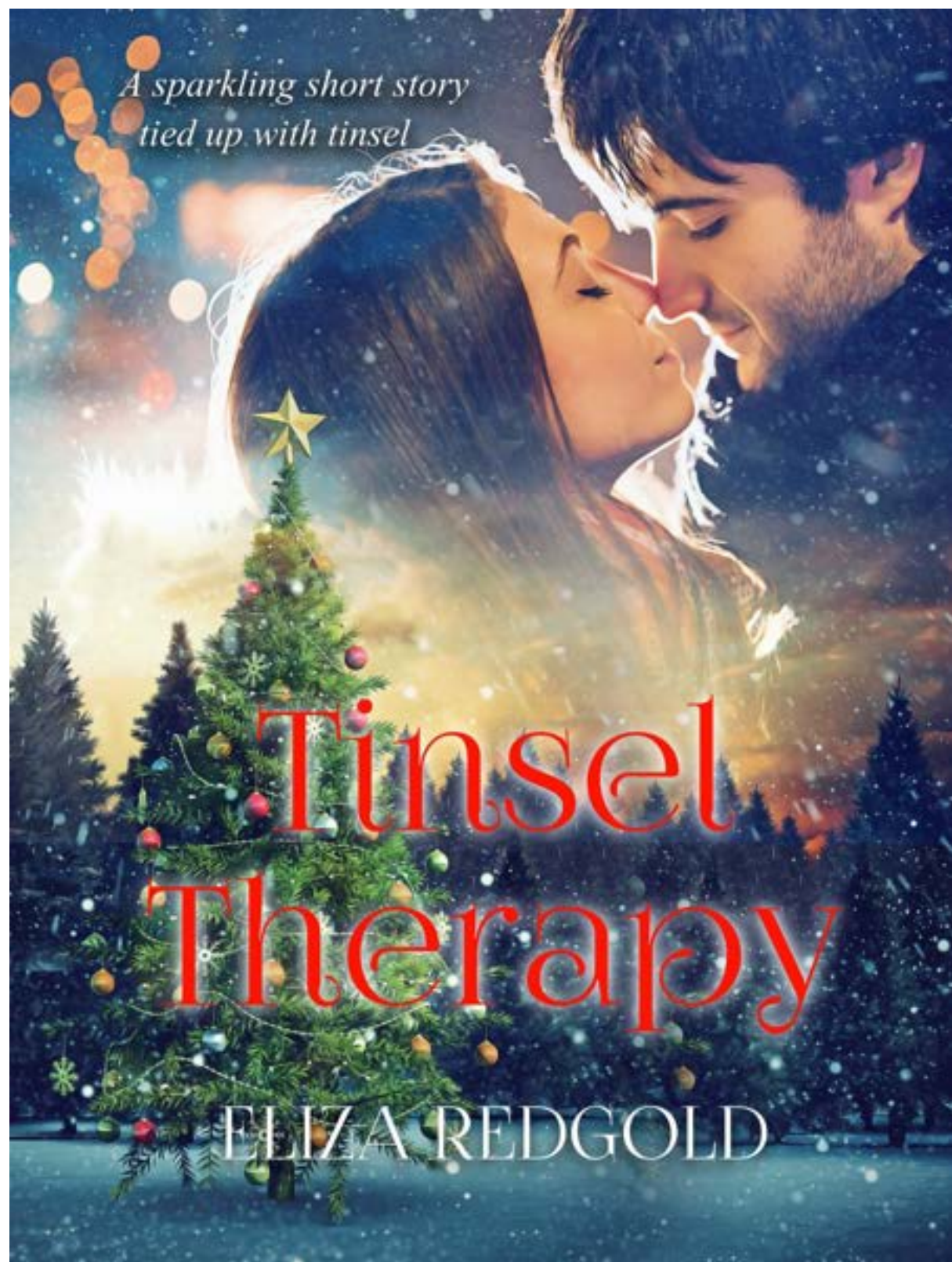




*A sparkling short story
tied up with tinsel*

Tinsel Therapy

ELIZA REDGOLD

Tinsel Therapy

Eliza Redgold

Charlotte Blair is terrified of tinsel – thanks to her old childhood playmate Rupert Bringham. He's back in London and offering his help to help her overcome her fears – which she soon realizes are more about life and love than festive decorations. Can Charlotte face what scares her and let tinsel bind them together in time for Christmas?

About the author

Hello, I'm Eliza Redgold. It's the Gaelic meaning of my full name, Dr Elizabeth Reid Boyd.

There are some exciting new releases coming in 2017. Out in March is [*The Secrets of Mindful Beauty*](#) to be published by Skyhorse Publishing, New York. These revolutionary techniques in anti-ageing and self-care will change how you look and how you feel - forever.

Also in 2017 the first in my Ladies of Legend fiction series will be released as an audio book. Listen out for ***NAKED: A Novel of Lady Godiva***.

For more details, please feel free to visit my website at www.elizaredgold.com

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I do hope you enjoy this festive story - a fun and heart-warming Christmas tale set in the fairy-lit streets of central London.

Eliza Redgold



Charlotte Blair glared across the crowded room at the man who had ruined Christmas.

Rupert Bringham. No doubt about it. Hair so dark it was almost black, and light blue eyes that made his skin look tanned. On second glare, it was a tan. He'd been away from rainy London, skiing or sunning somewhere exotic.

She'd have recognized him anywhere, even though they hadn't spoken in years. But they had Facebook friends in common, as well as their parents still sending each other Christmas cards containing Round Robin letters that detailed every respective family success. Oh yes, Charlotte knew about how well he had done at school, at university and in joining a firm of London architects. Whether he knew that she worked for a fabric design company she had no idea.

Seeming to sense her furious gaze upon him he looked across the room and glanced idly over her hair spilling over the shoulders of her little navy dress. For a moment she wished she'd worn the red velvet dress she'd almost slipped on at the last minute. It was a kind of stretchy velvet that clung in the right places, but as usual she had decided to play safe.

His head swiveled away, and back again.

The corners of his mouth stretched into a grin.

He moved through the crowd with a polished ease that told more of his success than his parents' Round Robins and came to a halt by her side. "It's you, isn't it? You're the girl who's scared of tinsel."

Charlotte jerked up her chin and stared up at him. He was taller than his Facebook tags had suggested. "No thanks to you."

Rupert started to laugh. "You can't be serious. After all these years? You're still blaming me?"

"You gave me tinsel phobia," Charlotte hissed. "What do you think it's like at Christmas time? One week to go and it's a nightmare. There's tinsel everywhere. Look!"

He followed her gaze to the huge Christmas tree on the opposite side of the room, strung with lights, ornaments, baubles and meters and meters of crinkly, sparkly, silver horror.

