

'Every day is a perfect day to read this' *Shari Low*

just the way you are



Beth Moran

JUST THE WAY YOU ARE

BETH MORAN

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Boldwød

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This one's for the Free Range Chicks, with special mention to Jo Pestell, Pearl Moses and Vicky Warnes

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About Boldwood Books

Arriving home on Valentine's Day, after a slog of a day, to find a bouquet of flowers, a box of chocolates and the enticing fragrance of a homemade curry is a lovely surprise.

For me, however, currently single and living with my mother, this was neither lovely, nor, unfortunately, that much of a surprise.

'Surprise!' she cried, popping the cork off a bottle of Prosecco once I'd slipped off my sopping wet trainers, shaken the rain out of my hair and found her standing beside a dining table laid for two.

'What's this?' I asked, trying to sound grateful rather than utterly dismayed.

'Well, we can't spend this evening sitting about feeling sorry for ourselves, can we?' she gushed. 'Team Tennyson, our favourite chicken balti and all the sides. Who needs a man?'

While I agreed with the sentiment – if I needed a man I'd be in big trouble, because I'd not had one for years – I had, in fact, arranged to meet one, that evening, for dinner. In an Indian restaurant.

Crap.

My first date in forever, and I was going to have to cancel.

Mum's smile had begun to waver in the two-second hesitation while I tried to summon up the appropriate response.

‘Wow, it looks fantastic. The flowers are gorgeous. Thank you so much, Mum.’

Appeased, she tugged her hand-knitted jumper – pale grey with tiny love hearts in every shade of pink – down over teal cropped trousers that had been stylish ten years ago but now appeared faded and shabby. She’d blow-dried her chin-length salt-and-pepper bob and even added a swipe of lipstick to brighten her sharp features.

Inside, my heart drooped.

‘I’ll quickly get changed, if that’s okay?’ I worked for ReadUp, an adult literacy charity, and had spent all day in a grubby community centre on the other side of Nottingham. I was pretty sure the stink of stale sweat had followed me home.

‘Here.’ Mum handed me a glass of Prosecco. ‘Take your time. I’m not going anywhere!’

* * *

The second I got upstairs, I undressed, pulled on a dressing gown and messaged Steph, my best friend of eighteen years.

HELP!! Mum has cooked dinner and bought flowers and chocolates!
What do I say to Mark?

Steph’s reply seemed to ping through before I’d even pressed send.

Tell him you’re looking forward to seeing him later AS PLANNED A
WEEK AGO

I took in a shaky breath. Mark was a manager at one of the libraries where I met with clients. We'd been engaging in slightly awkward conversations for a few months now. Mostly about books, gradually progressing on to the weather, local news and eventually restaurants – his slightly bumpy segue into asking me out. He was nice, if a little over-earnest, and had beautiful brown eyes. If I could keep focused on the top of his face, and avoid his constant lip-chewing, I could quite possibly, almost definitely end up sort of attracted to him.

This was my first date in nearly two years. Even if Mark didn't turn out to be 'the one', I was in desperate need of the practice.

I was also in desperate need of a social life that didn't revolve around my sixty-three-year-old mother and my newly married best friend.

But I couldn't go.

I can't go!

I replied to Steph, even while willing her to force me into it. She sent me a flurry of replies:

No! NO NO NO! YOU HAVE TO GO!!
You cannot let her do this again!

I am literally begging you

Drew is begging you

Tell her the truth, turn off your phone and GO AND ENJOY
YOURSELF

I sucked in an anxious breath.

I should have told her I had plans

Another split-second reply:

Have you forgotten tooth-gate?

I would never forget tooth-gate.

Ollie, you are not going to stand someone up on V Day! I forbid you to cancel!

I jumped in and out of the shower, trying to hold back the tears that had, if I'm honest, been building for years now. Steph continued bombarding me with messages as I got ready. I didn't bother replying that I didn't even like Mark that much. That it was rude and cruel to leave my mother, riddled with two decades of abandonment issues, alone on Valentine's Day. That I wouldn't enjoy the date anyway due to stressing out about Mum's anxious messages reproducing like mutant bacteria on my phone.

And then her last message hit me like a punch in the guts:

Keep giving in to this and the Dream List might as well die.

