

BILLY

“We’ve got to get out of here. Now!”

For a moment I squint at Olivia, dumbfounded, waiting for her to dissolve into fits of giggles as usual. She’s got to be joking! But her face is serious, and I feel my smile freeze.

“Are you mad? Why?” Not three minutes have passed since the end of the museum tour. “But, the party is only just getting started.”

Little groups of people are gathered around us in their finery. Elegant evening gowns create splashes of colour amongst black suits. The people take glasses of champagne from the servers, clink glasses and start their conversations, soft music in the background. I have already worked out who the sponsors are and who the great and good of Liverpool are. I am not interested in them. I am here to network with people who are going to work at the Mary Annings Museum. The scientists, curators, lab technicians, the people in administration and public relations, and the assistants. On the first of August the newly inaugurated natural history museum had announced a single vacancy for an assistant curator. My application had been successful, my interview was in five days. But, as well as me, it felt like every other person living in the city wanted that one job too, and if I wanted a real chance, I needed something to help me stand out. Or someone. I don’t have the relevant qualifications or work experience, no references, nobody who knows someone, who knows someone, who... The party tonight is my only chance of making some measly and apparently vital contacts.

I can’t leave now!

Olivia gathers up the skirt of her emerald green evening gown, ducks down and goes round a local celebrity, who ogles her neckline as she goes. She is obviously trying to go under some kind of radar that I am unable to see. What is going on with her?

I can’t claim that my friend is renowned for her logical and rational approach – in the nicest possible way, she is completely nuts! -, but she knows how important tonight is to me, and would never put it at risk because of one of her ‘changes-like-the-wind’ mood swings. Whatever is going on here, she isn’t going to get out of this without an explanation.

She quickly links arms with me and pulls me along with her between the columns in the entrance hall with its high ceiling towards the stairs that lead to the exit. In doing so she almost knocks a tray of canapés being carried by a waiter in just as much of a hurry as her. I have to forcibly extricate myself from her to make my point. But I have no desire to be remembered as the hysterical girl scrapping with her friend at the opening ceremony.

“I am so sorry, Billy, but we really have to go.” A few strands of her turquoise bob fall into her face meaning she can avoid looking at me. She seems truly remorseful. “At least you got to see Spino Dino.”

Spinosaurus aegyptiacus. It did not belong to the museum; it was just on loan for exhibition during the opening year and was supposed to be a crowd magnet as the highlight of the ‘Fossil Age’ exhibition. Since the Second World War, when many priceless fossils were destroyed, this was the only remaining, almost complete original skeleton. I got goose bumps all over my body when I saw it for the first time just now.

“And when you come next time”, Olivia goes on in a high-pitched voice, “you might even be allowed to dust it.”

“Very funny.” Unfortunately, I am in the mood for explanations, not jokes. “Why do we have to leave all of a sudden?”

We get to the wide stone steps that split after a few steps forming two flights that lead to the ticket desks on the ground floor. Two people are handing in their coats; some guests are obviously only now arriving after the tour. The party is only just starting.

I grab Olivia’s arm so that she has to stand still. “Can you please just tell me what’s going on? Is your deodorant not working, do you need a tampon, or did you see an ex?”

“I’ll explain outside.”

“Explain now or I’m not going a single step further! You know why we’re here, Livie. I can’t just...”

Whatever Olivia sees as she glances past me has to be on about the same level as a dancing Neanderthal skeleton, because her red cheeks suddenly go unhealthily pale around

her little nose. She abruptly grabs me by the shoulders, turns me around and gives me a shove so that in my high heels (Olivia's high heels, to be honest), I stumble down the first few steps much more quickly than I would like. On trying to grab the wide stone banister, I break a nail, my clutch slips out of my hand, a killer heel snaps off to the side under my foot. I see myself tumbling down the stone steps in my loaned mustard-yellow evening gown and being the first ambulance call to enter into the annals of the museum, when my helpless stumbling comes to an abrupt halt.

Into the arms of...The Beatles.

Their portraits and mop-tops appear right under my nose, until I manage to pick myself up and stand steadily on two feet again. A Beatles T-shirt in Liverpool? That's what backwater German tourists wear, isn't it?

"Thanks", I gasp catching my breath and lift my head from the faded Beatles T-shirt peeking out from the open jacket of a tailor-made suit. Here we have someone who knows how to break fashion rules. Liverpool has a lot to thank the Beatles for – my thanks, however, go to the guy now looking me straight in the eye, as he's standing two steps down from me. Without him I would have fallen down the stairs.