She shuddered.

"How would you have liked to be tied up in an attic?"

He chuckled. "It was a game. That was all."

"It wasn't a game to me." She shuddered again as the memory came back to her.

"You weren't there for long," he objected. "Only a few minutes."

"I was seven years old. It seemed forever."

Rupert frowned. "It really affected you."

She gulped a mouthful of mulled wine. "You must have known."

He shook his head. "I had no idea. I thought you got over it years ago."

"Well, I didn't."

He studied her with an intensity that made her glance down into her cup of warm, spice scented wine. A piece of orange peel was floating on the top.

"Charlotte."

She looked up.

"I'm extremely sorry."

His blue eyes glowed with an unmistakable flicker of sincerity. Their color matched his business shirt, perfectly laundered. Pure cotton. She always noticed fabric.

She stared down at her punch cup again. Mumbled into it. "Forget about it. It's perfectly all right."

"No, it's not."

To her amazement Rupert placed two warm fingers under her chin, lifted her face to meet his. "You need tinsel therapy."

“Charlotte, a courier’s just delivered this for you.”

Charlotte rubbed the back of her neck and stretched. Too long at the computer, as usual. People thought fabric design was about cloth, but most of the design process was done on the computer. She still made sketches by hand too, of course. She kept a sketch book with her, jotted down patterns on the train, while sitting in a café. All kinds of things gave her ideas. She had folders of sketches at home too, not that any of them were much use at work.

“Thanks.” She took the envelope from Luli and tore it across the top. A card slipped out.

Charlotte screamed.

Luli rushed over from her desk on the opposite side of the office. “What’s wrong?”

Charlotte hauled a deep breath. “Tinsel.”

Luli picked up the card from the floor. The front glowed with a photograph of a red tinsel wreath.

Charlotte pressed her back against her chair.

“Tinsel Therapy session one,” Luli read aloud. “Eight o’clock tonight. What’s that all about?” Her dark eyes narrowed. “Why are you having therapy? You’re not depressed or anything are you?”

“No.”

“Is it a date? You never go out on dates.”

Charlotte restored her breathing to normal and shook her head. “It’s nothing like that.”

“Then what is ... tinsel therapy? And who is Rupert?” Luli read the name from the card.

“He’s the man who gave me tinsel phobia.”

“What?”

“He tied me up with tinsel.”

“Kinky,” said Luli with a giggle.

“Not when you’re seven years old,” Charlotte said tartly. “His parents and mine are friends. We were at a Christmas party at their house, and we were all playing sardines. It’s an English house party game,” she explained, at Luli’s expression of incomprehension. They

probably didn't play it in China. "Anyway he found us a place to hide in the attic. There were some Christmas decorations stored there, and he tied me up with tinsel. I think we'd stopped playing sardines, and were playing cowboys or something like that. He was going to rescue me. Instead, he forgot all about me. By the time I was found I was hysterical. Ever since then, I've hated tinsel."

And Rupert Bringham, she added, in her head.

"How old was Rupert?"

"Ten years old."

"He's nicer now?"

The touch of his hand lifting her chin came back to her.

"He's ..."

Luli raised an eyebrow. "Handsome?"

Charlotte found she was blushing. Rupert Bringham had improved over the years, although he'd never been hard on the eye. "He's just giving me tinsel therapy, that's all. He feels responsible."

"Sure." Luli slid the card back into the envelope and propped it on Charlotte's desk among the paperwork and fabric swatches.

Charlotte stared at Rupert's strong, black handwriting. The sense of his fingers cupping her chin lingered.

Definitely worth a try.

"That turkey was better than my mother's." Rupert laid down his knife and fork and lifted his glass of claret. Charlotte avoided looking at his long fingers. "Don't tell your mother I said so. She won't be able to resist telling mine."

Charlotte giggled. "I won't breathe a word."

Between them a red candle glowed. The restaurant he'd booked was quiet and discreet, with white linen tablecloths and sparkling silverware. She'd read about it in one of the weekend newspaper lift-outs, though she'd never been before. It specialized in traditional English fare, cooked to perfection. They'd both ordered from the Christmas menu and the restaurant's reputation hadn't been misplaced. The meal was excellent.

So was the company.

She snuck a glance at Rupert across the table. He was dressed in a dark suit, with a white shirt, tie-less. The suit was wool, with some mohair in it, she guessed from its smoothness. His sleeve had brushed against her as he took her new navy trench coat. In the dim lighting his hair appeared even darker, but his eyes hadn't lost their intensity as he met her scrutiny with a grin.

She glanced away. At most of the other tables there were couples too, and when she'd entered the restaurant her stomach had fluttered with sudden nerves. Surely somewhere busier would have been better, when any lapse in conversation would be covered by chatter from nearby tables.

To her surprise, their conversation didn't stall. Instead, there was an unexpected rapport between them, and not just because they had known each other as children. She hadn't realized they had so much in common. They discussed people they knew, places they'd been on holiday. Books they'd read, movies they'd seen. Music they downloaded. They discovered a shared liking for Scandinavian design. He didn't glaze over when she mentioned a certain kind of Scandinavian fabric, which Charlotte loved, but her mother thought was too big and loud. It turned out his mother preferred chintz too.

She commented on it as the waiter cleared their plates. A sommelier rushed over to top up their claret glasses. The wine too was excellent.

Rupert smiled. He had good teeth. She chided herself for noticing. She wasn't checking a stallion in a stud.

"We're strangers, and yet we're not," he said. "The Round Robin."

"I hear about you from my parents," Charlotte admitted. And she'd checked him out online that day. Read all about his architecture awards for the warehouses in the East End he'd converted into studio apartments. She'd only checked once. Well, twice. In case she'd missed anything.

"I hear about you too," he replied. "But not the important bits, I presume."

"The important bits?"

"There's been no wedding announcement in your family's Christmas letter."

"Oh. No."

"I take it you don't tell your parents about your love life." He grinned again, disarming her. "I know I don't tell mine."

"No, no I don't."

"Is there anyone special in your life?"

"Not right now."

Luli was right, Charlotte reflected. It had been an age since she'd been out on a date. There'd been a couple of times a relationship had gone further, but she always shied away.

It felt too rude to ask him if he had anyone in his life, but the question must have shown on her face.

He laughed. "I'm not seeing anyone at the moment, since you're too polite to ask. I'm out of a long term relationship. She went back to Brazil, a couple of years ago."

Brazil. Charlotte tried to drum up her knowledge of the South American country, but all she came up with was soccer and bikinis and painful beauty treatments.

She smoothed her navy skirt over her opaque tights. She wore it with a white lace shirt. Suddenly she wished again she'd had the nerve to wear her red velvet dress. "She sounds ... exotic."

