

# FOLLOW THAT STAR

by A.A. Abbott

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Although they were both wearing wigs, only she knew her hair was fake.

Marc didn't. For sure, he appreciated his Santa outfit was a disguise. He clearly had no idea Milly wasn't who she appeared to be.

No-one looked further than blonde hair, in her opinion. At this luxury hotel, the best in town, the gentlemen certainly preferred blondes. Especially after a few drinks, they leered, pinched her bottom and made offers. She laughed it off. Drake, the manager, would never support her if she complained. He'd claim the CCTV was broken. Anyway, these men weren't her prey.

"Why do you do this?" Marc asked, as they vaped together outside the delivery bay.

"I'd prefer a cigarette, but Drake will smell the smoke." Milly shivered in the cold night air. Her uniform was overly

traditional: a white blouse and black skirt, below which she was expected to wear sheer tights. She suspected the dress code was aimed at the clientele, or at least, the ageing male bosses who influenced their companies' choice of party venue.

"Here, let me." He put down the vape pen and removed his fur-trimmed coat, placing it around her shoulders. "I meant, why waitressing? You're a bright girl."

"It's a job. Thanks for the coat." It felt cosy and she approved of Marc's anarchy T-shirt. Somehow, it suited his stick-on beard.

"No worries." He peered at his watch. "Twenty past nine. Ciderhead Sid had better be quick. I cadged a turkey sandwich for him."

"You too?" She fished a foil-wrapped packet from her bag.

As if on cue, Sid shuffled into view. Dishevelled and dirty, he slept out most nights with a bottle for company, staying just far enough from the main entrance to stop the security guards getting shirty.

"Them for me?" he slurred, grabbing their offerings as though he hadn't eaten all week. A brewery smell clung to him. It remained long after Sid mumbled his thanks and shambled off to pester passers-by for change.

Marc spun around to face Milly. "Has anyone told you that you have the most beautiful blue eyes?"

"Often." They hadn't, but she wasn't admitting it. Inside the hotel, with its flashing coloured party lights, no-one could see

your eyes properly. Milly made a mental note to try green contact lenses at the next place.

She edged away from him, finished vaping and returned his coat. "Must get back. They'll want their coffees and mince pies."

She could feel his gaze upon her as she pushed the door open, returning to the warren of rooms and corridors the guests would never see. Here, the odd mouse blinked in the fluorescent light; tattooed kitchen porters swore and Drake wielded his metaphorical whip. An otherwise unremarkable middle-aged man, Drake appeared to have the superpower of being in several places at once.

He sidled up to her as she collected a groaning tray of mince pies. "Hurry up, slowcoach. You're thirty seconds over on your break."

"Sorry. It won't happen again." Milly flashed an appeasing smile rather than telling him to stick his job. She didn't wish either to burn bridges or be memorable in any way, let alone for the wrong reasons.

In the function room, its faded paint hidden by swags of tinsel, the Capital Chemicals party was in full swing. Few guests had stayed seated. Those who were had played musical chairs and moved to different tables. The rest gathered in small groups to drink and chat. Their beverages were stronger than the pots of stewed coffee she left with the pastries.

Drake had followed Milly in, no doubt to check up on her. Luckily, he was soon distracted by the Capital Chemicals CEO.

The sleazy fellow, who had told Milly "Call me Jim" while ogling her cleavage, asked when Santa would arrive.

Drake mounted a small stage. A DJ would use it later to play cheesy favourites. Meanwhile, an armchair and microphone had been reserved for Father Christmas. Drake grabbed the mic. "Who wants to see Santa?" he bellowed.

"We do," yelled the revellers, so lashed that Milly thought they would have cheered for Satan instead.

It was the signal for Marc to set off a sparkly party popper at the rear of the stage. He bounded through the glitter to applause from the crowd.

"Happy Christmas," Marc announced, seizing the mic and seating himself in one fluid motion. "The first little boy I've come to see goes by the name of Jim. Does anyone know where he is?"

CallMeJim marched forward.

"Oh dear," Marc said. "You're a rather big little boy. You needn't sit on my knee, Jim."

"Thank God for that," CallMeJim muttered.

