

THE LOST AND FOUND NECKLACE

by Louisa Leaman

EXCERPT

Jess sits out the rest of the auction, barely aware of the lots that come and go. She doesn't lift her card again, but sits shredding it, venting her wrath on its flat, passive form. As the auction comes to a close and the hall starts to empty, the compulsion – and perhaps her true motive for staying behind – comes to the fore. Curly-Sparkle is one of the last to leave, having spent time chatting with other dealers. As he makes for the door, Jess staggers after. By the time she catches up with him, he's in the street, the boxed necklace still tucked under his arm, hailing a black cab. The air is warm, summer in Knightsbridge. The high street is busy with afternoon shoppers. As a cab pulls in, she knows it's her only chance – now or never.

'Wait!' she cries.

He doesn't hear, but climbs into the back of the cab, starts giving the driver instructions. Jess slams herself forward, ignoring the pain, then blocks the door with her stick. Now he looks up.

'Oh, hello again.'

'We need to talk.'

'We do?'

'Yes.' She eyes the purple box. 'About that.'

'You mean my necklace?'

'My necklace,' Jess corrects.

'Er?'

Jess leans into the doorframe. Curly-Sparkle gives her a puzzled smile.

'Something tells me – could it be the way that you're staring at me with a slightly demonic look in your eyes – that you're annoyed I won the bid.'

'That necklace,' says Jess, brow furrowed into a deep V, 'is my family's heirloom. I came here to get it back for my eighty-two-year-old grandmother. I had my handle on the auction the entire time, and then just as the hammer was about to drop on my final bid, *someone* decided to throw out a chippy little one six fifty offer. Literally as the hammer was about to drop.'

Curly-Sparkle shrugs.

‘Some you win, some you lose.’

‘Oh, come on. I deserved that bid and you know it.’

The cab driver coughs. ‘Do you want this ride, mate?’

‘Yes,’ says Curly-Sparkle. ‘Just . . . give me a moment.’

He turns back to Jess.

‘Look, I’m sorry how things turned out, but ultimately my bid won. I appreciate you feel the necklace has something of personal value to you, but you took your eye off the ball. What can I say?’

Their gazes lock together. Jess tries her best to glare him into submission, but his confidence doesn’t waver. He is utterly self-assured. Why . . . why does this have to be a trait she finds alluring? She stares into the darks of his eyes, wills that beguiling sparkle to go cloudy. He is not. Never. No way.

‘Perhaps I could give you a lift somewhere?’ he suggests. ‘And on the way maybe we can resolve the matter. Or you could just scold me some more, whatever helps. Either way, can we come to some kind of peace? I like to sleep easy at night and –’ he grins – ‘you’re strangely endearing.’

Jess snorts her outrage.

‘No, thank you,’ she asserts.

He smiles, unfazed.

‘It’s a hot walk to the tube.’

‘I’ll be fine,’ says Jess.

‘Suit yourself.’

He shuts the door. Jess hobbles on, purposefully pounding the concrete with her stick, holding her nerve, masking her emotions with a fixed frown. Smart-talking cavaliers? Oh no, she’s been down that road already and look where it got her? A shattered body and a shattered heart. As if to reinforce the point, her hip joint twinges, stopping her in her tracks. She stiffens, winces, waits for the pain to pass. In her periphery she sees the cab move off. Good riddance. Another unnecessary, unhelpful and, no doubt, messy flirtation averted.

As she walks on, however, a small torment bores into her soul; the thought that Nancy’s necklace, there on the back seat, is about to disappear once more. She’d come so close, but now . . . no tears. There will not be tears. Oh god! There *are* tears! They stream down her cheeks, blur her eyes. She increases the pace, determined to bury her frustration. It’s just a necklace, she tells herself. There are bigger things to worry about. But then . . .

The cab slows beside her. The passenger window comes down. Curly-Sparkle leans out.

‘Are you sure?’ he says. ‘I’m heading for Portobello. I can drop you where you like . . .’

He holds out the purple box as though trying to tempt her with it. She takes a breath, clenches her fists. The moment spirals inside her. He’s trouble, of that she’s certain, but the necklace . . . its history, its beauty. She *can’t* let it go. With a resolute shiver, she stops walking, turns to face him.

‘Are you open to deals?’

‘I might be.’

The door opens. Jess climbs in.

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