"She was. Is. But she didn't settle here in London, in the end. Too rainy, too ... demure. Erika was anything but demure. But I quite like demure. It's English. It makes me feel at home." He made a drumroll on the table with his long fingertips. "Are you ready for your therapy?"

Charlotte picked up her own glass of claret. "I guess so."

"We'll take it slow," he drawled. "No rush."

Charlotte took a sip of wine and cleared her throat. "Oh. That sounds fine."

"The card I sent you this morning was the first step," he explained. "How did you cope with it?"

"I couldn't touch it," she admitted. "My friend at work picked it up from the floor."

Two lines appeared between his brows. "'Where is it now? In the rubbish bin?"

"No. Luli, that's my friend, she put it back in the envelope. It's on my desk."

"Put it in your bag," he ordered. "You need to carry it around with you."

Charlotte wrung her fingers together. "I'm not sure I can ..."

"Leave it in the envelope." His voice became persuasive. "You don't have to open it yet. Just get used to having it around. Okay?"

She gulped. "Okay."

The waiter delivered their plump Christmas puddings, served with rich brandy butter. Rich and curranty, steam curled around them.

“Good old fashioned English cooking is back in style,” he said. “I went off it for a while. After boarding school I suppose. Now I’ve come back to it.”

“I don’t usually order the Christmas menu.” Charlotte lifted up the twig of holly adorning her Christmas pudding. “People even garnish food with tinsel these days.”

“You’ve got tinsel phobia, but I think I’m getting a tinsel obsession,” he revealed. “Today I couldn’t get it out of my mind. I saw it everywhere. I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I even looked it up on the web. Did you know tinsel was originally made of shredded silver? It goes back to the 17th century. It was supposed to look like icicles.”

She swallowed a currant. “Oh.”

He grinned. “Some icicles, the colors we get at Christmas. Now, about your therapy. I’ve worked out a plan. I’m confident it will work.”

“You seem to know a lot about psychology.”

Rupert grinned. “Just call me Dr Google. Actually, I rang a friend of mine from university. He’s a clinical psychologist. He took me through the steps. It seems a very straightforward procedure. I don’t think I’ll do more harm than good. I hope not.”

“What’s the procedure?”

“Exposure,” he said.

Charlotte choked on her mouthful of pudding.

“Are you ready for step two?” he asked.

He slid a black velvet case across the table, the size of a jewelry box for a watch or a bracelet.

At the table for two next to them an older woman winked at Charlotte.

Charlotte drew her upper body away from the box and fiercely shook her head.

“Open it,” Rupert urged. “It’s just a try. Step by step. That’s that way. I’ll help.”

He leaned over and snapped open the lid.

Glimmering gold foil burst out and snaked onto the white tablecloth.

The woman at the next table sent Charlotte a look of sympathy.

“Can you handle it?” Rupert asked.

She shook her head.

"Try. It's from Harrods. Best quality tinsel."

She could see it wasn't the really cheap sort, the scratchy kind that made the worst tinselly shine as well as having the worst tinsel scrunch.

She shook her head again.

"Just stroke it. One finger."

"I can't," she said breathlessly.

He scrutinized her face.

"Let's try something else. My friend said it would be good for you to watch someone else handle tinsel. Here."

He picked it up, ran the metallic ribbon through his fingers.

Charlotte stared. Rupert Brigham's hands. His palms were huge and his fingers long, strong and powerful. Yet the gentle way he caressed the tinsel...

"Please," she gasped. "Please stop."

With a sharp look at her face Rupert shoved the tinsel back into the box and snapped the lid.

He scowled. "It's worse than I thought."

Charlotte's temper rose.

"I didn't ask you to try to fix it," she snapped.

His brow cleared. "I'm not angry. I'm frustrated. This is more challenging than I expected."

She slid away her plum pudding. She'd lost her appetite.

From across the table Rupert's huge hand shot out and encased her fist.

His grip was firm and warm. Charlotte's heart drummed.

"I'm not going to give up," he said. "There are five days until Christmas. We can do it, together. Have you got any plans for the next few days?"

His hand was still around her tight fist. She shook her head.

"Great. Session three tomorrow night, then."

He slid his hand away.

She stared down at her abandoned plum pudding.

"Charlotte."

She glanced up. The blue flame was back in Rupert's eyes.

"We can do this. Okay?"

Tears prickled at the back of Charlotte's eyes. Tinsel phobia was ridiculous, but for her it was real. No one had ever taken it seriously before. "Okay."

"How did your tinsel therapy go?" Luli asked as she hung her coat on the hook.

Charlotte looked up from her desk. She toyed with the pencil in her hands.

"It went better than I expected," she admitted.

She kept thinking about Rupert's hands. The size of them, the touch of them, the way they encased her own.

Her heart drummed faster than the little drummer boy in the Christmas carol. "We're meeting again tonight."

"Where?"

Charlotte shook her head. "I'm not sure yet. He's going to text the details."

"That's kind of romantic," Luli said. "Like a blind date. A secret rendezvous."

"It's not romantic," Charlotte said quickly. "It's therapy."

Her pulse made another annoying drum-roll.

Charlotte swung her legs from the bar stool. The polished tips of her brown boots only just touched the cobbled stone paving.

Rupert pressed through the crowded piazza and placed a mug of cocoa on the bar in front of her. The top brimmed with cream and cinnamon.

"Thanks." Charlotte closed her sketch pad and went to slide it into her bag.

“What’s that?” Rupert asked as he put down his own drink and slid beside her. His long legs could reach the cobblestones. His drink looked like coffee, but smelled like whiskey. Irish coffee, she realized. She never risked coffee after nine pm.

“Oh, I just like to make notes and sketches. Thanks for suggesting we come here.”

“My pleasure,” he replied with an almost imperceptible lift of a corner of his mouth, before his head swiveled away to stare around Covent Garden. “These Christmas lights are amazing, aren’t they?”

“They’re gorgeous.” Charlotte had always loved the atmosphere of Covent Garden with its covered market, quirky shops, restaurants, bars and amazing street entertainers, though she usually avoided it at Christmas time. It made shopping particularly difficult, but she’d started to order on-line instead. Now, looking around the crowds, the fairy lights, bright faces and inviting shop window displays ordering on-line seemed rather dull.

“You’ve had a lucky escape from tinsel tonight. There’s less tinsel there than I expected.”

“I haven’t spotted any,” Charlotte replied.

She’d held her breath as they walked by a huge Christmas tree, but it was lit with lights rather than tinsel. An enormous silver reindeer stood poised in front, as though guarding a forest entrance. The Covent Garden Christmas theme was remarkably tinsel free.