"Is there a reason you're running away?" He has dark hair, almost black, short on the sides and a bit too long on top. It looks like he can't nod or shake his head in case the hair rakishly smoothed to one side goes in his eyes. Which would be a shame because those eyes could be described as nothing but triumphant. The strong brows – the right one has a wafer-thin scar running through the end third – and the dark designer stubble make them look very, very blue. His accent reveals that he's no tourist. The T-shirt has got to be ironic.

"Not for no reason have I arrived late", he says, "but, is it really so boring here that you have to rush out and break every bone in the process?"

"Are you really such a philistine?" I ask. "You really don't look like one. Or are you one of those people who think it's somehow cool to find everything boring and dull, unless it's extremely loud, extremely dangerous or completely mad?"

He just smiled back. Have I seen through him? Got it right so quickly?

“Billy!” Olivia has already gone a few steps past me and seems pretty distraught now. “Come on. Please!”

The Beatles fan bends down to get my clutch and passes it to me. “I don’t want to be indiscrete, but if you need a getaway car...”

His smile isn’t really a smile. He is only smiling with the corner of his mouth, and even that has only moved slightly. A half-smile would be an over-statement – it’s more a quarter of a smile. You would have to call it extremely sparing, but for some reason this quarter has more of an impact than most other people when they beam. It is contagious, so much so that I nearly forget how annoyed I am. But only for a fraction of a second. But then it just makes me feel even more frustrated because with every moment that passes it makes me want to leave even less. “Don’t tell me you happen to have one waiting outside the museum?”

“No, but taxis stop for me.”

“Wow. That’s impressive.” Who is this guy – a pop star? A Royal I’ve never heard of? Jesus?

“Would you maybe like to have breakfast with me?” he asks.

Now I have to laugh. “Breakfast. It’s half nine at night.”

“I mean tomorrow. At my place. You’ll be hungry if you decide to stay, and I have four different types of cereal. And...” He pauses meaningfully and strokes his chiselled chin with his finger tips, “quite good coffee.”

“That sounds really tempting. Have you got Weetabix?”

“Of course. Probably out of date, but...”

“Billy!” shouts Olivia.

“I’ve got to know!” I cross my arms. “Does this crap work with any women?”

The tailored suit says: Oh yes. The Beatles T-shirt says: But, hello. His smile...gets a shade brighter.

Why am I asking – of course it works.

“Sadly I’ll have to decline.” I brush past the guy and have to make myself keep looking ahead. Under the suit is not just a Beatles T-shirt, but a black tattoo, peeking out from his collar on his left collarbone. “I stole a vertebra from the Spinosaurus, I’m not going to get far in a taxi.”

What was I saying? Am I drunk from just looking at the champagne flutes?

“Exciting”, he murmured. “Do you do things like this often?”

“Yes. All of the time. If you hide me at yours, you’ll be arrested by Scotland Yard along with me.”

“And if I’m ok with taking that chance? Maybe they’ll lock us in a cell together.” His eyes are locked on my mouth, even though I’d normally find being hit on like this a turn-off, I can feel my lips tingling, and it’s not because this guy is pretty damn hot. It’s because he’s managed what some never do: he’s unashamedly talking about nothing other than sex and despite that making me feel like it’s all about *me*.

With most men, it’s the exact opposite.

Maybe it’s because of my nervous energy about tonight, maybe it’s the missed glass of champagne, maybe the fact that I’m going anyway and will probably never see him again. But for a few seconds I play along. I lay my hand on his chest, I run my fingertips across the hollow above his collarbone, and I lean so close to him that I can smell him. A whiff of aftershave or perfume, beneath it an aroma reminiscent of oranges and dark chocolate.

“Never”, I whisper, “Never would I ever do anything to put you in danger.” With that I spin around and totter down the stairs; click clack click clack click clack. And without breaking anything. Who knows, I must be one of the long-lost avengers. You’ve got to have a superhero gene to accomplish feats like that.

“Shame. But good luck with your vertebra.” He sounds surprisingly serious.

“Thanks!” I shout over my shoulder. “By the way, the exhibition is far from boring!”

Liverpool-Reihe: A Reason To Stay

The Liverpool Series: A Reason To Stay

by Jennifer Benkau

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“Of course it isn’t. The party, though.”

BILLY

I really want to say something else to the guy on the steps, but Olivia takes me by the hand and drags me to the exit. We almost run into a tall middle-aged lady with dark hair, who even at this extravaganza stands out amongst all the guests as being particularly exquisitely dressed. She looks at us slightly bemused as we rush past her. A moment later we're standing in our sleeveless dresses in the April wind. A squall means that the sycamores surrounding the entrance rain water down on us.

