



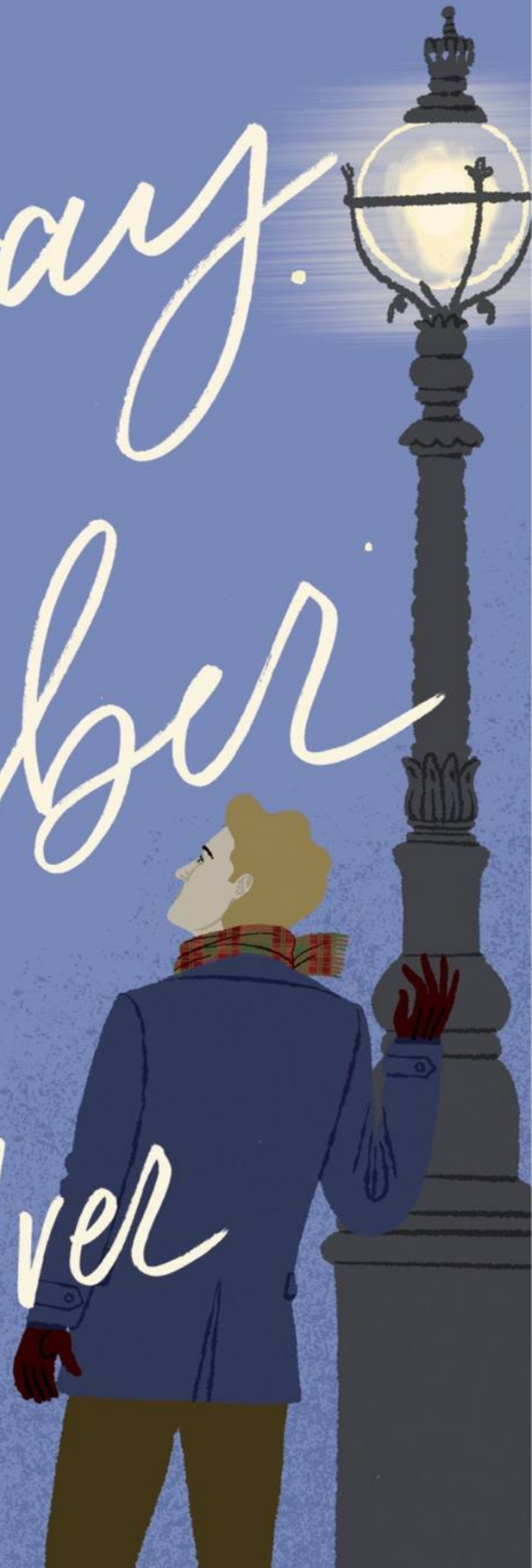
“Josie Silver writes with a warmth so palpable her characters sneak their way into your heart and stay for a long time. The perfect book to get lost in this holiday season.”

—Jill Santopolo, author of *The Light We Lost*

# One Day in December

A Novel

Josie Silver



*One Day  
in  
December*

A NOVEL

JOSIE SILVER

**B\|D\|W\|Y**  
BROADWAY BOOKS  
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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2008

DECEMBER 21

*Laurie*

It's a wonder everyone who uses public transport in winter doesn't keel over and die of germ overload. In the last ten minutes I've been coughed on and sneezed at, and if the woman in front of me shakes her dandruff my way again, I might just douse her with the dregs of the lukewarm coffee that I'm no longer able to drink because it's full of her scalp.

