



# **BOMBSHELL**

# **ALISON**

# **HAMMOND**

WITH LISA BENT



bantam



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For you, Mum  Maria



# 1

Glancing round the rink, Madison decided there must be something wrong with her skates. The white surface of the ice glowed prettily under the golden fairy lights all strung up by the beautiful Victorian bandstand in London's Hyde Park. You couldn't have wished for a more Christmassy scene, thought Madison, as she looked at the skaters bundled up in their winter clothes, smiles on their faces, breath misting in the cold air as festive tunes blared out. Beyond the rink, there were food stalls, fairground rides, and a selection of stands selling Christmas gifts that they'd promised the kids they'd return to later. It was perfect. Exactly the fun she'd wanted to kick off the month of December.

However, there was one problem. Her skates.

There *had* to be something wrong with them. Yes, they had been hired from exactly the same not-very-helpful assistant who had fitted out her husband, Rich, and the kids, Chloë and Jordan. But while the three of them had taken to the ice with a few initial wobbles until they found their feet, Madison had been on her bum more times than she cared to count.

Rich glided up to her and came to a sharp stop, his skates making a scraping sound on the ice.



‘You know you’re meant to let go of the wall, babe?’ he said, and before she had time to get annoyed, he flashed her the million-dollar smile that still made her heart melt – and saw him adored by fans of the TV show he presented, *House Mates*.

‘I quite like the wall, thank you very much,’ Madison said primly, tightening her grip with both hands and attempting to edge along just an inch or two. Oh, God. She could feel the skates moving with a life of their own. She tensed and then, somehow, they were whizzing out from underneath her and, yes, she was down again, landing in the meltwater that was pooling by the side of the rink. That wasn’t *normal*. Maybe one of the blades was adrift.

‘For f— *Father Christmas’s sake!*’ She caught herself as Chloë, aged six, came into view, looking like Bambi on ice but somehow staying on her feet.

‘Mum!’ called Chloë. ‘Come and skate with me!’

‘In a minute, darling,’ said Madison, beaming at her daughter and trying to get up in a dignified fashion. ‘Mum’s still getting the hang of this.’

‘But we’ve only got half the time left,’ said Chloë, with a little frown.

Madison was caught between relief and disappointment – she’d had a vision of the four of them swooshing effortlessly round the rink holding hands, discovering that – at forty years old – she was unbelievably talented at ice skating, having never tried it before. She shut her eyes briefly and tried to channel the vision of herself she’d had on the way here, skating backwards on the ice, throwing in the occasional pirouette or casual jump for good measure. But water from her latest fall had seeped into the seat of her jeans. A soggy bottom was *not* part of the vision. It was time for action.



‘There’s something wrong with Mummy’s skates,’ Madison said decisively. ‘I’m going to try to change them. Can you skate with your brother for a bit?’

‘He’s going really fast,’ said Chloë. They looked out and saw Jordan weaving in and out of the crowds, moving to the beat of the music. Madison felt a burst of love for her two kids. She was so proud of them.

‘Well, you can go really fast too, I’m sure,’ Madison said encouragingly. ‘If you want. Girls can do anything boys can, right?’

Madison wondered if she saw the flicker of a smile on her daughter’s face. She wished she could provide a more direct example of that at this precise moment, especially as Rich had taken up his effortless swooshing around the rink again and looked like a film star. She clocked one or two women giving him an admiring glance as he passed them. She guessed she’d have to get used to that, especially if his career took off as they were hoping. He’d been talking about having his own show for years, and now it might finally be a possibility. Chloë waved at him, and as he caught sight of his daughter, his face lit up. He skated over and held out his hands to them both. Madison appreciated the offer but shook her head.

‘Come and skate with your dad?’ he said to Chloë, who beamed.

Madison watched them moving together on the ice, blending in with the other skaters. ‘Right, then,’ she muttered, beginning to make her way back to the entrance. She could have sworn it was further away. Had she really shuffled only ten metres from the start?