"Has Jim been naughty or nice?" Marc asked the crowd.

"Naughty," they roared.

Milly could believe it. CallMeJim had left his jacket on the chair where he'd previously held court. She bumped into it, shaking the garment onto the floor and noticing a twist of paper fall out. It looked like a wrap of cocaine to her not inexpert eye. Evidently, CallMeJim planned a white Christmas.

She picked up and straightened the jacket while the guests cackled at CallMeJim's discomfort. Marc informed the CEO there might be a little something in the sack if he helped to give presents to the other boys and girls. A secretary produced a box of secret Santa gifts. CallMeJim and Marc distributed these with much innuendo.

By now, the meal was over. Watched over by Drake, CallMeJim and his team continued with the serious business of getting out of their heads and into each other's knickers. Milly cleared tables and escaped to the kitchen. Thankfully, the staff dish of the day wasn't turkey, as Chef had no intention of serving "the same thing every blinking night." They tucked into curry, plus half-full bottles of wine snaffled by the servers.

Marc arrived, pulling off his whiskers with a wince. He was a good-looking lad under the white curls, with sandy hair and twinkling brown eyes. That twinkle had won him the job, he explained. "I'm twenty-five, so it's not as if age matters."

"Size?" Chef interrupted. A fat, balding man, he had a traditional Santa's girth, if not the hair.

"Nope." Marc grinned. "You've got to look cheerful. That's easier with office jollies than kids. Never work with children or animals. These parties are a piece of cake by comparison."

"Seasonal, though, isn't it?" Chef said. "What do you do after December 25th?"

"As an actor, I take whatever I can get. I'm only Santa when I'm resting."

"Been in anything I'd have seen?" Chef asked.

Marc laughed. "Maybe, if you like Shakespeare. But my dream is breaking into Netflix. I've applied for a leading role in a new series. Fingers crossed."

"Indeed," Chef agreed. "I do enjoy the Bard's work from time to time. I thought you seemed familiar." He turned to Milly. "How about you? What do you do for the rest of the year?"

She could have lied and claimed to be a student. Unusually, she elected to tell the truth. "The outdoor life. Ski resorts and beach bars." Milly was always moving, following her star. Christmas was the sole exception. It was when she returned to give something back. She hadn't forgotten where she came from.

She noticed Marc's bright eyes assessing her, and that decided it. She giggled, as people expected that from blondes. Then she added, "I'm giving my notice as soon as I see Drake. There are jobs in Austria, and I can take my pick." It was almost true. She'd already arranged to fly out for the New Year.

Later, when she broke the news to Drake, his face revealed that waitresses came and went all the time. He didn't try persuading her to stay.

"Coming on the staff bus?" Marc asked.

"No thanks, I've booked an Uber." The staff bus was free, but it wiggled all around the city as it dropped everyone off.

The road outside was quiet apart from the purr of the Uber's engine and requests from Ciderhead Sid for spare change. Milly thought about giving him a fiver. She was flush, having filched

forty pounds from CallMeJim when she tidied his jacket. Dogooders always told you not to give cash to the homeless, supposedly to avoid facilitating their addiction. Milly regarded addiction as a sensible response to a dismal life. She'd been there. In the end, she handed Sid half a pack of cigarettes, which pleased him greatly.

When Milly returned to the hotel two days later, Sid didn't recognise her. Nor did Drake, or anyone else. She was no longer blonde. Her natural brunette colour failed to turn heads and her LBD was similar to 80% of the dresses worn at tonight's corporate Christmas party.

She arrived after the mince pies had been served, which, she knew, would have been at 9.30pm precisely. Drake was a stickler for detail and Chef, although loved by the staff for his fine cooking, ruled them with a rod of iron.

Marc was dishing out the company's secret Santas, using the same old jokes she'd heard each night. They'd been funny once.

She found a semi-abandoned table. No partygoers were sitting there, but they had left jackets and handbags on their seats. The bags were dinky and black, just like hers. How easy it would be to pick up the wrong one by mistake, leaving hers behind. She did so three times, visiting different ladies toilets in the vast, maze-like building. Then she moved on to another table.

