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Christmas, Love and other Disasters

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Spicy – a hot CEO who melts more than just the chocolate. An atmospheric, laughout-loud story where sizzling chemistry meets heartwarming moments.

Elle can hardly believe her bad luck: despite impeccable planning, she is late for an interview in snowy New York. This means she can forget about her dream job at a top event agency. But Keane, Elle's broken prom date, is now CEO of the agency. He makes her an offer: she has one month to organize the Christmas party for a special client as an event planner. If she succeeds, she will be offered the position of department head at Keane's agency. What Elle doesn't know is that the client is none other than the smart CEO himself. What is the purpose of his assignment? And why does not only the hot chocolate during the party preparations, but also his closeness, melt Elle's heart?

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PLAYLIST

Let it Snow – Dean Martin
 Sleigh Ride – The Ronettes
 Wonderful Dream (Holidays Are Coming) – Melanie Thornton
 Something Stupid – Robbie Williams / Nicole Kidman
 Where Are You Christmas? – Faith Hill
 Blue Christmas – Elvis Presley
 Santa Baby – Eartha Kitt
 Mrs Santa Claus – Nat King Cole
 Jingle Bells – Frank Sinatra
 Santa, Can't You Hear Me – Ariana Grande / Kelly Clarkson
 Rudolph, The Red-Nosed Reindeer – Dean Martin
 Hallelujah – Pentatonix
 Don't Feel Like Christmas – Tyler Hilton
 Jingle Bell Rock – Bobby Helms
 Santa Tell Me – Ariana Grande
 Please Santa Please – Pentatonix
 My Only Wish (This Year) – Britney Spears
 Mistletoe – Justin Bieber
 Naughty List – Liam Payne / Dixie D'Amelio
 Santa Claus Is Coming to Town – Michael Bublé
 Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree – Brenda Lee
 Come out and play – Billie Eilish
 It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year – Andy Williams
 Last Christmas – Wham!
 It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas – Michael Bublé
 Winter Wonderland – Bing Crosby
 White Christmas – Frank Sinatra
 Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas – Lauren Daigle
 All I Want for Christmas Is You – Mariah Carey

LET IT SNOW, LET IT SNOW, LET IT SNOW

Or: Murphy's Law – Anything That Can Go Wrong, Will Go Wrong

"Jingle bells are ringing – the countdown has begun. To all survivors of the Black Friday weekend out there: just thirty days until Christmas, the season of goodwill, when big and small miracles have a way of happening," the radio host's tinny voice crept into my ear from the alarm clock. At the same time, my smartphone alarm kicked in – not pleasant, but effective.

Yawning, I switched off the irritating beeping and listened instead to the considerably more agreeable sounds of the old-school device that had been easing me out of sleep relatively gently since childhood.

Normally I would have hit snooze and stayed in bed for at least another ten minutes. Not today. Whether I'd actually slept properly was debatable. Sort of yes, sort of no. Remarkable what a big job interview could do to a person.

As I climbed out of my box-spring bed, the host invited any early risers among his listeners to call in if they were among the lucky ones who had already experienced a Christmas miracle. Then he played the instrumental version of Sleigh Ride.

On the short walk from bed to the kitchenette across the fairly modest floorplan of my studio apartment, I flipped on the light and switched on the coffee maker I'd loaded the night before.

Then I spent a good while on my morning routine, even though my body's refusal to sleep had already driven me to take a hot shower at two in the morning.

In fresh underwear beneath my gloriously soft fluffy bathrobe, I shuffled across the pale wooden floorboards of my combined living-sleeping-working-cooking room to the simple kitchenette with its mismatched colourful handles and knobs. I poured myself a cup of freshly brewed coffee and leaned against the counter.

Meanwhile, the first listeners were calling in to radio station WANR. Prompted by enthusiastic questions from the host, they shared their personal Christmas miracles. Alison from Trenton, New Jersey went first. In an overwrought voice, she described how, five years ago on Christmas Eve, she'd skidded off the road on her way to her family and ended up with her car in a riverbed. She'd been stuck there for a full two hours because her seatbelt had jammed and she'd had no mobile signal to call for help. But then – oh, Christmas miracle – she'd been discovered and rescued by none other than her first great love.