Madison leaned over the wall and called to the assistant, who was wearing flashing green-and-red antlers. She was deep



in conversation with another girl, who was rolling a cigarette whilst dressed as an elf, wearing a badge saying ‘Santa’s Little Helper’. ‘Hello! Hi – could you help me a second?’

The girl rolled her eyes and tutted, irritated at being interrupted. ‘What is it?’ she called.

*Never been disrespected by a girl in flashing antlers, and not going to start with that now*, Madison thought, taken aback by the complete lack of customer service. She tried to draw herself up to her full height. ‘Could you come over here, please?’ she called.

Sighing heavily, Antlers came over and raised an eyebrow. ‘Yeah?’

‘There’s something wrong with my skates,’ said Madison.

‘Wrong size?’

‘I don’t think so. They’re just very . . . slippery.’

The antlers began flashing in a faster rhythm. Madison wondered if they indicated the girl’s growing impatience with her.

‘They’re ice skates. They’re meant to be slippery.’

The elf came over, and asked if Antlers had a light. The girl dug around in her pocket and passed her one. Meanwhile, Madison was trying to reduce her building irritation.

‘This woman’s saying her skates are slippy,’ said Antlers, and Santa’s Little Helper sniggered.

‘Look, I know how it sounds,’ said Madison, ‘but they *are* too slippery. I cannot stay upright. There’s got to be something wrong with them. Like’ – she cast about – ‘the suspension.’

‘Suspension? It’s skates, not a four-by-four,’ said Santa’s Little Helper, puffing out cigarette smoke. Madison’s Winter Wonderland vibes were disappearing rapidly. The elf turned to Antlers. ‘Look, when you knocking off? Some of the lads from



the Penguin Dodgems are heading to the pub, and Aaron's promised me a hot dog.'

'The fit one?' said Antlers, excitedly.

'Yeah!'

'Excuse me, but we still haven't solved the issue of my skates,' said Madison. She wasn't normally one to push things, but she was a paying customer and, as a reasonably good dancer, surely it shouldn't be that hard to translate her moves to ice.

Antlers looked at her. 'Look, Miss, I don't mean to be rude, but the skates aren't the problem. *You* are. You've been clinging to that wall since you got here. Most first-timers do the same thing, so don't worry about it. What you need to do is just . . . *let go*. Trust yourself.'

Madison felt the heat of anger and embarrassment rise to her cheeks, which stung against the cold air. She had applied herself to being good at everything since her school days. As an adult she wanted everything she did to be perfect – and when the kids arrived, well, she had to be the best mum: outings, birthdays and Christmas had to be exciting, amazing and memorable. Her visions were big, but a pro skater first time? Maybe not. She opened her mouth to speak again but Santa's Little Helper squeaked in excitement and pointed at the rink. 'Look! Isn't that Rich Sykers?'

'Who he?' said Antlers.

'That one off the telly. The home-makeover show? He's quite fit for an old bloke.'

Madison suppressed a smirk. She'd wind Rich up about it later.

'My mum *loves* him,' Santa's Little Helper was saying as Antlers nodded in recognition. 'I wonder if there's any way we can get a photo of him, a video or something . . .'



‘You want a video of my husband?’ Madison said, as Rich skated over to her.

The girls’ jaws dropped.

‘Everything OK?’ Rich said, looking between Madison and the two staff members.

‘Fine,’ said Antlers, eyes wide and voice shaking. ‘Your wife’s skates are just very, very, very faulty. We’re going to refund the whole session and invite you back for a freebie. With complimentary drinks and food after.’

‘Great,’ said Rich. He glanced at his watch and turned to Madison. ‘I guess we should round up the kids. Nearly time to be off. I’ve got a bit of a headache as well.’ He grimaced.

Madison tried not to let herself feel a beat of disappointment. She’d thought they’d stay for longer – check out the food, buy a few decorations for the tree, even go on a couple of rides.