Dressed in flared black trousers and a pale blue halter-neck top, coppery hair curled into soft waves, my grey eyes rimmed with a smudge of eyeliner, I took a breath fit for a deep-sea dive, picked up my chunky-heeled shoes and steeled myself for impact.

* * *

Mum was ready and waiting for my footsteps on the stairs. As soon as I entered the dining room she hurried in, bearing two plates, piled high. A platter of samosas and bhajis was already on the table.

‘Well, don’t you look gorgeous! Almost a shame you haven’t got a date tonight.’

‘Well, actually, Mum, I have.’ To avoid me backing out as soon as I saw her, I’d messaged Mark to say that a family emergency had come up, and I would be half an hour late, but I was definitely coming.

‘What?’ Mum’s face crumpled in confusion. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘A friend from work invited me to go for a drink with him later on. I’ll stay and eat with you first, then head off.’ Not entirely true, and my lie would require eating two meals in one evening, but that was the least of my worries.

‘You’re going to leave me. On my own. After I’ve done all this for you?’ The smile was gone, her face mottled with crimson.

‘No, I said I’m going to eat with you, and then pop out afterwards. If you’d checked first, I’d have told you I had plans.’

‘If I’d checked first?’ She pressed a trembling hand to her chest. ‘It never crossed my mind that you’d not tell me if you had a date. I didn’t even know you were interested in anyone.’

‘It was a last-minute arrangement.’ I was frustrated by the quiver in my voice. If I’d told her I had plans, she’d only have had more time to invent a reason for me to cancel them. Two years ago, she developed agonising toothache on the day I was supposed to be going away for the weekend with Steph. By the time I’d taken her to

the emergency dentist and found out that it was nothing that couldn't have waited until Monday, we'd missed our flight to Amsterdam.

'Well, I organised this days ago. You'll have to tell him you're busy.'

'No. I'm sorry, but I'm not cancelling a date on Valentine's Day to spend yet another evening with my mum. Let's just enjoy our dinner, and then I'm going out. It's not that big a deal.'

The tears came then, as she collapsed into a chair, shaking her head as if completely baffled.

'No, it's fine. Of course. I'm just disappointed. I'd picked out a film, and had cocktails for later. Of course you must choose this *friend from work* over your silly mum. Don't worry about the food – you go off and enjoy your night without me. I'll be fine.'

She rubbed her chest a few times, face scrunched up to let me know the 'pains' were back, as predicted. I felt a prickle of guilt that I'd upset her, but the stab of anger that she was trying to manipulate me was, for the first time, stronger.

'Okay, that's really kind of you, Mum. We can save all this for tomorrow, and enjoy a really lovely evening together then.'

Her head jerked up, unable to hide the shock that I'd agreed.

'Right.' Watery eyes darted from the table to me, and then the door. 'If you wouldn't mind taking everything back into the kitchen, only – *ooooh* – my chest isn't feeling very good.' She took a deep breath, blowing it out as if trying to ease the agony.

'No problem.'

I ignored her rapidly increasing huffs and groans as I raced in and out of the kitchen and tidied all the food into the fridge. 'All sorted. We can leave the table set up ready for tomorrow. Here.' I handed her a glass of water and an aspirin. 'Why don't you get

settled on the sofa and have a rest? That usually helps your chest feel better.'

I'm not sure which of us was more surprised when I slipped into my shoes, grabbed my bag and walked out. My mistake was pausing, ears pricked, one hand on the open front door.

'AH! OOOH!' Mum's cries easily carried down the hallway. 'Olivia, have you left yet? Only... my chest... I need... please don't...'

I closed my eyes. There was a moment's silence while she waited for me to rush back inside. When I held my ground, she called louder. 'No, it's fine. You go and have a nice time. I'm just... calling... 999... If you wouldn't mind texting Aunty Linda... I'm scared to go to hospital on my own... ouch... OOOOH!'

Yes, I was ninety-five per cent sure it was an act. Yes, I'd heard it all before and worse. But I still couldn't walk out leaving Mum waiting for an ambulance alone.

Once I heard her speaking to the emergency operator, I stepped back inside and closed the door. Even as I fetched a blanket, as I texted Mark with the same pathetic apology I'd used so many times before, I made a life-changing decision:

This was the last time my mother was going to control my life.