“A chance encounter with the stimulus is useful, my friend thought,” Rupert explained. “I thought that if some happened to be here we’d see how you handled it. I was all set to defend you from a random tinsel attack.”

“You were going to defend me?”

He grinned. “Of course, my lady. We used to play knights and swords, didn’t we? What exactly were we doing when I tied you up? Cowboys?”

“Sardines,” she corrected.

“That’s right.” He picked up his drink. The lower part of his mouth was hidden by the glass.

Charlotte glanced away from his hands and cupped her own around her mug of cocoa. “I haven’t seen a Christmas display like this for ages. Not on purpose, anyway.”

“I take it you don’t you come and see the Christmas lights every year.”

She shook her head. “Tinsel alert.”

"Not much of a risk taker, are you?" He sounded amused, almost mocking, she thought, as he swallowed the whiskey coffee.

"What makes you think that?"

He grinned. "You're drinking cocoa."

"Is there anything wrong with not being a risk taker?" Charlotte demanded. "You can't even go on holiday any more without someone asking if you climbed a mountain or bungee jumped or went white water rafting or on safari or something else life threatening."

He held up one palm flat. "Hey, just wondering."

Sorry," she murmured. It was a touchy subject with her. She didn't take many risks, she knew it. Just that morning she'd been tempted to show some bolder, Scandinavian style patterns in her design to her boss, but she'd ended up playing it safe, as usual. Luli had encouraged her to show the sketches, but she'd hidden them in a folder on her computer.

He swallowed some of his Irish coffee. She tried not to notice the froth at the corner of his mouth. Lickable, the thought popped into her head.

This was Rupert Bringham, her sworn enemy since age seven. She shouldn't be thinking about licking coffee froth from his lips. But when he used the tip of his tongue to wipe it away, her stomach did a somersault.

"You've done well tonight," he said.

"I feel as if I cheated. I haven't faced a single strand of tinsel."

"I'm proud of you for taking a risk," Rupert said. "You took a chance coming here. It could have been a tinselly nightmare."

"*You* were with me." The words popped into her mind. She bit them back before she said them.

"The decorations are gorgeous," she replied instead. They'd given her the idea that made her sketch away madly while he got their drinks.

"Then I pronounce tonight a success." Rupert took another swig of coffee. "We'll be on to session four. I'll text you the details again tomorrow. The address will be a giveaway, otherwise. I don't want you getting cold feet and standing me up."

"I won't stand you up," she said quickly. Too quickly. She shrugged. "I need the therapy."

"And you're going to get it." He held her gaze for moment. Her stomach did that somersault again. "Have you got the card I gave you?"

She nodded. She transferred it from one bag to another and patted her satchel. "It's in here."

"No ill-effects?"

She'd transferred the enveloped gingerly, not looked inside the card and tucked inside the zip compartment.

"Okay. That's a step forward then. You're getting used to having it around."

She took another sip of cocoa, drained it. "Yes."

She slid her sketchbook into her satchel, next to the envelope.

"What were you drawing?" he asked.

"A sketch for fabric," she explained. "These Christmas lights gave me an idea."

"It must be great to see your fabric designs in the shops."

Charlotte grimaced. "My best designs don't make it to the shops. The firm I design for creates the same kind of pattern each year, with only a tiny tweak here or there to show it's been updated. It's easy to do, but it's not that stimulating for the designers."

"Ever thought about going out on your own?"

Only every day. He must be a mind reader. "Maybe one day."

"What's holding you back?"

"I'm happy enough where I am."

He studied her speculatively. "Is happy enough good enough?"

"At the moment."

"You could start your own fabric design firm."

"You make it sound so simple!" she protested.

"Isn't it?"

"Of course not! You need capital, clients ..."

"Courage," he put in.

Charlotte took a breath. "I don't think you understand. There's a lot involved in the design trade. Have you started your own architecture firm?"

"Not yet," he said easily. "But I will."

Rupert glanced at his watch. "It's getting late. I'll get you a cab."

Charlotte tried to ignore her sense of deflation. "So that's it for tonight?"

"Yup. You've done well. We don't want over-exposure."

"No, of course not."

Rupert glanced at her mug and leaned close. His voice lowered. "Unless you'd like another cocoa."

"Actually," Charlotte said, "I think I'll have an Irish coffee."

Charlotte switched on the light by her drawing board at the window. The curtains were drawn back, and moonlight shone onto the white page.

There had been no point lying in bed any longer. Sleep wasn't going to come. The combination of alcohol and caffeine was still surging through her body faster than adrenaline.

And Rupert Brigham.

Had it been her imagination or had his offer of more cocoa been suggestive?

Could an offer of cocoa be suggestive?

Drawled in a London accent from the mouth of Rupert Brigham, it seemed it could.

Or was it wishful thinking?

In her small galley kitchen she heated some milk in the microwave and made herself some more.

After placing the mug of cocoa beside the drawing board she pulled out her small sketch pad from her handbag. The envelope with Rupert's tinsel card inside fell out with it. Unopened, she held it for a moment in her hand, staring out into the dark street. She'd sealed the flap with some sticky tape.

Gazing through her own window across to those on the other side of the road, she could see Christmas trees twinkling. It looked like fairy land.

Charlotte slipped the card back into her bag and picked up her pencil.

Charlotte yawned.

"That's the third time you've done that today," Luli said from her desk across the room. "What did you do last night?"

"I was up late," Charlotte explained, yawning again before managing to cover her mouth with her hand. No one wants to see your tonsils, her mother had always said. For some reason thinking about her mother made her think about Rupert, but all morning she'd been thinking about Rupert.

"You had more tinsel therapy, with, what's his name? Rupert Bringham. Didn't you?"

"That's not why I was up all night," Charlotte replied hastily.

"That's a shame." Luli giggled. "How's the therapy going?"

"It's ... interesting."

Luli raised a delicate eyebrow.

"I liked him when we were children. He was lots of fun," Charlotte confessed. "I remember once he let me win at tiddlywinks."

"Tiddly..."

...winks," Charlotte finished. "It's another English game."

"And Rupert played this ... tiddlywinks ... with you?"

"We all had to play 'non-screen time' games," Charlotte remembered. "It was fun, actually." Though sardines and tiddlywinks did sound odd, she had to admit. "That was before the tinsel incident, of course."

"And you like him again now?"

She'd hated him for so long.

"It's all about tinsel, nothing else." Charlotte clicked her mouse. "We're having another session tonight."

"That's the third date in a row," said Luli.

"They're not dates!"

Luli giggled again. "Of course not."

“Well?” Rupert demanded.

“It’s so beautiful,” Charlotte breathed.