‘Really?’ she said, voice low as she turned away from the prying ears of the two girls. ‘I think the kids were hoping we’d stay longer.’

‘Sorry, babe,’ Rich said. ‘I’m just knackered.’

He did look tired, she thought. Yes, he was still movie-star handsome, even more so than when she’d met him – an Idris Elba lookalike, his beard now flecked a little with grey, but that suited him. Then she noticed his eyes seemed a little hollow, his skin a little dull. She felt a flash of guilt. Rich worked so hard – he was often away filming, or doing long hours on-set.

‘Of course,’ she said, her voice soft. ‘We can head straight home after this. Run you a bath, make you dinner or phone for a takeaway?’

Rich smiled, but somehow it didn’t reach his eyes.

Madison waved the kids over and they came obediently.



‘Can we come again, Mum?’ Jordan said, unlacing his skates.

‘Definitely,’ said Madison. ‘We’ve got free tickets, actually.’

Jordan punched the air with his fist and Madison laughed – what did it matter that she wasn’t the world’s best skater when the kids had enjoyed it so much? Next time, she’d just wrap up warm and watch them all from the side. *Or maybe I could try not to pressure myself so much.* ‘Can we get hot chocolate?’ Chloë was saying. ‘And go on the rides? I saw this massive slide and—’

Truthfully, Madison shared in her disappointment. She wanted to stay on and do all those things but she needed to manage her daughter’s expectations, make sure this outing still felt like a treat. ‘We’re going to have hot chocolate at home,’ she said.

Chloë pushed out her bottom lip and looked at her with doe eyes. ‘But I thought . . .’

‘I know,’ said Madison. ‘But at home we can put marshmallows in it.’ She hoped there were some left in the cupboard. If not, she’d have to pop out. ‘And you can do all the frothy milk by yourself.’

Somewhat placated, Chloë nodded, but Jordan thrust his hands into his pockets, downcast.

‘We’ll come back soon,’ Madison promised. ‘And it’ll be even more fun.’

‘With Auntie Jess and Sienna?’ said Chloë.

Madison always smiled at the mention of ‘Auntie Jess’. Jess was her best and oldest friend from school, and for years, whenever Madison heard her name, the first mental image that came to mind was of Jess as a fifteen-year-old, pouting in the cloakroom mirror as they tried to get away with wearing makeup they hoped was undetectable to the teachers, but



noticeable to the boys. She could never quite believe that she and Jess were now proper grown-ups, that their families were so close and they were raising their children side by side in the neighbourhood where they'd grown up.

She helped the kids pull off their skates; the cold air made their fingers stiff. Madison rubbed their hands in hers to warm them – she smiled as she remembered her own dear mum doing the same. Then she bundled a pink bobble hat on to Chloë's head and wound the matching scarf round her neck, leaving only her eyes visible, and tried to persuade Jordan that he *would* feel cold soon, once he'd cooled down after skating, so maybe it was a good idea to put his jacket on. Somehow that turned into a negotiation about Xbox time, and then—

'Babe, you're OK to film this, yeah?' Rich said, holding out an iPhone with a sparkly cover on it. Madison glanced around. Antlers and Santa's Little Helper were flanking Rich, and looking at her expectantly. 'Sasha' – Santa's Little Helper – 'was just saying her mum's a big fan of the show and could I do a little cameo?'

'Oh, sure,' said Madison. She grumbled inwardly, then ticked herself off. It wouldn't take long. In any case, it was part of the job and what made Rich so popular – he had a reputation for being super-friendly to his fans. It was only going to get more intense, she reminded herself, so she'd better get used to it now.

Rich worked as a handyman on *House Mates*, in which pairs of friends gave each other's homes a makeover. It was fronted by the eternally youthful Scandinavian Astrid, who had been part of a one-hit-wonder dance duo in the nineties. She had reinvented herself as a no-nonsense TV presenter, famed for her direct feedback to the show's participants.