I'm so tired I could sleep right here on the top deck of this swaying, rammed-full bus. Thank God I've finally finished work for Christmas, because I don't think my brain or my body could withstand even one more shift behind that awful hotel reception desk. It might be festooned with garlands and pretty lights on the customer side, but step behind the curtain and it's a soulless hellhole. I'm practically asleep, even when I'm awake. I'm loosely planning to hibernate until next year once I get home to the nostalgic familiarity of my parents' house tomorrow. There's something soothingly time warp-ish about leaving London for an interlude of sedate Midlands village life in my childhood bedroom, even if not all of my childhood memories are happy ones. Even the closest of families have their tragedies, and it's fair to say that ours came early and cut deep. I won't dwell though, because Christmas should be a time of hope and love and, most appealing of all at this very moment, sleep. Sleep, punctuated by bouts of competitive eating with my brother, Daryl, and his girlfriend, Anna, and the whole gamut of cheesy Christmas movies. Because how could you ever be too

tired to watch some hapless guy stand out in the cold and hold up signs silently declaring to his best friend's wife that his wasted heart will always love her? Though—is that romance? I'm not so sure. I mean, it *kind* of is, in a schmaltzy way, but it's also being the shittiest friend on the planet.

I've given up worrying about the germs in here because I've undoubtedly ingested enough to kill me if they're going to, so I lean my forehead against the steamy window and watch Camden High Street slide by in a glitter of Christmas lights and bright, foggy shop windows selling everything from leather jackets to tacky London souvenirs. It's barely four in the afternoon, yet already it's dusk over London; I don't think it got properly light at all today.

My reflection tells me that I should probably pull the tacky halo of tinsel from my hair that my cow of a manager made me wear, because I look like I'm trying out for Angel Gabriel in a primary school nativity, but I find that I really can't be bothered. No one else on this bus could care less; not the damp, anoraked man next to me taking up more than his half of the seat as he dozes over yesterday's paper, nor the bunch of schoolkids shouting across each other on the back seats and certainly not dandruff woman in front of me with her flashing snowflake earrings. The irony of her jewelry choice is not lost on me; if I were more of a bitch I might tap her on the shoulder to advise her that she's drawing attention to the skin blizzard she's depositing with every shake of her head. I'm not a bitch though; or maybe I'm just a quiet one inside my own head. Isn't everyone?

Jesus, how many more stops is this bus going to make? I'm still a couple of miles from my flat and already it's fuller than a cattle truck on market day.

*Come on, I think. Move. Take me home.* Though home is going to be a pretty depressing place now that my flatmate, Sarah, has gone back to her parents'. Only

one more day and then I'll be out of here too, I remind myself.

The bus shudders to a halt at the end of the street and I watch as down below a stream of people jostle to get off at the same time as others try to push their way on. It's as if they think it's one of those competitions to see how many people can fit into one small space.

There's a guy perched on one of the fold-down seats in the bus shelter. This can't be his bus, because he's engrossed in the hardback book in his hands. I notice him because he seems oblivious to the pushing and shoving happening right in front of him, like one of those fancy special effects at the movies where someone is completely still and the world kaleidoscopes around them, slightly out of focus.

I can't see his face, just the top of his sandy hair, cut slightly long and given to a wave when it grows, I should imagine. He's bundled into a navy woolen pea coat and a scarf that looks like someone might have knitted it for him. It's kitsch and unexpected against the coolness of the rest of his attire—dark skinny jeans and boots—and his concentration is completely held by his book. I squint, trying to duck my head to see what he's reading, wiping the steamed-up window with my coat sleeve to get a better look.

I don't know if it's the movement of my arm across the glass or the flickering lights of dandruff-woman's earrings that snag in his peripheral vision, but he lifts his head and blinks a few times as he focuses his attention on my window. *On me.*

We stare straight at each other and I can't look away. I feel my lips move as if I'm going to say something, God knows what, and all of a sudden and out of nowhere I need to get off this bus. I'm gripped by the overwhelming urge to go outside, to get to him. But I don't. I don't move a muscle, because I know there isn't a

chance in hell that I can get past anorak man beside me and push through the packed bus before it pulls away. So I make the split-second decision to stay rooted to the spot and try to convey to him to get on board using just the hot, desperate longing in my eyes.

He's not film-star good-looking or classically perfect, but there is an air of preppy disheveledness and an earnest, "who me?" charm about him that captivates me. I can't quite make out the color of his eyes from here. Green, I'd say, or blue maybe?