The last time.

I was done.

The following day, I finished work at three. Having arrived back in Sherwood half an hour later (Sherwood the Nottingham suburb, not to be confused with the forest), I got off the bus and headed straight to the shop.

Mum's older sister, Aunty Linda, ran the Buttonhole craft shop and haberdashery, situated in prime position in amongst Sherwood's artisan bakeries and gin bars. Aunty Linda's shrewd business mind and talent for evolving one step ahead of the times had allowed the Buttonhole to not only survive, but thrive for over three decades. Mum also worked there, but when her 'pains' flared up a few years ago, she'd cut down her hours along with her enthusiasm, demoting herself from sought-after craftswoman to lacklustre shop assistant. She wasn't in today, hence me visiting.

I entered the Victorian-style doorway to find one of their hugely popular workshops in full swing. Several women were seated around two large tables, heads bent over balls of wool, needles clacking in time to their animated conversations. Linda stood up as soon as she saw me, automatically pausing to compliment someone's handiwork before striding over to where I hovered by the counter.

‘How’s she doing?’ Linda grimaced, her lilac glasses halfway down her nose. She shared Mum’s wiry frame and narrow features, but her hair, far more salt than pepper, was invariably wound up in a plaited bun, into which she’d have stuck a crochet hook, or a random ribbon.

‘She’d made an amazing recovery by the end of the evening.’

‘Oh, love.’ She gave my arm a sympathetic squeeze. ‘There’s tea in the pot, and plenty of cake.’ She moved over to the refreshment counter, setting out two large, flowery mugs.

‘What do you think would happen to her if I ever moved out?’ I asked, causing Linda to pause, still holding the teapot in mid-air.

‘I think you need to focus on what it would mean for you, and your life.’ She eyed me carefully. ‘Leave your mum to worry about herself.’

The previous evening, as we’d eaten the curry in front of a romantic comedy that made me feel more like crying than laughing, I had thought of little else.

‘I’m scared to even consider how she’d cope without me.’

‘Moving out doesn’t mean severing all contact. It’s what most people do, Ollie. Find their own place to live, pop back home at the weekend and Christmas, like your cousins.’

‘But if her “pains” are bad again, I’ll end up back home so often it would be easier not to bother leaving.’

‘What’s the alternative? Stay, and sacrifice your happiness for hers?’

‘I’m not unhappy...’

My aunt rolled her eyes. ‘Only because you don’t allow yourself to feel anything much at all. I don’t want to presume that you hope to have a family one day. But it was something you used to talk about a lot, when you were with Jonathan.’

Jonathan.

Hearing his name still made my heart clench.

We took our drinks and cake over to an empty table and sat down. 'I do want to meet someone. I have a whole list of things I've dreamt of doing when I can finally move out. Things I don't want to do with my mother.'

Linda raised one eyebrow. 'Oh yes?'

'I mean... like get a puppy. Or camp out under the stars. I want to host a party, full of noise and laughter and the kind of friends who push the table to one side to make room for dancing.' I sighed, before taking a bite of fudge cake. 'I have so many dreams about how life would be, once I've found the person to do it with. But they seem to just keep getting further away the older I get. How am I supposed to find a partner, when I can't even make it to a first date?'

Linda sipped her tea. 'Perhaps it's time to stop waiting.'

She didn't add what we both knew to be true – I stood no chance of finding a man who wanted to share my current life, unless he was also prepared to share it with my mother. I had met Jonathan in my final year at Nottingham University (commuting every day from home). Back then, it was probably only natural that Mum and I were close, given that it had been the two of us for so long. It was as Jonathan and I grew more serious that her mystery pains began, and as her illness grew worse, alongside the anxiety, I ended up having to repeatedly prioritise her over Jonathan.

The frailer she grew, the clearer it became quite how much she needed me. She told Jonathan, several times, that I was 'the man of the house' and once she reduced her hours at the shop it seemed sensible to transfer household accounts to my name. After a few months, she had deteriorated to the point where she couldn't drive any more, so also depended on me for lifts.