"Of course, Alison," I muttered to myself, rolling my eyes over my coffee. "By now you're probably happily married with two adorable children, living in an idyllic suburb distinguished by its identical houses and perfectly matching gardens ..."

I was wrong about the idyllic suburb. About everything else, not so much. Saccharine talk about the one true, miraculous, and above all fated love first thing in the morning was definitely too much for me. Alison must have an extraordinarily vivid imagination. She was probably even a romance novelist or screenwriter. I was neither, and firmly placed myself in the camp of the disillusioned realists.

Sighing, I took another sip from my mug. My gaze drifted to the wardrobe, where a complete business outfit was hanging. The new light grey trouser suit with the cream blouse and matching heels had cost me a small fortune, even on sale. For the average New Yorker it would have been a serious bargain. For my rather modest finances, the investment had hurt. A lot. And that was only one of many reasons I urgently needed a properly paid job.

I was desperately hoping winter would continue to show its bitterly cold but dry side today, so I could wear the outfit I'd bought specifically for the interview and make the best possible impression. After ninety-two applications, fourteen instant rejections, seventy-eight initial online conversations with various HR departments, fifty-three more rejections, twenty-five second-round interviews, and the subsequent twenty-four rejections for lack of experience – I absolutely had to make the most of this, my only real shot at a position as executive assistant, and convince the HR department of Waters Corporation beyond all doubt. There was no plan B right now. What there was, however, was a career path that might lead me, by some route or another, to my actual dream job. Possibly straight into event management.

The display on the radio alarm clicked to 7:15. I took a deep breath, drank the rest of my coffee, and placed my mug in the sink. If my schedule was going to work out comfortably – ideally arriving at the Waters Tower a full half hour early – I needed to get moving, and check the weather first.

The Christmas miracle stories on WANR wrapped up in the background with a marriage proposal that missed the brief entirely but sent the host into absolute raptures and had me rolling my eyes again. When the shrieked "Yes, I do!" rang out from off-mic, I was completely done. Why had the guy chosen the radio for his proposal when he was clearly in the same room as his dream woman?

Tzzz ...

Drowning in kitsch, I walked to the window and pulled open the blackout curtains. At the exact same moment, to the bright festive flute intro of a globally famous Christmas song, the host's voice rang out: "Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Wrap up warm if you're heading out. Or – even better – stay home by the fire like Dean Martin," he announced, thoroughly amused.

"Holy shit!" I gasped at the sight of the dense snowfall outside and could barely take in what I was seeing. Rooftops, trees, cars, streets. All white. Overnight, without any warning, Inwood had been blanketed under a good ten centimetres of snow. And it was still coming down. I loved snow. And it was pretty to look at, no question. But this scenario hadn't been on my radar when I'd done my meticulous planning, because every meteorologist in the country had agreed that New York and all its boroughs would remain snow-free for the foreseeable future, thanks to the prevailing polar air mass.

It took me a moment to shake myself out of my stunned stupor. Then I dashed to the wardrobe, tossed the hanging outfit carelessly onto the bed and my bathrobe on top of it, and scrambled frantically for something vaguely snow-appropriate that at least looked a tiny bit like business wear and could be paired with lined boots. Total failure.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!"

But fine. I could panic and sue every meteorologist in the country after I'd signed the employment contract. With my current finances, a lawyer wasn't an option anyway.

Out of necessity I pulled on thick socks, squeezed into my least faded jeans, and grabbed the first pale pink roll-neck jumper I could find. A quick glance in the mirror confirmed what I already suspected. Perfect for ice skating with friends. Absolutely not appropriate for an important job interview at a major firm in Midtown Manhattan. But there was no time for the minor breakdown building inside me either. Like everything else, it would have to wait until I got home.

Focus, Elle, focus.