Rupert bowed. “Here in London we aim to please. When you said you avoided Christmas lights I knew this was where we must come next.”

On the opposite side of the road they had the best view of Harrods. The famous department store was outlined by electric lights, lit up like a fairy castle.

All around them, crowds of people rugged up in coats and scarves carried bags that brimmed with Christmas shopping, couples with their arms around each other, children out to see the lights and tourists taking photos of the window displays on their cell phones. On a corner they even passed carolers.

“The first electric Christmas lights were used to light up streets and department stores in Victorian times,” Rupert told her. “Before that it was candles, of course. Tinsel was used to reflect the light and add to the effect. It was rather dangerous.” He chuckled. “More tinsel facts. I better stop before I become a tinsel bore.”

“You don’t bore me,” Charlotte blurted. “I mean I like you ... I mean I like it when you tell me about tinsel.”

“Thank you,” he drawled, sounding amused. “We’ll consider that progress in your therapy.”

Charlotte bit her lip as she stared around.

“Christmas window displays are an art form,” she marveled, changing the subject. How had she allowed herself to miss out on them for so long? She glimpsed them passing by on a bus or in a cab, of course, but she always turned away or squeezed her eyes shut. Now all the color and life triggered the artist inside her. Patterns jumbled in a kaleidoscope of color inside her head. Red, green, gold. Blue, white, silver. Bells, balls, stars. She could hardly wait to get her ideas down on paper.

“I’ve seen the window displays in New York too,” Rupert said. “Barney’s windows are spectacular.”

America.

Charlotte’s Christmas spirit plummeted. Of course he’d seen the store window displays in America, probably with the South American beauty he dated for so long.

“But London is home,” Rupert added.

Charlotte felt as if fairy lights turned on inside her.

"Yes," she echoed. "It's home. But I have to say I don't often come to Harrods. I usually shop at Harvey Nichols."

"So do I," he admitted. "We must get it from our mothers."

Charlotte laughed.

She glanced up sideways at him. His head was bare, but he'd wound a tartan scarf around his neck. She liked it. It reminded her of Christmas ribbon. She loved to unwrap parcels tied with ribbons.

She swallowed hard. Her own navy scarf that she'd knitted herself scratched against her skin. She loosened it a little.

"Right." Rupert briskly rubbed his gloved hands together. It was a shame not to be able to see his bare hands, but she had to admit they looked good encased in black leather. Good leather too, the top quality kind that stretched across his knuckles as he flexed his hands.

"We're outside Harrods because of their Christmas grotto," he said. "It will be the most effective exposure. I checked it out when I bought the tinsel for you."

"You're going to a lot of trouble."

His gaze found hers. His eyes were so blue. They ought to be cold, that color, but they were warm. "We're old friends. I owe you. Are you ready?"

"I think so," she said faintly. Old friends. Was that all she was to him?

"I'll take you for a drink at the pub afterwards," he promised. "Unless you need one beforehand."

"No." Charlotte's legs trembled inside her knee-high boots. "Let's do it."

Rupert grabbed her hand. "Come along. It's time for some Christmas shopping."

Her heart leapt as he seized her hand in his leather glove, and raced across with crowded street, pulling her with him, almost breathless.

Together they entered the brightly lit department store. He kept hold of her hand as they pressed through the chattering throng of shoppers. It was suddenly warm coming inside the store after the cold outside, but it wasn't the store heating that made warmth rush through her body.

"This way."

Rupert gave another tug of his hand. It pulled her closer to him as he flashed a smile over his shoulder.

A smile, as if they were a couple, as if they belonged together.

A smile that made her weak at the knees.

At the same moment she saw the first huge garland of tinsel above Rupert's head.

Charlotte's head spun.

"I'm so sorry," said Rupert.

Charlotte lifted up her head. It had been between her legs for long enough now, surely.

Rupert stood beside her. He gazed at her with concern as he slid a glass of topaz brown liquid across the table. "I knew I should have got that drink for you before we went into the store."

Charlotte grabbed the glass and gulped.

"It's a whiskey mac," he said. "Whiskey and ginger wine. I thought it would do the trick."

She didn't care what it was as she took another swig.

"I can't believe I fainted." Her voice was shaky to her ears and her legs were still trembling. "There was just..."

"Too much tinsel," Rupert finished grimly. "I'd never have believed it either if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. One minute we're entering the Christmas grotto and the next you're out cold."

Her cheeks flamed. She'd come round on the floor of Harrods to find him kneeling over her while people pushed and shoved around them. It had been hard to breathe. He'd practically picked her up in his arms, forced his way through the crowd and hurried her away from the store into this dimly lit pub.

It had been mortifying, yet when he'd lifted her into his arms ...

Charlotte gripped the glass. "I'm so sorry."

"I've just apologized to you," he said. "Let's stop being English and apologizing to each other. We're both terribly sorry."

She managed a shaky giggle.

He frowned. "Are you hungry?"

"I haven't eaten dinner," she admitted. And she'd skipped lunch, come to think of it. She'd raced out to buy a new jumper, pale blue and white, with snowflakes shapes on it. Not quite icicle shaped like tinsel, but getting closer. She wondered if Rupert had noticed it. Probably not, while she'd been sprawled out on the floor of Harrods.

She bit back her moan of embarrassment. If only she hadn't fainted!

"I'll go and order us both some pub grub," he said now. "Steak and ale pie and chips suit you?" At her nod he added, "I'll check they don't garnish with tinsel."

Now Rupert came back from the bar carrying a full pint glass.

"The barmaid thought I was mad checking there was not a tinsel garnish," he said as he slid opposite her in the booth.

Charlotte chuckled.

"That's better," Rupert said approvingly. "The English roses are coming back into your cheeks."

"I'm not an English rose," she protested. "English roses are fair-haired."

"But you've got English skin," he said, "Pink and white. With your dark hair and eyes, I have to say it's a winning combination. I remember thinking you were pretty, even when you were a little girl. I liked you then, you know."

Charlotte choked on her whiskey mac. "Did you?"

The flame in his eyes had become something darker. "Why do you think I tied you up?"

He drummed his fingertips on a beer mat and slid his pint glass onto another. "This isn't going to beat us. We're going to solve this, Charlotte. Maybe I need a bit more background information. Are you prepared to answer a few questions?"

He got out his cell phone and clicked. "I talked to my friend again and made some notes."

"What kind of questions?"

"I'm wondering if you associate tinsel with anything else. Whether there's any other issue that needs to be addressed. If we can get rid of your aversion to that issue, we might solve the tinsel problem."

"Oh."

"Is there anything? Does tinsel have any other strong associations?"

"Of course," she said.

He raised an eyebrow.

"You," Charlotte admitted in a small voice.