Madison knew, though, that Astrid was a softy underneath the tough exterior. It was Astrid who'd given Madison her 'big break' – her first job as a design assistant on the show, back in her twenties. And it was on that show that she'd met Rich, although he'd been working behind the cameras at that point. A chance on-camera moment of him sanding down a wardrobe door while wearing a sweaty white vest had gone viral. Madison remembered reading the comments to him, back on one of those glorious lazy Saturdays, early on in their relationship before they'd had kids.

*Who is this fitty?*

*He can D-I-Y me any day of the week!*

*Never wished I was a wardrobe door more than right now.*

Rich had initially been embarrassed, but quickly got over it when he was offered a regular slot on the show as the 'Hot Handyman' who demonstrated a variety of household tips and tricks. 'They want me to wear tight T-shirts,' he'd moaned to Madison, although she noticed he quickly got over his reluctance on that front, too.

In fact, she saw he'd taken off his coat right now, despite the freezing December air, and rolled up his sleeves to show his defined forearms. *If this man catches a cold I will not be looking after him*, she thought.

'OK, so what do you want me to say?' he said to Sasha.

'I dunno,' she said excitedly. 'Becca, what do you think?'

Antlers thought for a minute. 'Like, something cheeky for her mum?'

Rich laughed. 'I'll think of something. What's her name?'

'Mandy.'

Sasha leaned into Rich, her best smile on.

'Do you want Antl— Sorry, Becca in shot as well?' said



Madison. 'I'll count you in and then hit play. Three, two, one.'

Rich turned on his mega-watt smile. His voice dropped an octave and became animated and bubbly. 'Hey there, Mandy, this is Rich, the Hot Handyman, although this weather's making it hard to stay warm! I'm sure you can think of a few ways to heat up the home.' He winked. 'Merry Christmas, and a happy new year.'

Madison stopped recording.

'Thank you *so much*,' said Sasha, breathlessly, to Rich, as Madison handed the phone back.

'Absolutely no problem. I hope she likes it, yeah?' said Rich.

Madison cleared her throat. 'Shall we get the kids home?'

'Let's just have a look at that video,' said Rich, taking the phone from Sasha. He watched the screen intently and turned to Madison. 'Babe, I reckon the contrast is off. You should have done it facing the light. Look, you can barely see it's me. Let's just do it again, OK?'

'You sure?' said Sasha.

'Of course,' said Rich. 'Anything for a fan.'

Sasha giggled, and took up her position by Rich's side once again.

Madison flicked on the camera mode. Her hand was getting cold out of the glove she'd been wearing, and the kids were shifting impatiently. 'Three, two, one,' she said, and they were rolling again.

'Hey there . . .' said Rich, and stopped. 'Damn. What's your mum called again?'

'Mandy,' said Sasha.

'Mandy, got it.' He looked at Madison. 'OK to go again?'

She gave a thumbs-up, glancing at the kids, who were looking



increasingly bored and chilly. ‘Not long,’ she mouthed at them.

This time, Rich stumbled over the line about the weather, saying it was hard to stay cool. That meant they had to record it again. He looked flustered.

‘It’s OK,’ Madison said. ‘We’ve got the first one. That’s all good.’

‘But it needs to be perfect,’ Rich said.

They did two more takes. By the end of it, Madison thought that even Antlers and the elf were getting tired.

‘YES!’ Rich beamed, as they watched the last video. And it was perfect, Madison had to admit. Rich’s voice was confident and assured. All trace of fatigue was gone from his face in the golden glow of the fairy lights. His shoulders and arms were strong. He looked – and sounded – like a main player. Not a sidekick any more. And if Madison was a bit annoyed by the amount of time he’d spent charming his fans while her fingers were freezing, and she could swear the kids were turning into icicles, she just had to get used to it. Over the past few years, Rich had been recognized more and more, and that was only going to increase if he *did* get his own show. Change was on the horizon for Rich, for all of them.