Olivia holds her handbag over her head, achieving absolutely nothing, because this *bag* isn't much bigger than a credit card.

"Car!" she shouts, avoiding my piercing look.

"I hope for your sake you've got an explanation!" I respond, as we run to the road hitching our dresses up, turn left avoiding a few guys coming in the opposite direction leering over us with bottles of beer. I had to get used to the louts to begin with; they're everywhere in Liverpool. It's not uncommon for them to even be wearing smart suits.

Under the streetlights I notice more and more speckles of water spray on the mustard-yellow fabric of my dress.

"Just great! If the cleaner can't get them out, I'm up shit creek." The dress is hired and worth more than the decrepit, rust-brown Ford I christened Homer.

"I'll help you", replied Livie. And that's exactly what I was worried about.

"Just don't. May I remind you about your Irish wool jumper?"

"Your firstborn could still wear that during a hard winter."

We finally get to Homer. I unlock the passenger door, go around the bonnet and open my own door. The central locking was already broken when I bought the car last year, and is one of many things that I have never got repaired. I gave it the name Homer during our first night together – the first of almost thirty I spent curled up asleep on the back seat. My car has this name, not because I'm a fan of ancient Greek literature or the Simpsons, but because it was my home for a while. And in some ways it always will be.

Olivia is already sitting down as I sink behind the wheel, and although she, like every self-respecting Northern girl, isn't affected by the cold, her shivering arms are folded across her chest and her teeth are chattering. "Can we go now, please?"

I turn the key in the ignition to start the motor and with it, the heating, but make no move to do my seatbelt up or put the car in gear. The fans blow air towards us, that feels like it comes from the North Pole, and we turn around at the same time to fish out the denim jacket and hoody we threw on the back seat earlier.

"Now are you going to tell me why we had to run away, or am I going to have to guess?"

Since Olivia purses her lips together instead of answering, I make good on my threat.

"Okay. Prince Harry was there, and you had a thing with his wife before they got married. No, wait. You had a thing with his wife *after* they got married. Oh... you *still* have a thing with his wife?"

"She's about forty!" responds Olivia indignantly. "She's old enough to be my mum."

"She doesn't look like it though."

Olivia looked at me rubbing her chin with her index finger. "No. But she could be *your* mum. Why has that never occurred to me before? She has dark skin, wavy black hair, big chocolate-brown eyes... *Is* she your mum?"

"My mother", I say feeling the impatience in me rising, "has very little in common with the Duchess of Sussex apart from her skin colour. And you know very well that I don't want to talk about Mum or the Duchess of Sussex right now. Damn it, Livie, this party was my only chance!"

A small chance maybe. But unfortunately my only one.

Livie sighs, it sounds almost like a sob, and her face looks so unhappy, I immediately feel sorry for being harsh. But, I have to know what happened. After all, right now I could be chatting to the curators and entralling them with my contagious enthusiasm for the exhibits.

And afterwards maybe a glass of champagne with the cute Beatles fan. Half a glass – because of Homer.

I could ask him if he lost a bet, which is why he’s wandering around in that Beatles T-shirt, and if he was the betting type, I would make sure he lost a bet with me, and the T-shirt...

Oh my, I’m losing it. I get my thoughts in check, clear my throat and give Olivia a look with my eyebrows raised strictly. “Out with it! Now!”

Olivia stares at the glove box. “The tickets”, she says then, much more quietly than is her usual style.

“You stole them.” Even though I’m wearing my cosy hoody and warm air is now coming out of the blowers, I suddenly turn ice cold. And I start sweating too, and for a moment my body won’t let me take a breath. *Not that.*

“Of course not”, murmurs Olivia, and I relax a bit again. “Unfortunately the truth isn’t much better.”

“Just say it, please.”

“Do you remember Gavin? The cute blond we met in that bar? Looked promising to start with, but on the date it became apparent after about five seconds that there couldn’t be anything between us.”

“Wait! Aren’t you the one who told me to give people a second chance, despite first impressions?”

“Sure, but Gavin smelt funny. Like meat, mustard, grease and onions. Like a McDonald’s Cheeseburger meal.”

Despite everything I couldn’t help but smirk. “Understood.” Olivia reacts hysterically to smells. “But what has all of that got to do with tonight?”

“The tickets are from him. He just wasn’t my type, Billy, but when he had this contact and had tickets for tonight...”

I have a sense of foreboding. “You met him again? Just for the tickets?” Just...for me?

“Twice. Nothing happened. We just went to the cinema and I waxed a bit lyrical about the museum.”

