for her outside. Exchanging a few polite words, Hannah’s thoughts turned to Ben. He’d made such a lasting impression. She could only ask herself if it was possible to be in love with one man yet feel attracted to another.

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Watching the last guests leave, Melanie and Ben retired to the back of the foyer. Looking into his eyes, she whispered, "I'm so sorry things didn't turn out the way you'd hoped."

"That makes two of us. I'm in love with a woman I just met and lost."

"Listen to 'Auntie Mel': I've a feeling you've not seen the last of her. If I were you, I'd not give up just yet."

"You're seriously thinking I stand a chance?" There was a glimmer of hope in Ben's eyes.

"I do. Trust me on this one, okay?"

That night Ben vowed to not give up on the woman he loved. Mel's intuition had never failed her before. Despite wishing Hannah and that guy she was involved with every happiness, Ben couldn't stand the thought of her belonging to anyone but him.