## 2

Once they were in the car on the way home, Rich lapsed into silence. Madison was driving, and focused on the different decorations within each borough they drove through. *Zones One and Two definitely have different budgets*, she thought. She loved London. Yes, it was big, busy and expensive. All the things people said. But to Madison, it was a place of nostalgia, happy times, good memories and, thanks to the vibrant mix of cultures and colours, endless inspiration for her design work. And at Christmas the city felt hopeful, magical and somehow full of possibilities.

She thought of all the versions of herself she'd been in London – a schoolgirl, an art student, a twenty-something desperate to make her way in the world and have as many adventures as she could. Getting her first 'proper' design job on the show. Becoming Rich's girlfriend. And then – a mother. She glanced at the kids in the rear-view mirror. Chloë was nodding off, and Jordan had his earphones in, nodding to some inaudible beat. Despite all the wonderful choices on offer, she was so glad she had ended up like this: her family, her team, all together.

She glanced at Rich, who was staring out of the window,



chewing the side of his thumbnail, lost in thought. 'You OK, babe?' Madison murmured.

He jerked round to look at her. 'I'm thinking about the video,' he said. 'Wondering if I should even be doing that kind of thing any more. Like, imagine if someone took offence at what I'd said. Social-media storm. Career suicide.'

He chewed his thumb some more and sighed. Madison knew how her husband came across to the observer: confident, smart, maybe even a bit cocky at times. But he had a streak of insecurity and, at the moment, it seemed to be getting bigger.

'You're nervous about the new show,' said Madison, soothingly. 'But don't stop being *you*. That's who they want. Someone who is going to be a natural with fans, someone with real warmth.'

'Yeah, but what if—' Rich broke off.

'What if?' said Madison.

He shrugged. 'It doesn't matter.'

'Look, babe. Whatever happens, you'll have us. We've got your back all the way.' She took her hand briefly off the wheel and reached over to squeeze his. There was a moment's pause before he squeezed her hand back, then let go, resuming his stare out of the window.

She reminded herself that she needed to be patient. The suspense over Rich perhaps getting his own show had dominated their lives for the past couple of months. It had lurked as a possibility several times before but never felt concrete until his agent had told him a major streamer wanted to create a new home-makeover show, and was looking for a presenter to front it. These things came and went quickly, but it was what Rich had dreamed of – and if he got the show, it had professional implications for her too.



Madison hadn't returned to the TV show after she'd had Jordan. It often required them to work away from home, at short notice, with long hours, which wasn't compatible with young children. Then Chloë had arrived, and just when they'd been getting back to a new kind of normal, Madison's beloved mum had become ill with terminal cancer. Madison had nursed her until she passed away, then looked after her distraught dad.

In the last year Madison had returned to working part-time, as a design assistant at a hotel chain, but it wasn't her: too rigid and bland. She and Rich had often discussed what it would look like for her to return to working in TV.

'Just imagine,' she said now, 'the two of us working together again. It'd be fun, right?'

'Yeah, sure,' Rich said distractedly.

She tried a different tactic. 'Might even get to misbehave at the Christmas party,' she murmured. She could remember that night like it was yesterday . . .

The production company that made *House Mates* had an annual Christmas party, and it was a big deal. Madison had *loved* Christmas ever since she was little. You could go all out at Christmas – it was a time for excess, for loads of tinsel, for spending a bit more than you should on the perfect gifts for family and friends, for that extra glass, or three, of bubbly. The first Christmas party had been right after she'd started at the company, so she'd been on her best behaviour, and had even felt a little bit left out of her colleagues' closeness. But now, a year in, she'd felt like they were family, and she was ready to let her hair down.

Naturally, it was themed – there was a prize for the best outfit, and this year's theme was Icons. What could be more



iconic than Santa? Madison had thought, and she'd bought herself a red dress and was preparing to glue some white fluff along the hem. She'd managed to find a quiet spot in one of the office meeting rooms to do it, and was engrossed in carefully handling the glue gun and applying the finishing bits of fluff when the door flew open, knocked into her and caused glue to splurge everywhere.