For three years Jonathan was inordinately patient. When he asked me to marry him on my twenty-fourth birthday, I said that I couldn't leave Mum when she was still so ill. He asked again, twice more, over the next year, sure that we could make it work, even offering to pay for some home help for her. I dithered and delayed answering, until, eventually, his patience ran out. He said that as much as he loved me, he couldn't handle always coming second. It hurt him too much to see me trapped in what he called a toxic relationship and if I wasn't prepared to build some boundaries, we weren't going to make it.

I was shocked. How could he ask me to *build boundaries* when she was so ill, and still had no diagnosis?

How dare he make me choose between him and my mother?

When he quietly suggested that Mum had subconsciously imagined the symptoms because she was scared to lose me, I was beyond furious. And when in the argument that ensued he took it a step further, accusing her of deliberately making them up, that was it. We were over.

And yes, a tiny part of me may have reacted with such ferocity because for one horrible moment, I had wondered that, too.

In the days after Jonathan and I split up, as I cried on the sofa, nursing my broken heart with a giant tub of ice cream, Mum's pains began to improve. I put away all thoughts that Jonathan had been right. She was better now, and that was what mattered.

* * *

I thought about Aunty Linda's advice as I walked back through the murky drizzle, to the street of 1920s semi-detached homes where I'd spent my entire life. She was right, of course – I was earning enough

to support myself, if I was careful, so money was no reason to wait until I was married before moving out. Yet, that was the eventuality Mum had always drilled into me: 'When you get married, and have your own place...'

For the most part, Mum and I had a good relationship. Leaving would devastate her, and I wasn't sure it was worth it. If I spoke to her and put some boundaries in place, maybe things could get better without me having to move out.

Besides, I'd never spent so much as one night alone. What if I hated it?

Even thinking about the logistics of it all: telling Mum, packing up, sorting all the admin, finding somewhere new... the whole idea was exhausting, and that was all before I'd actually gone anywhere.

But as I trudged up our narrow, concrete drive, I allowed myself one moment to imagine what it would be like if the house that awaited me was empty. I'd slip off my shoes, sink into the sofa and soak up the blissful silence. I'd watch whatever I felt like on television instead of endless soap operas. Eat what I wanted, when I wanted, rather than the standard six o'clock sit-down meal.

For the first time in as long as I could remember, I'd please myself.

Was I a horrible, selfish cow for even thinking about it?

* * *

Either way, I thought of nothing else for the rest of the week. On Saturday morning, as soon as Mum left for work at the Buttonhole, I drove round to see Steph, with the promise of her usual weekend breakfast pancakes, bacon and eggs and token bowl of berries.

Her brother, Nicky, answered the door. 'Hey, Ollie!' he yelled, while racing back into the kitchen. 'Can't stop!'

I followed him down the hallway as he whipped open the back door and sped out.

'Drew's taking him for a bike ride,' Steph said, shaking her head. '*Helmet on first!*' she yelled through the door. '*Drew* – are you watching him?'

'He's fine!' Drew appeared at the door, snaking one arm out to snatch a slice of bacon, grabbing Steph and kissing her when she leant forwards to slap his hand. 'Relax and enjoy your breakfast.'

'I'll relax once you've stopped ogling me and are properly watching my brother!'

Drew grinned at me, waggling his eyebrows, before disappearing into the garden.

Having a brother with Down syndrome was the main reason why Steph had waited so long to marry the boy she'd loved since seventeen. She had basically raised Nicky, along with their two brothers, having been adamant that they would escape the future that too many people considered inevitable for mixed-race boys growing up on an estate run by criminals, with empty cupboards, a father in and out of prison and a mother who clung to whatever man would have her. With Jordan now a junior doctor, Simeon studying for a PhD in computer science and Nicky settled in supported accommodation, Steph had pretty much sprinted down the aisle last year.

She made two cappuccinos using the machine I'd bought for a wedding present, and joined me at the table, squeezing her generous curves into the breakfast nook. 'I thought you might want to talk without Tweedledum and Tweedledee chipping in every two seconds.'

I helped myself to a pancake and a spoonful of scrambled eggs. Steph knew me well enough to decipher the tornado of emotions swirling behind the brief messages I'd sent during the week.

'Have you spoken to Mark?' she asked, easing me in with a low-key topic.