And here's the thing. Call it wishful thinking, but I'm sure I see the same thunderbolt hit him too; as if an invisible fork of lightning has inexplicably joined us together. Recognition; naked, electric shock in his rounded eyes. He does something close to an incredulous double take, the kind of thing you might do when you coincidentally spot your oldest and best friend who you haven't seen for ages and you can't actually believe they're there.

It's a look of *Hello you*, and *Oh my God, it's you*, and *I can't believe how good it is to see you*, all in one.

His eyes dart toward the dwindling queue still waiting to board and then back up to me, and it's as if I can hear the thoughts racing through his head. He's wondering if it'd be crazy to get on the bus, what he'd say if we weren't separated by the glass and the hordes, if he'd feel foolish taking the stairs two at a time to get to me.

*No*, I try to relay back. *No, you wouldn't feel foolish. I wouldn't let you. Just get on the bloody bus, will you!* He's staring right at me, and then a slow smile creeps across his generous mouth, as if he can't hold it in. And then I'm smiling back, giddy almost. I can't help it either.

*Please get on the bus.* He snaps, making a sudden decision, slamming his book closed and shoving it down in the rucksack between his ankles. He's walking forward

now, and I hold my breath and press my palm flat against the glass, urging him to hurry even as I hear the sickly hiss of the doors closing and the lurch of the handbrake being released.

*No! No! Oh God, don't you dare drive away from this stop! It's Christmas!* I want to yell, even as the bus pulls out into the traffic and gathers pace, and outside he is breathless standing in the road, watching us leave. I see defeat turn out the light in his eyes, and because it's Christmas and because I've just fallen hopelessly in love with a stranger at a bus stop, I blow him a forlorn kiss and lay my forehead against the glass, watching him until he's out of sight.

Then I realize. Shit. Why didn't I take a leaf out of shitty friend's book and write something down to hold up against the window? I could have done that. I could even have written my cell phone number in the condensation. I could have opened the tiny quarter-pane and yelled my name and address or something. I can think of any number of things I could and should have done, yet at the time none of them occurred to me because I simply couldn't take my eyes off him.

For onlookers, it must have been an Oscar-worthy sixty-second silent movie. From now on, if anyone asks me if I've ever fallen in love at first sight, I shall say yes, for one glorious minute on December 21, 2008.

2009

# NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

Just two resolutions this year, but two big, shiny, brilliant ones.

- 1) Find him, my boy from the bus stop.
- 2) Find my first proper job in magazines.

Damn. I wish I'd written them down in pencil, because I'd rub them out and switch them over. What I'd ideally like is to find the achingly cool magazine position first, and then run into bus boy in a coffee shop while holding something healthy in my hand for lunch, and he'd accidentally knock it out of my clutches and then look up and say, "Oh. It's you. Finally."

And then we'd skip lunch and go for a walk around the park instead, because we'd have lost our appetites but found the love of our lives.

Anyway, that's it. Wish me luck.



MARCH 20

*Laurie*

“Is that him? I definitely got a bus-ish vibe from him just now.”

I follow the direction of Sarah’s nod and sweep my eyes along the length of the busy Friday-night bar. It’s a habit we’ve fallen into every time we go anywhere; scanning faces and crowds for “bus boy” as Sarah christened him when we compared Yuletide notes back in January. Her family festivities up in York sounded a much more raucous affair than my cozy, food-laden one in Birmingham, but we’d both returned to the reality of winter in London with the New Year blues. I threw my “love at first sight” sob story into the pity pot and then immediately wished I hadn’t. It’s not that I don’t trust Sarah with my story; it’s more that from that second forth she has become even more obsessed with finding him again than I am. And I’m quietly going crazy over him.

“Which one?” I frown at the sea of people, mostly the backs of unfamiliar heads. She screws her nose up as she pauses to work out how to distinguish her guy for my scrutiny.

“There, in the middle, next to the woman in the blue dress.”

I spot her more easily; her poker-straight curtain of white-blond hair catches the light as she throws her head back and laughs up at the guy beside her.