Ankle boots with grip soles versus fur-lined boots. To avoid looking entirely like I was off to a casual winter outing, I went with the knee-high winter boots. Done.

I rushed breathlessly to the tiny bathroom. The sleek updo I'd seen in a Reel and practised so many times I could do it in my sleep was out of the question right now. Every second counted. Snow in New York invariably had a catastrophic effect on the already chaotic traffic and every form of public transport. But leaving my hair loose in this weather wasn't an option either. That was a recipe for frizz, frizz, and more frizz – the kind that defeated even the best anti-humidity sprays. In a pinch, a simple ponytail was the only answer. I quickly combed the fair-blond tangle on my head back firmly and tied it with a hair tie.

The carefully practised subtle daytime make-up also fell victim to the acute shortage of time. Utterly overwhelmed and completely at a loss, my blue eyes stared back at me from the mirror as I at least managed to dash on some mascara at speed.

Taking a deep breath in and out, I left the bathroom and returned to the main room. A fleeting glance out the window confirmed that, contrary to my hopes, the snowfall had grown heavier.

Shit!

On the radio, the last notes of Dean Martin faded seamlessly into Bing Crosby's Winter Wonderland.

Seriously?

The host was having a great time, clearly. You could hear it. He was sitting warm and dry in the studio, being paid very well for it, while half of New York was battling through heavy snowfall on the way to work, freezing to death.

As soon as I got home, I would change the station – that had just moved to number one on my to-do list for the day. Taking another deep breath, I pulled on a wool coat, swung my bag onto my shoulder and shoved my phone in. Then, with every nerve tightly wound, I grabbed my keys and tucked the document folder under my arm.

Umbrella, umbrella, umbrella ...

Quick search. Found fast. Even though I was sure I hadn't forgotten anything, I looked around the apartment one more time just to be safe, and took one final look in the mirror beside the wardrobe.

Yay!

What a disaster. I looked exactly as bad as I felt. Maybe the HR department would show some understanding for my unprofessional appearance given the unexpected weather. At least, with a bit of luck. Everyone needed that now and then. Why on earth would it choose today to flip me off?

Okay, stay calm. Don't even think about Murphy's Law. You are thoroughly prepared and fully qualified for this job in every way. Everything else is beside the point. There's absolutely no reason to panic. You love snow. Now get moving. Onwards into the Winter Wonderland, Elle!

SLEIGH RIDE

Or: Skidding Through New York

The moment I set foot outside the five-storey apartment building, the freshly fallen wet snow crunched under the soles of my boots. One glance up at the sky was all it took to confirm what I already feared. Mother Nature was shaking out her duvets with impressive enthusiasm, and by all appearances had no intention of stopping any time soon.

Why today of all days? Why not tomorrow? Or the day after?

Sighing silently to myself, I squared my shoulders, fumbled the umbrella open, and at least managed to shield myself from some of the fat flakes before they could soak through my clothes entirely.

Moving as fast as the slippery pavement would allow, I headed down the street. Half of Inwood was busy digging cars out of the snow. The other half was, without question, doing exactly what I was doing – making for the subway or one of the various other public transport options.

I picked up my pace and slalomed past the other pedestrians, taking care not to catch anyone with my umbrella or nudge into anyone. When I finally spotted the cheerfully blinking Christmas lights of Gossip Square in the distance, at least a tiny fraction of the built-up pressure lifted. Even though there was no time to stop in at Ernest's – the cosy little newspaper and coffee shop owner – and pick up a cup of what was, without any competition, the best coffee in all of Inwood, the little shop at least represented a small slice of morning normality on this very abnormal day.

"Good morning, Ernest," I called as I passed and waved to the bearded grey-haired man in his red-and-green checked flat cap.

He grinned from ear to ear and waved back. "Good luck with your interview, Elle," I heard him shout. "The subway's completely packed," he added. "Better take a cab while they're still running."

I smiled and nodded, but headed for the subway stairs anyway, despite his well-meaning advice. With my monthly budget stretched as it was, I had to at least try. And in terms of time it wouldn't make much of a difference.