I cringed. 'He avoided me at the library on Thursday, and then sent a text saying that he'd decided to give things another go with his ex. He didn't want me to feel awkward, because she works in the library and I might see them together.'

'Ouch.'

'Yeah. I knew who he meant straight away. She's one of those really enthusiastic, smiley people who ends every sentence with a question and I sort of already hated her a bit.'

Steph made a scoffing noise. 'She can have him. Mark was only a practice run, to get you back dating. He was never going to be the man you embark upon the Dream List with.'

I sighed. She was probably right.

'You know I'm right.'

'Okay, but whatever Mark might or might not have been, that's not the point, is it?'

It was Steph's turn to sigh. 'What are you going to do? This is not going to get better on its own. *She's* not going to get any better if you keep dropping everything whenever she imagines a new twinge.'

I could feel my shoulders hunching over as my internal organs shrank away from this truth.

'She's ill!'

'Yeah, a chronic case of selfish cowitis. Smothering mothering syndrome.' She used a chunk of crispy bacon to mop up the remains of syrup on her plate.

I shook my head. 'I accept that the pains are mostly psychological, maybe even deliberate, but that just shows how desperate and scared she is about being alone. I hate myself for even wishing I could leave.'

Steph's voice softened. 'She's manipulating you into never having a relationship, hoping it will trap you there forever. Jonathan was right, it's toxic, and I feel so angry and sad that you would let someone keep treating you like this.'

I sat back, my breakfast curdling in my stomach. Had Steph been talking to Aunty Linda behind my back?

'I know what happened this week wasn't okay. But she's not been like that for ages. Most of the time we get on really well.'

'Because most of the time you do what she wants, and you don't try and go on dates!'

'Do I have to move out, though?'

Steph tugged on her black curls with clenched fists. 'That's not the question here! Do you *want* to move out, now, instead of waiting for the excuse of some mystery Dream Man who might never appear?'

I scrunched my face up, eventually finding enough courage to whisper, 'I think I do.'

'Fan-bloomin'-tastic!' Steph hollered. 'At last!'

I wasn't so ecstatic. A tear trickled miserably down my cheek.

'What if it never happens, though? What if I never find a Dream Man to complete the list with? What if Mum's made me incapable of having a healthy relationship?' I blotted the tear with my jumper sleeve. I had started writing the Dream List back in sixth form. It contained twelve things I planned to do when I finally fell in love like Steph and Drew. Over time some of the list had been edited (for example, deleting the original number eight: watch the live UK tour of

Glee and replacing it with a summer evening at an outdoor theatre), but it had been transferred between the back pages of all my journals for twelve years.

Steph shook her head in dismay as she ate a handful of blueberries. 'Have I taught you nothing over the years? *Why do you need a man to complete your Dream List? Why not do it on your own? By the time you've finished it, you'll be so independent, and interesting and confident that there'll be Dream Men queuing up to help you write a new one.*'

I know. It's pathetic. *I was pathetic, thinking I needed someone to complete my Dream List – which was really my dream life – instead of getting on with it by myself. But twenty-nine years of a mother who balked at the idea of doing a big supermarket shop by herself, who called 999 to avoid spending an evening alone, had conditioned me for dependence.*

The thought of setting out into the unknown to tackle my dreams solo was terrifying.

But at the same time, the thought of never tackling them at all scared me even more.

As I sobbed, Steph squeezed around the table and wrapped her arms around me, and a minute later a sweaty-faced Nicky burst in and came to join in the hug. A text beeped from Aunty Linda to say that she was thinking of me, and I knew that even if I did resign from Team Tennyson, I would never be alone.

* * *

I still might not have done it, I might have let enough time pass, enough excuses take hold that I ended up slipping back into old habits, if Mum hadn't sprung another surprise on me that evening.

‘So, we need to start planning your birthday,’ she said, eyes glowing with anticipation.

‘We’ve got months yet.’ My thirtieth birthday was in September. ‘I haven’t even decided what I want to do.’

‘Well, you can’t leave it until the last minute!’ Mum laughed. ‘If we’re going to give you a proper celebration, there’s a lot to be done.’

‘I might not want a big celebration.’ I wriggled uncomfortably on the side of the sofa that was sagging and worn, because I’d been sitting in the same spot for so many years.