He's about the right height. His hair looks similar and there is a jolting familiarity to the line of his shoulders in his dark shirt. He could be anyone, but he could be bus boy. The more I look at him, the more sure I am that the search is over.

"I don't know," I say, holding my breath because he's as close as we've come. I've described him so many times, Sarah probably knows what he looks like more than I do. I want to inch closer. In fact I think I have already started inching, but then Sarah's hand on my arm stills me because he's just bent his head to kiss the face off the blond, who instantly becomes my least favorite person on the planet.

Oh God, I think it's him! No! This isn't how it's supposed to happen. I've played out variants of this scene every night as I close my eyes and it never, repeat *never*, ends like this. Sometimes he's with a crowd of guys in a bar, other times he's alone in a cafe reading, but the one thing that never happens is he has a girlfriend who he kisses to within an inch of her shimmery blond life.

"Shit," Sarah mutters, pressing my wine into my hand. We watch as their kiss goes on. And on. Jeez, do these people have no boundaries? He's copping a thorough feel of her backside now, wildly overstepping the mark for a busy bar. "Decency, people," Sarah grumbles. "He's not your type after all, Lu."

I'm crestfallen. So much so that I pour the entire glass of chilled wine down my throat, and then shudder.

"I think I want to go," I say, ridiculously close to tears. And then they stop kissing and she straightens her dress, he murmurs something in her ear, and then turns away and walks straight toward us.

I know instantly. He brushes right past us, and I almost laugh with giddy relief.

“Not him,” I whisper. “Not even very much like him.”

Sarah rolls her eyes and blows out the breath she must have been holding in. “Jesus, thank fuck for that. What a sleaze-dog. Do you know how close I came to tripping him up just now?”

She’s right. The guy who just sauntered past us was high on his own self-importance, wiping the girl’s red lipstick from his mouth on the back of his hand with a smug, satisfied grin as he made for the bathroom.

God, I need another drink. The search for bus boy is three months old. I better find him soon or I’m going to wind up in rehab.

Later, back at Delancey Street, we kick off our shoes and flop.

“I’ve been thinking,” Sarah says, crashed out on the other end of the sofa from me. “There’s this new guy at work, I think you might like him.”

“I only want bus boy,” I sigh, costume-drama melodramatic.

“But what if you find him and he’s a twat?” she says. Our experience in the bar earlier obviously hit home for her too.

“You think I should stop looking?” I ask, lifting my heavy head off the arm of the sofa to stare at her. She flings her arms wide and leaves them there.

“Just saying you need a contingency plan.”

“In case he’s a twat?”

She raises her thumbs, probably because it’s too much effort to raise her head.

“He could be an A-class, top-drawer super-knob,” she says. “Or he could have a girlfriend. Or Christ, Lu, he could even be married.”

I gasp. Actually gasp. “No way!” I splutter. “He’s single, and he’s gorgeous, and he’s somewhere out there waiting for me to find him.” I feel it with all the conviction of a drunk woman. “Or maybe he’s even looking for me.”

Sarah props herself up on her elbows and stares at me, her long red waves the worse for wear and her mascara end-of-the-night smudged.

“I’m just saying that *we*, *you*, might have unrealistic expectations, and you, *we*, need to proceed with more caution, that’s all.”

I know she’s right. My heart almost stopped beating in the bar earlier.

We look at each other, and then she pats my leg. “We’ll find him,” she says. It’s such a simple gesture of solidarity, but in my boozy state it brings a lump to my throat.

“Promise?”

She nods and draws a cross over her heart, and a great snotty sob leaves my throat, because I’m tired and pissed and because sometimes I can’t quite bring bus boy’s face to mind and I’m scared I’ll forget what he looks like.

Sarah sits up and dries my tears with the sleeve of her shirt.

“Don’t cry, Lu,” she whispers. “We’ll keep looking until we find him.”

I nod, dropping back to gaze at the Artex ceiling that our landlord has been promising to repaint ever since we moved in here several years ago. “We will. And he’ll be perfect.”