She had an escape route in mind, just in case. Even the hotel's long-dead architect would have been hard-pressed to navigate the service corridors as well as Milly. Ditching her bag would be no hardship, as her valuables were stashed in a hidden money belt. However, she was in luck. At a large corporate bash, half the merrymakers didn't know each other. Nobody challenged one more honey in a black dress. Only once did Milly sense eyes upon her, but when she cautiously looked around, all the party animals were gawping at Father Christmas.

Before putting each bag back, effusive apologies at the ready, she took ten pounds here and twenty pounds there. It was a sum that well-off people wouldn't miss. They'd assume they hadn't counted properly, or they'd bought a round and forgotten about it. She was recycling their wealth, she told herself: taking from the rich to give to the poor. Milly had a very good evening, fruitful enough to return the next night, and the next.

It was when she left that party, as she was about to step into her Uber, that Santa appeared with a sobbing girl.

He waved, and Milly's heart skipped a beat. The message in his gaze was inescapable. Marc had spotted her.

"Hey, you're going south of the river, aren't you? Be an angel and take Joanne home. Some scumbag's nicked her taxi money." Marc's glare said he'd worked out who had taken it.

"Of course." Milly pointed Joanne into the cab, and got in beside her. She made sympathetic noises.

"This is so kind of you." Joanne dabbed at her tears with a tissue.

"Don't mention it." Reflecting, Milly recalled a couple of bags with very little money in them. She had raided them anyway. Next time and in the next hotel, this particular hunting ground being off limits now, she would be more careful.

Joanne lived in the poorest part of town, near the fleapit where Milly stayed. Milly considered booking an earlier flight, but decided Joanne posed no threat. She'd had her taxi home, after all. No, there were more hotels in town, all desperate for casual staff at this busy time of year. She would spend her ill-gotten gains and then find another job.

It gave Milly a surge of pleasure to shop for a Christmas feast. She bought books and little treats too, then boxed up her purchases with pretty paper. Having asked around, she knew which families were in dire need, and she staggered to their homes with hampers. It brought a tear to her eye when she saw the pinched faces of young mothers and their children lit up at the sight of food.

"I'm delivering for a friend," she told them.

"Snap." It was a familiar male voice.

Milly, about to say goodbye to a grateful single father, jumped with shock. She looked over her shoulder. Next door, Marc was handing over a basket of groceries to a woman with four toddlers clinging to her ankles.

"So we meet again. I knew it was you the moment I saw you strut down the street."

Milly blushed. "Really? Just from my walk?"

"That, and those blue eyes." Marc gazed into them. "You fooled Drake, but I'm an actor. I study body language. Anyhow, this is my last drop. How about a cuppa?"

Milly thought about legging it. However, Marc looked fitter and his expression was friendly. She found herself agreeing.

"Good choice." He motioned to a greasy spoon café on the corner.

Over tea with three sugars, Marc suggested they pool resources. He didn't mention how she financed her largesse, but he did explain that he spent all year saving up. In his view, they should both change their approach and seek crowdfunding for their food parcels. "So, what do you say?" he asked.

Milly managed a tight smile. "That won't be possible. I'm leaving soon for the mountains and the sun." She might have been raised in the inner city, but the best lesson she'd learned was that she didn't need to stay.

"I'm leaving too," Marc said. "I got the Netflix gig."

"Congratulations." Her smile broadened with genuine delight for him.

"Come with me. We're filming in Wales. I'll pull strings and get you a supporting role. We can work on your movements together." He laughed. "I've seen how you blend in anywhere. You've got raw talent."

Milly stared at him. He understood her better than she'd realised.

Marc's eyes twinkled. "By the way, I'll tape my wallet to my body. And tell everyone else on set to do the same. Seriously, if you're earning good money, do you really need to steal it?"

"You're on. Just one condition." After all, she couldn't sense if he'd meant acting talent or something else. "No casting couch. I'm not that way inclined." The last statement wasn't quite true, though. He really was cute.

Marc frowned at first, then grinned. "Agreed. But there's also one condition from me. No wallets. Or handbags. Deal?"

"Deal." Milly high-fived him, enjoying the brief touch. There would be sunshine as well as mountains in Wales, she was sure.

When you got the chance, you followed your star.

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