‘Pshewee! I know you’re going to want this!’ Mum stood up, doing a sort of dance as she dramatically reached into her back pockets and then whipped out two tickets. ‘*Much Ado About Nothing* is on at the outdoor theatre at Wollaton Hall a week after your birthday!’ She beamed. I wasn’t smiling. ‘But on your actual birthday, we’ll have a party. Fancy dress, maybe a retro theme from your childhood, one of your favourite books or something, and a cocktail bar. We could even borrow one of those dance videogames, that’ll be fun.’

‘*What?!*’

‘I know! Don’t say your mother doesn’t know you!’

My stomach muscles hardened into a ball of anger. ‘I won’t. But I will say that my mother has been snooping through my stuff!’

This was not a coincidence. I had never once mentioned to Mum that I wanted to do any of those things. We never did things like that, because we always did what she wanted: days out by the seaside, craft fairs, toasted teacakes in cafés with net curtains.

I saw the flash of guilt in her eyes before she snapped back to overly jolly bewilderment. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

An outdoor theatre and a not-yet-updated Harry Potter-themed party, along with a cocktail bar and the *Just Dance* videogame were

on my Dream List, safely tucked away in my journal, hidden in my bedside drawer.

‘You’re not even going to admit it?’ The anger had dissolved into bone-weary exhaustion. My decision on Valentine’s Day had been right. I couldn’t do this any more.

‘What?’ Her eyes jerked in every direction but mine, before she accepted there was no escape. ‘Okay, okay! I was looking for my favourite bra and thought it might be in your room. The journal ended up falling out of the drawer and landed open at your list. I didn’t mean to look at it, but I couldn’t help spotting a couple of things on there while I was putting it safely back... But isn’t this perfect? Aren’t you pleased? We’ll be able to celebrate your *dream birthday!*’

I could have argued, but it would have been pointless. I closed my eyes for a brief moment, and then got up and walked away.

* * *

I lay awake most of that night. By morning, I had reached a decision. I knew Steph would complain that it wasn’t drastic enough, but I had to go with what I could handle.

I was going to move out. One advantage of having next to no life was that I had some savings, but I wasn’t going to blow them on a half-hearted move that I could end up backing out of. If I was moving, it was to a house that I would buy, not rent, and it would be as close as possible to the one on the Dream List.

I wouldn’t leave Mum floundering alone, treating her as badly as my dad had done. I would find her a lodger (however long that took) and I would ensure all the practical things like bills were properly sorted.

I would also tell her none of this, until it was certain, and I had new house keys in my hand. I would move close enough to drop in from time to time, but far enough away to start a whole new life of my own. And I wouldn't be telling her my new address until I was certain she could respect my choice.

As I got up that morning, the excitement and terror pulsed through my bloodstream. Images of my new life flashed in front of me like the trailer to the best film ever, with me in the leading role.

Every time I wavered, felt almost suffocated with guilt, I remembered the Dream List, clung to it as a promise to myself of the life I'd always wanted – the one that was out there waiting for me, if I had the guts and the gumption to get out there and find it.

And I would not be completing a single thing on that list with my mother.

I took a deep breath. After a long, somewhat dispiriting search, I was standing in front of what I felt sure would be the house from my Dream List. Or, to be more truthful, the closest to the Dream House that fit my budget. The end of a row of three terraced cottages, the duck-egg blue front door stood one large paving slab back from the pavement. The external walls were freshly painted in a crisp white, and the honeysuckle clambering around the old-fashioned window held the promise of a thousand tiny pink buds.

Before I had a chance to knock, the estate agent opened the door with a formal smile.

‘Ms Tennyson, please come on in.’

Heart pounding, I stepped inside onto the oak floorboards, inhaling the scent of wood varnish, musty air and a million dreams. The agent led me into a cosy living room – more floorboards, white walls and a log burner set in a stone mantelpiece flanked with built-in shelving units – before showing me the kitchen-diner, the only other downstairs room apart from a tiny cloakroom and an understairs pantry. The kitchen, like most of the house, was styled in what the estate agent called ‘rustic charm with a contemporary twist’. This included more open shelving, a Belfast sink, giant oven and navy

blue cabinets to contrast more white walls. It fitted a decent-sized table, and a door opened out onto the garden beyond. I tried to look thoughtful and composed, but inside I was hugging myself with glee.