The question pops into my head: how did Olivia manage it? She may have varied interests, but they do not include extinct animals or stones and bones, not to mention fossilised bones. And as far as astronomy goes, she only knows what she’s talking about if it includes the universes in *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*.

“He finally gave them to me, and I nearly even kissed him for them.” She taps the corner of her mouth. “Here. Just a peck. He would have liked more, but I’ve got one thing to say: McDonald’s meal deal.” She shudders.

That doesn’t sound like a reason to run out of the museum in such a haste. “And then?”

She slowly shrugs her shoulders. “Then it might be that I didn’t contact him for a while. Quite a while.”

“So, never again.”

She nods and she looks like all she wants to do is crawl into the glove box. “I rejected his calls when he rang me. And after not replying to seventeen messages, I blocked him on WhatsApp. And then on Insta.”

“Oh my God. You ghosted him! Livie!”

“It’s lousy, I know. But...”

I bow my head and rest my forehead on the steering wheel. Olivia is the biggest pacifist I know. It is not the first time she has put her head in the sand like an ostrich trying to ride out conflict. But ghosting someone who obviously has feelings for her and is making so much effort for her, I would never have thought her capable. Especially not Gavin, who I actually thought was quite nice. The poor guy!

In her defence I have to admit that she seems to have a guilty conscience, and not just about me, but Gavin as well.

“Okay, let me guess. Gavin was at the party.”

“Yes, with one of the curators, the grey-haired one, who gave the last speech. Maybe he’s with him to get over me? What have I done? The man is old enough to be his grandfather!”

Damn! My name would have been mud if Gavin had spotted us!

“Hopefully he hasn’t become a toy boy for rich, old codgers”, Olivia murmurs. “I mean he smelt really disgusting, but he doesn’t deserve that.”

“God, Livie, it probably *was* his grandfather!”

She flinches because I sound so harsh, but my patience is wearing very thin.

“What were you thinking? Did it never occur to you that someone who can get hold of such exclusive tickets can just get new ones?”

“That’s just it Billy! He didn’t even want to go! That’s why he gave me both of them instead of inviting me to go with him. Gavin wanted to go to Manchester tonight because United are playing and – in his own words – he ‘lives for football’. The game is on right now. How was I supposed to know he would bail on his beloved Reds and turn up at the museum?”

I shake my head in frustration. “You should have told him you didn’t have feelings for him. You should have told *me* where the tickets came from.” Maybe I’m not completely blameless in her not telling me. She told me she’d got the tickets from an acquaintance – which wasn’t a lie -, and I didn’t delve any deeper: firstly because of hysterical joy, and secondly, because I was overwhelmed by the question of what I should wear.

And now I’m sitting here and the dream is over before it even began. Rain is streaming down the inside of Homer’s windscreen because the cheap back-alley mechanics hadn’t even managed to mend the leak on the second attempt. My mustard-yellow evening gown has brown speckles on the bottom and a really cute Beatles fan is probably clinking champagne glasses with someone else. In *my* museum. Beneath the empty eye sockets of my *Spinosaurus aegyptiacus*!

“I’ll put it all right”, says Olivia, but I brush her off and put the car in reverse to finally manoeuvre Homer out of the too-narrow parking space. “I could at least track down that guy for you.”

“What guy?” Annoyed, I wonder if I was thinking out loud.

“The one who was all over you. I mean the one on the stairs, who you can’t possibly have forgotten so quickly.”

I roll my eyes. “Livie, yes, he was cute. But please, leave it. We’ll find out he’s Gavin’s brother. Or his date, the reason he decided to come after all.”

“I have to make it right though.”

“It’s really not about the guy. I just want this job.”

Olivia lays her hand on mine on the gear stick as I inch my way towards the car behind us. “And you’ll get it. With or without contacts. As long as there are no brain-dead morons working in the personnel department, they’ll see that you were born for this job, no *conceived* for it.”

“And how am I going to tell them anything about the reason for my conception in a single interview?”

“Anyone who exchanges more than three words with you can tell”, responds Olivia and gives me the comforting feeling that she really means it. “You move people. Your positivity is contagious, and your capacity for enthusiasm is undeniable. Darling, the things you explained about that Dinosaur-chicken-bird-thing...”

“Archaeopteryx”, I correct her because I can’t help myself.

“...even impressed me. Even though I was absolutely adamant I would find it all completely mind-numbing. And now I can hardly wait for you to give me a private tour. You are a born museum guide. If they don’t see that you shouldn’t take the job anyway.”

“Why not?”

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“Because it means that only idiots work there. And the place will close down soon anyway.”