There was a moment of silence.

"Me?"

"I wasn't ever sure what I hated more," Charlotte admitted. "You or tinsel."

Rupert roared with laughter.

Then he sobered. "We're running out of time. Tomorrow night is the night before Christmas Eve. I don't think there's a special name for it, is there?"

"I don't think so."

Rupert leaned over the table. His voice turned husky. "We need to spend some time by ourselves, Charlotte, if you're going to get over this aversion."

Rupert reached across the table and placed two fingers under her chin, lifting her eyes to meet his steady gaze. "Come to my flat tomorrow night. Come and decorate my tree."

"It's a date," Luli said. "Come on Charlotte, admit it."

"I think it might be," Charlotte conceded with a grin.

The memory of Rupert's fingers holding her chin, the way he looked at her lips as though assessing how best to kiss them. Surely she hadn't mistaken that.

He'd stared so intently. It had almost been better than a kiss, that amazing sensation, as if his lips actually touched hers.

Almost, but not quite.

From her bag she pulled out the envelope that contained the card Rupert sent her when she first began her tinsel therapy.

It was just picture, a photograph. She could handle it. She didn't have to be afraid.

She held her breath as she slid the card out of the envelope and stared at the red tinsel garland.

A tremor of panic shuddered through her body.

"Are you all right?" Luli asked from across the office.

"Yes, I'm fine."

Charlotte shoved the card back into the envelope.

Charlotte stared out across the lights of London, twinkling like an enormous Christmas tree. She slid her hand along the window frame. It was raw wood, but it was smooth to the touch. Sleek, hard edged, yet warm.

The whole flat was the same. Two dark brown leather sofas faced each other in front of the fireplace. A brown and white hide rug lay in front of it. A fireplace flickered with glinting logs.

"It was my first warehouse conversion," Rupert said. "One of the first I ever did. I couldn't let it go."

"It's wonderful," Charlotte said, "Although ..."

"It could do with some curtains," he finished. "That's what my mother always says."

Charlotte giggled. "My mother would say that too. I wasn't going to say so. I don't close the curtains in my flat very often."

He lifted a brow. "Don't you? That's a surprise."

She shrugged. "I do take some risks."

"That's good to know," he drawled, with a grin.

To hide her hot cheeks she glanced away. "You could do with some soft furnishings. A cushion or two."

"Maybe when you start your own design company I'll buy some fabric designed by Charlotte Blair."

She smiled. "Who knows?" The night before she'd stayed up and sketched some more. "That reminds me." From her satchel Charlotte revealed the rolls of tartan ribbon. "I brought these for your tree."

“Great. Come and see the tree.”

Carrying her bag she followed him past the leather sofas in front of the fireplace with to the corner of the room where the tall fir tree stood in semi-darkness. Rupert flicked a switch and the fairy lights came on. The warm-white lights sparkled.

Charlotte let out a sigh of relief.

Rupert reached out and touched her cheek with two fingers, tilted her face towards his. “You’ve been holding your breath.”

She turned, stared up at him. The planes of his face were outlined in the lights. “Tinsel.” She faltered, her heart thumping.

“There’s no tinsel in here.” He cupped her face in his hands, studying her mouth with that intense gaze. He murmured as he lowered his mouth to hers. “Just me.”

His lips descended on hers. So familiar, so warm, as if they’d kissed before, yet with a hard unexpected edge. She raised herself up, her arms around his neck. His hands moved to her body, pulled her closer against him.

The kiss became something deeper, more powerful. She stumbled back against the fir needles of the Christmas tree, but he held her upright as she let him search her, devour her. It had been building inside her for so long, this hunger. He wanted her too, his body pressed hard into the softness of hers. She found herself reaching for him, tearing at his shirt to have his skin against her, pulling at his belt.

He drew back, ran a hand through his hair. “Charlotte ...”

She put her hand against him. “Don’t stop, please Rupert. I want this. I want you.”

He almost groaned. “I want you too. The past few days have been torture.”

Her voice sounded husky to her ears as she grabbed her satchel. “Wait here for me, by the tree, please. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Swiftly she made for the door on the opposite side of the room. “Is the bathroom this way?”

Rupert leapt towards her. “Charlotte...”

“I won’t be long,” she whispered over her shoulder.

She twisted the handle.

“Wait!” he shouted.

Charlotte opened the door and screamed.

Tinsel.

Everywhere she looked there were meters and meters of it, in every color.

Red, green, blue, silver and gold.

Bows. Garlands. Swags. Loops. Swirls.

Hanging from the doorframes. Swooping from the windows. Tied to knobs and handles. Swathed on the furniture. Hanging from the ceiling.

Draped over the huge double bed.

Rupert dragged her out of the bedroom and slammed the door.

Charlotte gasped, the screams choking her throat. "What was that?"

He held her by the shoulders. "You weren't meant to see it yet."

"What did you do?"

"I tinsel-bombed it."

She wrenched away from him. Her breath came in choking gasps. "You tinsel-bombed it? Is this some kind of cruel joke?"

He drew back. "Of course not! I thought if you had a total tinsel immersion experience..."

"What, in your bed?" Charlotte shook all over. "You ... you ... presumptuous ... you ..."

His jaw clenched. "I can fill in the blanks, Charlotte."

She marched to the front door. "I'm going home."

"Why am I surprised?" The bitterness in his voice stopped her.

She spun on her heel. "What's that supposed to mean?"

His eyes glittered. "Tinsel is just an excuse, isn't it?"

Tears stung the back of her throat. "Do you think I'm making it up?"

"Of course not," he slammed back. "I saw what happened in Harrods. Your phobia is real. But if you're going to beat it, you have to face the fear. You're not afraid of tinsel. You're afraid of life."

She gulped. "You're not a psychologist!"

"You don't have to be a psychologist to work it out. You're scared of me too, aren't you? Not because I tied you up with tinsel, but because I've got too close. You don't want to risk finding out for sure if this is something special." He moved towards her. "We've known each other all our lives, Charlotte. How long are you going to stay tied up in the attic?"

Charlotte's mouth fell open.

He grabbed her arm. "You don't any risks. You've got the skills and talent to start your own design business, but you're afraid to take a chance. You've been in the same job since you left university. And you haven't had any serious relationships."

"How do you know?"

"My mother."

"You asked your mother about me?"

"She keeps her Round Robin letters."

She yanked herself free of his grasp. "Then tell your mother this for next year's Round Robin. I don't ever want to see you again, Rupert Brigham."

Charlotte stormed out the door.

"The date didn't work out?" Luli asked sympathetically.

Charlotte shook her head. "Not really."

That was an understatement.