I took the steps down at a fairly nimble pace, snapped the thoroughly snow-laden umbrella shut, and squeezed past the unusually large crowd of people toward the platform for Midtown Manhattan.

But no matter how hard I tried, I only made it as far as the escalator. After that, nothing moved at all. Without a spontaneous change of plan I was going to be late, no question.

Okay, stay calm, Elle ...

Budget or not – I had no other choice. I'd have to try to find a cab somewhere.

Even though I was essentially swimming against the tide, the way back turned out to be considerably easier. Up on street level again, I opened the umbrella and looked in every direction. Nothing. Not a yellow cab in sight. Instead I spotted Ernest in the swirling snow, waving at me urgently. I had no idea what he wanted, but it seemed important.

Unable to bring myself to ignore him, I hurried over, a little more stressed than I intended. "You know I really need to get out of here, Ernest," I reminded him, a touch more reproachfully than I meant to, and immediately felt guilty – he always reminded me of my beloved grandfather from Connecticut.

"That's exactly why I waved you over." He winked at me conspiratorially and pulled me out of the snow under the narrow overhang of the shop. "Nick would give you a lift," he explained with a broad grin, clapping a coffee-sipping man on the shoulder – someone who, at first glance, looked like a very tall basketball player who'd only just rolled out of bed. "Officially his shift doesn't start for another half hour, but he'd make an exception for you."

I could hardly believe my sudden stroke of luck in the middle of all this misfortune. "Really?"

"Of course, ma'am, it's for a good cause after all," Nick replied very politely, drained his coffee, and set off with both hands buried deep in his jacket pockets.

"Thank you a thousand times, Ernest!" I hugged the kindest person I had so far met in Inwood – aside from my two neighbours Carli and Lin – and hurried after my only chance of getting to the interview on time.

After a few metres we turned a corner. The taxi was parked right at the front of the row, and before I'd quite registered what was happening, I was already sitting in the back seat behind Nick. He pressed a few buttons and pulled slowly away. "Where to?"

"Midtown Manhattan. The Waters Tower."

"What time do you need to be there, ma'am?"

"Just before nine."

"Could be tight."

"Yes ..." I glanced tensely out of the side window. The main road looked reasonably clear, which didn't surprise me – it felt like every working person in Inwood had switched to public transport at once. "Would it be possible to go a little faster?" I asked.

"Are you buckled up, ma'am?"

"Of course."

Nick promptly floored it, sending the car into a skidding drift around the next corner. I dug my hands into the back-seat upholstery in a panic.

"Do you have winter tyres on?"

"No."

"That's a joke, surely."

"No."

"Are you trying to get us killed?"

"No. Just customer-focused. You asked me to drive faster in terrible conditions, and that's what I'm doing. Maybe next time you should get up earlier before an important appointment."

"Hilarious."

"Thank you, ma'am, I do my best to entertain my passengers. Before I took the taxi job I actually wanted to be a comedian. Unfortunately it didn't work out."

"I can see why."

"Ouch. That was harsh. Really harsh."

"Sorry," I muttered, embarrassed.

"It's fine," he said. "If you can dish it out, you've got to be able to take it. Just sit back and enjoy the ride."

"Without winter tyres?"

"That was a bad joke. Of course I've got winter tyres." I could see his smile in the rear-view mirror.

I exhaled in relief. I didn't even want to think about what would have happened if he'd slammed on the brakes and thrown me out for being frustrated. "I'm really sorry. Today is just not my day," I apologised again. "By the way, my name isn't ma'am, it's Elle."

Nick laughed. "Elle suits you much better anyway."

"Have I actually thanked you yet?"

"You don't have to. I genuinely don't mind."

"Still – thank you."

"We're not there yet, and from the look of things," he said, eyes fixed intently on the traffic ahead, "we're not getting past that junction up there."

The main artery into Manhattan was completely gridlocked. Some cars were sitting diagonally across the road. Others were staging a pointless honking concert. So much for reasonably clear main roads. We had barely an hour for a journey that normally took thirty minutes in good conditions.