'Sorry!' said Magda, another designer, tumbling through the door, holding a glass of fizz, and swiftly followed by Astrid. 'We were looking for somewhere to wrap the Secret Santas.'

'Oh, no worries,' said Madison, eyeing the dollops of glue on the floor. At least they weren't on the dress. She decided she'd put it on, then add any finishing touches. She slipped into the toilets and changed, tugging the red dress over her head, then marching back to Astrid and Magda.

'Ta-da!' she cried, bursting in. 'What's more iconic than Santa?'

Astrid and Magda looked her up and down, their smiles frozen.

'That's what you're wearing?' said Astrid, pointing at the dress.

'There's, umm, a . . . bit of a mark,' said Magda, reaching out with a tissue and dabbing at the front of Madison's dress.

Madison looked down and saw a massive, sticky glue stain. 'Oh, *shit*,' she said.

'You will barely notice it,' said Magda, encouragingly. 'Especially when the lights are down and everyone's drunk.'

Astrid snorted. 'You English, always so polite. Madison, darling, you cannot possibly wear that dress.'

'I mean, it does look like someone . . . overexcited,' said Magda, blushing furiously.



‘And I presume that’s not the look you’re going for,’ said Astrid.

‘No, it most definitely isn’t,’ replied Madison, in despair. Why did this stuff always happen to *her*? She didn’t want to go to the party in her scruffy old jeans and the jumper that she’d been wearing since six a.m., even if the party was in the boardroom.

‘Hang on, Cinderella,’ said Magda. ‘I’ve got an idea.’

She beckoned for Madison to follow her through the corridors of the production office, where posters of present and past shows adorned the walls.

Magda unlocked a cupboard. ‘Shouldn’t really be doing this, but I know they stashed a host of costumes in here on the way back from a promo shoot,’ she said. ‘Come on, let’s see if we can find you another outfit.’ She rummaged among the railings, and gasped. ‘This! Oh, my God! It’s perfect.’

She pulled out a white halterneck dress, with a full skirt, that seemed to shimmer and glow with a life of its own.

‘Isn’t it too dressy?’ said Madison.

But Magda was a woman on a mission. She rummaged further and found a pair of silver high heels. ‘Just try it on, Madison,’ Magda begged.

Madison went into the loos again, pulled on the white dress and put on the shoes. She took a deep breath before she went out. She was generally OK with how she looked – she sometimes felt nice enough, but she wasn’t a knockout like her best friend, Jess. And she was fine with that. Mostly. As long as this looked OK, that was fine.

Madison glanced in the full-length mirror and did a double-take. That couldn’t be her! The dress fitted like it had been made for her: it skimmed and showed off her curves in all the right places, and her brown skin gleamed against the bright



white fabric. The high heels elongated her legs and she spun round, twirling. She felt *amazing*. She couldn't wait to hit the dance floor in this little number!

'Oh. My. God!' said Magda, bursting through the door. 'Madison, you look absolutely incredible! Where have you been hiding that figure?'

'Thanks, Mags,' said Madison, grinning shyly.

'Madison Monroe,' said Astrid, coming in behind her. 'Phenomenal.'

'Just one finishing touch,' said Magda, pulling out a deep red lipstick and applying it to Madison. 'Perfect. Now let's get in there.'

They walked into the boardroom, which had been transformed for the party, tables pushed back to make a dance floor, flashing disco lights, a buffet laden with beige food – much to Madison's disappointment, it didn't look like they'd splashed out for the end-of-year party. But there were mince pies, and Christmas tunes were blaring.

Some of the staff were already the worse for wear, Elton John's sparkling glasses, Britney's snake, and an array of wigs slipping off as the dance moves got wilder.