"What are you going to do for Christmas Day now?" Luli asked as she put on her coat. "Will you go to your parents?"

"I'll go tomorrow for lunch," Charlotte replied. She couldn't face anyone before that, even if it did mean spending Christmas Eve alone.

She wondered if Rupert would be alone, then pushed the thought from her head.

"I'm going to the shops," Luli said. "They're open for a little while longer. Do you want to come too? Unless you want me to stay with you. Are you going to be all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Luli looked worried.

Charlotte made her voice cheerful. "Honestly I'll be fine, Luli. Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas!" Luli waved as she went out the door.

Charlotte put her head in her hands.

She hadn't stopped thinking about what Rupert said to her. His words rang in her brain like Christmas bells.

Was he right? Was she afraid of life?

She shifted uneasily on her chair. His words contained a terrible grain of truth.

Lying on her desk was the envelope. She'd taken it out of her bag, ready to tear it into pieces and put it in the rubbish bin where it belonged.

Instead she slowly, carefully slid the card out onto the surface of her desk.

It lay face down.

Charlotte flipped it over.

Charlotte removed her underwear.

She gritted her teeth as she took up the first sparkly strand.

It scratched against her bare skin as she twined it around her leg, like an evergreen vine.

Then she took up the next.

She ran the shimmering green through her fingers. It had happened at the office. When she'd turned over the Christmas card she'd realized that Rupert's tinsel bombing had worked. It had given her such a shock that her initial phobia had been overcome. Or maybe she'd just decided not to be scared anymore, she didn't know for sure. It didn't matter. She'd raced out of the office and bought all the tinsel she could find at a little corner supermarket.

With care she wound the second piece of green around her other leg.

Next she took up a shiny red strand.

Nothing. No trembling. No fear, as she fashioned a tiny, glistening bikini that left little to the imagination.

TINSEL THERAPY

She studied herself in the mirror.

More. She needed more.

Charlotte kept decorating.

All over her naked body she tied it, ignoring the itchiness, only stopping for a festive sip of whiskey.

Straight up.

Finally, for good measure, she slung a shimmering gold boa around her neck.

Another glance in the mirror.

She was done up like a Christmas tree. Her mother's voice came into her head.

No. She wasn't going to think about mothers, any mothers. Not tonight, on Christmas Eve.

Charlotte smiled.

"May I come in?" Charlotte asked. "I know it's Christmas Eve."

Rupert opened the door and stood aside to let her pass. "Of course." His voice was steely English politeness.

Charlotte clutched the belt of her trench coat in tight fingers. It rustled suspiciously as she brushed past him. She peeked up at his face. No smile, and shadows beneath his eyes. Like her, he obviously hadn't slept much the night before.

He brushed his hand through his hair. "I was planning to call you. I'm glad you stopped by."

Charlotte gulped at the formality in his tone and clutched her coat tighter. "About last night."

His lips thinned. "I owe you an apology. The tinsel-bombing was out of line. Crazy. It could have done you a lot of psychological damage. But it's gone now, I threw it away."

She reached for her belt. "That's a shame."

"Charlotte..."

His voice died away as she opened the trench coat.

TINSEL THERAPY

“Tinsel.”

She’d never heard the word spoken like that before.

Tinsel.

How could she have hated it?

It was the sexiest word she’d ever heard.

“It’s for you,” she managed to stammer. “I wanted to show you I’m not scared anymore.”

“I’m really proud of you, Charlotte.” He sounded dazed, like she had after she’d fainted in the Harrods grotto. She hoped he wasn’t going to pass out.

She stepped closer. “Rupert ...”

His intense gaze moved upward to meet her eyes, sending shivers like icicles rippling through her. “Mmmhmm?”

She twanged a shiny red ribbon like a bra strap. “I’ve been tied up for a very, very long time.”

He pulled her into his arms. “I promised to rescue you, didn’t I?”

“You were a long time coming.”

Charlotte took the tinsel boa. Twining it around Rupert’s neck, she reached up and kissed him.

One Year Later

Christmas Greetings from the Blair family!

We trust our annual letter finds you well. This has been a busy year for the Blairs. Our daughter Charlotte has started up her own fabric design company, Tinsel Designs. It specializes in stylish Christmas fabrics for homes and offices, in well-loved patterns with a contemporary Christmas twist.

The splendid news doesn't stop there. We're delighted to announce Charlotte's engagement to Rupert Brigham, the son of our good friends and neighbors, the Brigham family. If you've already received their Round Robin letter our news will come as no surprise.

Next year, be ready to receive an invitation to celebrate Charlotte and Rupert's Christmas wedding!

May the festive season bring you every joy and happiness.

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I hope you've enjoyed this (hand-made) festive gift.