"So what now?" I asked, another wave of panic surging through me.

"Don't worry," he said reassuringly. "I've still got a few tricks up my sleeve."

And he meant it. Nick threw everything he had into getting me to the Waters Tower on time. We drove down streets I'd never heard of, and he took routes I would never have thought to try. In this way he worked around tailback after tailback while the snow kept falling, the dashboard clock ticked relentlessly, and I sent one silent prayer after another heavenward. But in Midtown Manhattan we hit limits that even Nick couldn't navigate around.

8:39. Every side street was just as blocked as the main road. The traffic looked frozen solid. Absolutely nothing was moving.

"Listen, Elle," Nick said suddenly. "The situation is completely rubbish, no question, but it's not hopeless. We're right in the middle of Times Square. You need the 5th Avenue. Over there is 45th Street. Can you see it?"

My gaze followed his outstretched finger through the lowering side window. Fat snowflakes floated in.

"Yes."

"Just run straight along 45th to the second cross street, and you'll come out right on 5th Avenue. Turn left, and after about a hundred metres you'll be in front of the Waters Tower."

"Okay. Right ..." I murmured, overwhelmed. Murphy's Law – anything that can go wrong, will go wrong – still had me firmly in its grip. Like it or not, I had to get out of the cab and walk. Along the way, I could only hope that Yhprum's Law – anything that can work, will work – would take over and get me to the HR department on time.

"What do I owe you?"

"Well, would you look at that. I completely forgot to turn the meter on."

"But –"

"Do you want to argue about the fare, or do you want to get to your interview on time?" he interrupted me with a wink.

"What do you think?" I quickly checked I had all my things. "Every coffee you drink at Ernest's until the end of the year is on me."

"I'm at Ernest's almost every day. That could get pretty expensive for you."

For the first time all morning, my lips curved into a smile. "You're my hero of the day." I stepped out, opened the umbrella, and hurried off.

"Good luck, Elle," I heard Nick shout through the thick snowfall. "If you ever need a superhero driver again, just ask for cab 838. Codename: Santa!"

I didn't look back, but despite the cold wind and the fat snowflakes blowing into my face, I found myself smiling for the second time that morning.

WONDERFUL DREAM (HOLIDAYS ARE COMING)

Or: The Early Bird Gets the Worm – And the Late One Gets Nothing

At exactly 8:54 I entered the Waters Tower – frozen through, breathless, and considerably more snow-dusted than I had hoped. The impressive two-storey lobby with its glass gallery, nestled among lush plants, water features, and artworks that invited you to linger, had a somewhat suboptimal effect on my already frayed nerves. Completely overwhelmed by stimuli, I looked around in every direction to get my bearings and finally spotted the large crescent-shaped reception desk.

Luckily, despite the busy lobby, nobody was at the desk right then, and I was handed a visitor's chip card without delay. Once I'd cleared security without a hitch, I hurried toward the lifts.

8:55.

My heartbeat spiked dramatically for any number of reasons. I shifted my weight nervously from foot to foot. Forty-two floors in five minutes. Theoretically possible. If the lifts – or at least one of the six in front of me – would ever arrive at ground level. But according to the displays, every single one was moving somewhere between the twenty-fifth and the fiftieth floor.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

Out of necessity I looked around, briefly considered taking the fire stairs, and immediately dismissed the thought – given my current fitness level, I would almost certainly have needed an oxygen tent by the fifth floor at the very latest.

On my third look around I found it. My salvation. Hidden behind a cluster of lush plants. Two more lifts. One was doing the same thing as all the others, drifting between floors. The other one was waiting with open doors for new passengers, practically calling my name. I beamed and jogged toward it, but was immediately stopped by a nearby security guard and asked to step back out.

"You'll need to use one of the other lifts, ma'am. These ones are reserved for senior management," he informed me.

8:56.