'Everyone's checking you out,' murmured Magda, and Madison opened her mouth to protest before she saw it was *true*. Heads were turning to watch her walk into the middle of the room. Her colleagues were smiling and raising drinks to her. She made herself pull back her shoulders and smile too. Her smile was her favourite feature: it showed off her naturally straight white teeth and the dimples she'd inherited from her mum.

She went to get some fizz from the makeshift bar, picking up a glass and reaching for the bottle. 'Please, allow me,' said



a smooth voice at her side, and she turned to see Rich in a tuxedo.

Of course she'd noticed him when she'd begun working there – everyone had. They'd been introduced, and he'd once helped her as she struggled to get an awkward box up some stairs, but that was the limit of their interactions. Working on separate teams with different schedules had dashed Madison's hopes of properly connecting with him. Until now.

'Is the name Bond, James Bond?' said Madison, reaching out her glass for Rich to pour her some fizz. The drink, the dress or the mixture of both had boosted her confidence.

Rich laughed. 'Something like that. The name's Rich. Rich Sykers.' He clinked his glass against hers.

Madison had a weird moment of wondering if he really didn't recognize her, if she was *that* forgettable, before shoving it to the back of her mind – maybe she was overthinking it.

'Madison. Madison Monroe,' she said.

'Well, Madison – what can I say? You're an absolute bombshell.'

Madison wanted to grin with delight. Instead she embraced the essence of her icon, and lowered her eyes to the floor, then looked up to meet his. 'I'd better go and greet my adoring fans.' She smiled cheekily and sashayed away, aware that Rich was watching her go.

Madison hit the dance floor in style, working her hips, singing along to the tunes at the top of her voice. She loved dancing, loved the beat working its way through her body, putting her hands over her head and letting pure happiness flow through her. Everyone was dancing in no time, and that was when Madison ducked away to wipe her brow and armpits discreetly with napkins, only to find Rich at her side again.



‘I cannot take my eyes off you,’ he said, and she noticed again how handsome he was, and felt her stomach flip. ‘Can I have the next dance with you?’

‘Sure,’ said Madison, breezily. She seemed to have acquired an entirely different personality in this dress. ‘Just make sure you can keep up, yeah?’

Rich laughed. On top of everything else, it turned out that he was an amazing dancer. He twirled Madison round, and danced up behind her, his arm around her waist, and Madison shut her eyes, leaning into the feeling of them dancing together, their rhythm perfectly matched . . .

‘Right, OK, time for a quick speech,’ came a droning male voice. Colin, the head of Accounts, pulled the music, to groans from everyone. ‘Just a very swift run-down of where we’re at this year . . .’

‘Colin, put the music back on or I’m leaving!’ yelled Astrid, and everyone cheered.

Colin scuttled away and the music resumed, but Madison was the only person who was glad of the interruption – it had been getting a bit heated for the work Christmas party. The last thing she wanted was to be office gossip in the morning. She hurried to the loos and immediately texted Jess, who was much more used to dealing with men who looked like Rich than Madison was.

Jess rang immediately.

‘What the hell do I do?’ muttered Madison. ‘The hottest man in the world appears to be hitting on me. *Me!*’

Jess cackled. ‘Play it cool, Mads. He’ll be used to getting what he wants. You just bide your time, eh?’

Madison topped up her lipstick and walked back out. She glanced around the room for Rich, trying to look as if she wasn’t searching for him.



‘Fancy getting out of here?’ Rich murmured in her ear, catching her by surprise. ‘The music’s entering a phase that’s a bit too cheesy for me.’

‘I’m gonna stay,’ said Madison, thinking of what Jess would do. ‘But you can take my number and ask me out on a proper date.’

Rich smiled.

‘And while Marilyn would probably have scribbled it in lipstick on a napkin,’ said Madison, ‘I’m going to put it in your phone.’

She tapped in her number, double-checking that it was correct, and saved her contact details as Madison Monroe.

Ten years later, and married, she was still saved in Rich’s phone as Madison Monroe.