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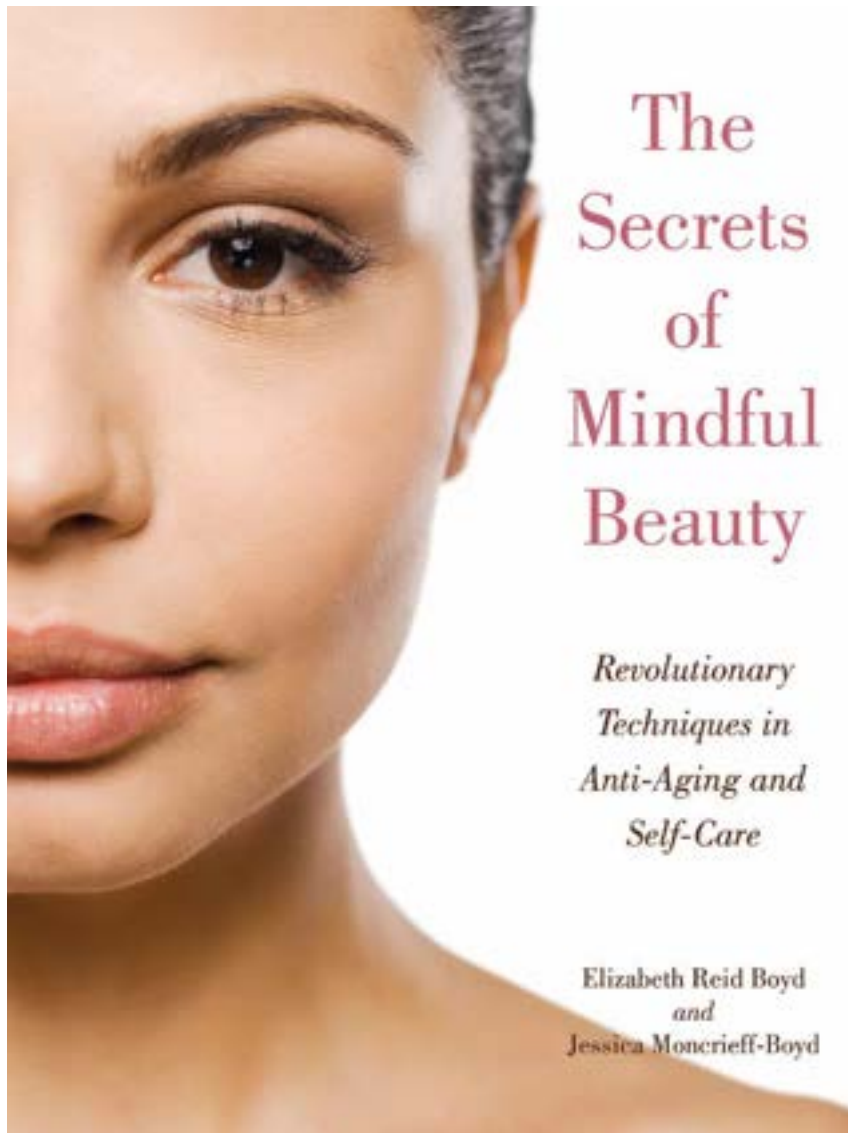
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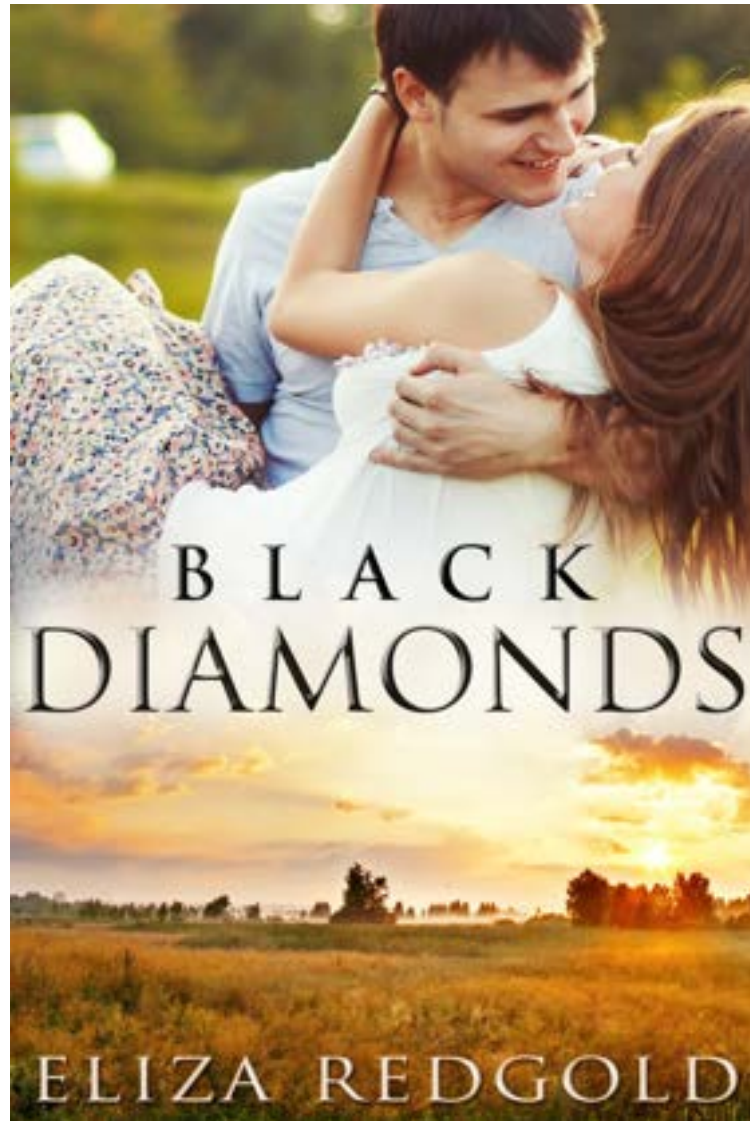
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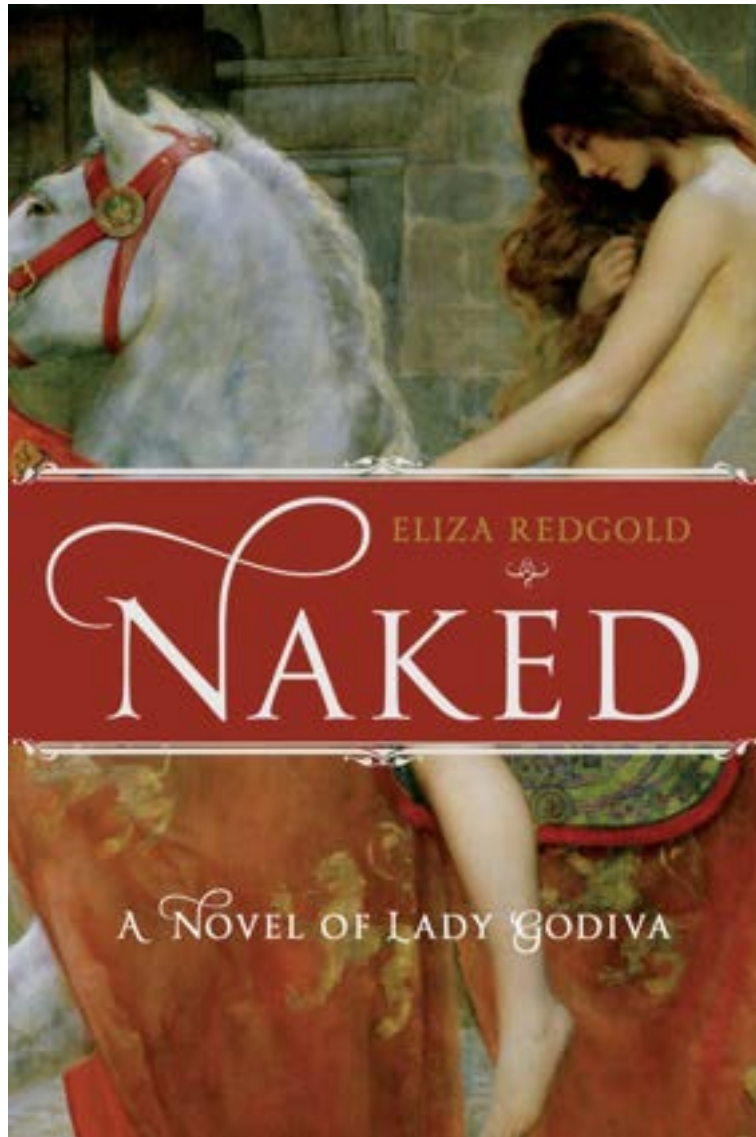


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