My pulse was racing. "Is there really no exception, sir? I have an interview on the forty-second floor in four minutes. The weather has completely thrown my plans off. Despite every obstacle I've somehow made it into the building at the very last second under extremely ... difficult conditions. And now it's going to fall apart because of an empty lift that has nothing better to do than stand there, and nobody needs it more than I do right now? Please, sir – Christmas is almost here, and I need this job. You cannot imagine how much I need it ..."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Rules are rules."

8:58.

I dug my phone out of my bag and called the HR department – engaged. Of all times. Infuriating that in all the chaos I hadn't thought to call from the cab. Close to tears, I let go of the last tiny shred of hope I might still make it on time, and trudged back to the ever-growing crowd in front of the other lifts.

9:01.

Ping. Lift doors slid open. Waiting passengers poured in. There was no room left for me and a handful of others. The doors closed in my face.

9:03.

Ping. This time I showed no consideration for anyone. Before the cabin had fully emptied, I pushed my way inside against the flow and pressed the button for the forty-second floor.

9:04.

A small lurch. Then the lift went down. To the archive.

A quiet, desperate laugh escaped me as I spotted the unwelcome information on the display panel. Sixteen other people had got in with me, and every single one – every last one – had pressed a different floor button.

This cannot be real ...

But it was.

Accept it, Elle, you can't change it anyway ...

And that was exactly what I did. Whether I liked it or not.

9:11.

Forty-second floor. Every second I was late counted. The moment the doors opened a crack, I squeezed through, took in my surroundings at a glance, and strode purposefully toward the HR reception desk.

"Good morning," a young woman about my age greeted me. "How can I help you?" she asked pleasantly.

"Good morning," I replied. "My name is Elle Barnes. I have a nine o'clock appointment with A. J. Mayflower."

The precisely shaped eyebrows of the receptionist climbed upward before she threw a quick glance at the unmissably large clock on the wall behind her. "I don't mean to correct you, Miss Barnes, but I think you mean you had a nine o'clock appointment with Miss Mayflower."

"You're right, sorry," I said. Clearly my peer had had a bowl of smart-aleck cereal for breakfast and was now working her way steadily through it. Right in front of me. Onto the desk. Wonderful. "The weather completely caught me off guard and –"

"As it did all of us," she added lightly.

Focus, Elle, focus. You need something from her. She doesn't need anything from you. However hard it is: stay friendly.

With the last of my strength I pushed back the rising frustration that was on the verge of erupting in a very ugly way. Internally, I breathed in slowly and steadily, several times. Externally, I fixed on the friendliest smile the circumstances would allow.

"Yes, exactly, the weather caught us all off guard. I imagine you were stuck in the traffic chaos like everyone else and arrived at work completely frozen. Which is why I'm very much hoping for your understanding about my being late."

To my surprise she leaned across the glossy black granite reception desk toward me. "Honestly, I was two minutes late myself today," she whispered conspiratorially. "So I'll do what I can for you."

Where this sudden change of heart came from was a mystery to me, but I was glad she'd made the about-turn.

"Thank you!"

The receptionist straightened up, reached for the phone, and dialled. "Hi, A. J., it's me, Melissa. Miss Baker –"

"Barnes," I whispered to her.

"Miss Barnes has just arrived. Can I still send her through? ... Ah, right, okay, understood." Melissa hung up and turned to face me. "Miss Mayflower will be right out," she said, before giving a non-committal nod and clicking away around the nearest corner.

I stood alone in front of the black-and-white HR reception desk, feeling about as adrift as I'd ever felt. My heart was still racing from sheer nerves. To distract myself, I let my gaze travel around the largely open-plan floor. From where I was standing I could make out only five offices with closed doors. Black and white. As far as the eye could see. Even the Christmas decorations and the ornaments on the tree were colour-coordinated with the dominant scheme. Only a few lush plants broke up the sleek, uncluttered – though also clinically cool – design, which looked more like a hip wellness clinic than a nationally and internationally successful events agency.

In a nook I spotted a waiting area with various seating and standing options. A suited man in his mid-thirties sat relaxed on a black leather sofa, eyes on his phone. A woman in a similar look leaned against the window, looking out.

I considered going to join them, but the steady clicking of approaching heels drew my attention elsewhere.

Then I saw her. Tall, dark-haired, blue-grey eyes, the upright posture of a dancer, and a gaze that could have sunk the Titanic without any assistance from an iceberg. Although I desperately hoped she wasn't Miss Mayflower, my brain laughed at me loudly. Of course she was, and deep down I'd known it the moment I'd heard the purposeful sound of her heels.

Shit!

She stopped an arm's length away and looked me over. Her expression made it perfectly clear how much she disliked what was standing in front of her – frozen stiff, damp from melted snow, dripping umbrella and all. "You must be Elle Baker," she said flatly.

"Barnes, Elle Barnes," I murmured quietly, adding an even quieter "Miss Mayflower." I extended my ice-cold hand.

Ignoring my greeting entirely, she continued. "I trust you're aware that your slot has passed and you have cost me fifteen minutes of my very limited time."

I nodded, lowered my hand, and opened my mouth to respond – but she didn't give me the chance.

"Based on your outstanding academic results and the excellent feedback from my HR team, you were my number-one candidate out of the final three applicants who made it this far from a total of five hundred and seventy-eight, Miss Baker."

I kept my breathing steady and cleared my throat quietly. "My name is Barnes, Miss Mayflower, Elle Barnes," I replied, making sure my voice was clear and firm. "And I am truly sorry for being late. You see, I was thoroughly prepared for everything – just not for the sudden extreme change in weather, and –"

"If you had been thoroughly prepared for everything, Miss Baker, you would have arrived on time at our highly regarded events agency, and I would in all likelihood have asked you to sign a very generously remunerated employment contract with benefits unlike anything offered by any other major company in Manhattan."

"Have you never once been late?" I asked, from the gut.

"No!" she replied tersely. "Punctuality is absolutely non-negotiable in this business."

There were women who looked immaculate in every situation – and who knew it. Even when they were, like Miss Mayflower at this moment, decidedly not amused. Flawless complexion, manicured nails, clothing and hair forming something close to a symbiosis. Their make-up looked freshly applied all day long. The nail polish perfectly coordinated with the overall look, likewise. Everything they wore appeared to have been tailored directly onto their bodies. And every single strand of hair stayed exactly where it was supposed to be, in any weather, no matter what.

I was not one of those women.

Quite apart from the fact that the very idea of walking around for two full days and nights in 48-hour make-up struck me as vaguely unhygienic, the stuff lasted six hours on me at most. Long-lasting nail polish either started peeling at the tips shortly after application, or I managed to cause some kind of damage to a nail during the drying time. My clothes also rarely sat properly or looked even remotely tailored, because I was neither slim nor curvy, neither petite nor tall, but something indefinable in between – for which there was little to no size that actually fitted. And at least five to ten strands of my hair did whatever they wanted, regardless. Even when I shellacked them into place with an entire bottle of hairspray in perfectly still, picture-book weather.

Perfectly imperfect came fairly close to describing it. And that was how I usually felt. Not being enough, not quite fitting in anywhere – thoughts that had followed me since school.

"And don't bring up the weather," Miss Mayflower continued. "Your two competitors behind us arrived in the waiting area ahead of schedule, Miss Baker."

"Barnes," I corrected for what felt like the hundredth time, but it interested her exactly as much as it had the first.

"Are you familiar with the saying 'the early bird catches the worm'? If not, I suggest you take note of it for the future – because that is precisely what has just happened to you. I wish you a good day, Miss Baker, and happy holidays." And with that, she was gone.

Dream over, Elle ...

[...]

Anja Tatlisu lives with her family and a Persian cat in a suburb of Cologne. She was already said to have a very active imagination at school, but her true love of writing did not unfold until many years later. In the meantime, she can no longer imagine a life without a permanent mental cinema and her writing utensils, as she finds wonderful inspirations in even the smallest things in life, which are desperate to be put down on paper.