‘As you can see, the current owners have done extensive renovations before deciding to sell. As well as all new fixtures and fittings, you’ve got state-of-the-art heating and electrics.’ He flicked on the under-shelf lighting to demonstrate. ‘The house is such a bargain because they’re in a hurry to sell. You genuinely won’t find anything close to this value locally. I’m expecting it to be gone before the end of the week.’

This was not entirely true. End Cottage was priced competitively, even for such a tiny property, but the main reason for this was that it was part of a ramshackle row of cottages at the edge of a rundown village in Nottinghamshire, whose unfortunate name of Bigley Bottom meant that house-buyers with the means to be choosy tended to overlook it in favour of nicer villages with prettier names.

Bigley Bottom was a perfect location for me, because the other reason why I could afford such a lovely little house was that as of last month, I’d been promoted to area manager for the brand new, not-yet-up-and-running Central Notts branch of ReadUp. This would require recruiting and then supervising a small team of reading coaches, as well as sourcing and working with my own reading clients. Unlike many of the local villages, Bigley Bottom had managed to hang on to its tiny library, which in my experience was the best place to set up base.

This location also satisfied one other essential Dream Life criteria: at a half hour drive from Nottingham, it was close enough to pop home for a cup of tea, but deep enough into the countryside that there was no chance of Mum ever finding me.

I took one last look at the kitchen, briefly imagining my similarly imaginary friends sitting round the table sharing lovingly prepared dinners, before following the estate agent upstairs to admire the second bedroom's buttercup-yellow walls and pale grey floorboards. This would be a perfect home office. There would also be room to squeeze a sofa bed in here, given that having my as-yet-imaginary friends to stay was another item on the Dream List.

Before entering the main bedroom, the estate agent paused, assuming his best salesman smile. 'Now, just to warn you, this is the one room that the owners hadn't got around to yet. However, I think the rest of the house demonstrates the incredible potential. It also gives you a chance to style the room to your own taste, of course, if you decide to redecorate.'

If I decide to redecorate?

The bedroom was covered in peeling, mildewed wallpaper. The ratty rose-pink carpet was dotted with various unidentified stains. There was a cracked fireplace, one grubby door half-hanging off the fitted wardrobe and a distinct whiff of dead something.

'It's perfect,' I said, unable to keep up the playing-it-cool act.

'It is?' The estate agent's professional façade vanished behind raised eyebrows.

Buying a house to do up was item three on the Dream List, but now that I was tackling the list by myself, transforming only one dilapidated room was a much more doable challenge.

'Well, if you like the room, you'll love this.' He gestured over to the large window. 'I'll be downstairs if you have any questions.'

Moving across, I gripped my hands together and breathed a sigh of happiness. Out of all the reasons for buying this house, this had to be top. The main bedroom looked out onto the back garden. All three gardens in the row were separated by a line of pretty flowers rather

than a fence or a hedge, creating the effect of a large communal space. With it being so easy to see into (as well as step into) each neighbour's plot, they must surely be friendly, neighbourly people?

Even better, at the end of the garden was a hedge, and in the middle section of the hedge was a gate. And on the other side of the gate was miles of nobody and nothing but the trees, birds, deer and whatever else happened to live in this offshoot of Sherwood Forest.

End Cottage sat right on the border of Bigley Forest Park, consisting of over a thousand acres of woodland footpaths and bike trails. I gazed at the sunlight dancing off the treetops, stretching out into the distance, and I resolved to explore them all.

I did have one question for the estate agent: *why on earth would ANYONE in their right mind want to sell this Dream Cottage?*

'Why are the owners selling in such a hurry?' I asked, once I'd re-joined him in the kitchen.

'They won the Euro Millions and moved to Monaco. They want everything here sorted as soon as possible.' He squinted at me. 'I know people expect the sales pitch and the spin, but I'm telling you straight that you are not going to find a better house than this for anywhere near the price. Not even in Bigley.' He pulled a wry grin. 'Honestly, if you don't put an offer in, I think I will.'

I took another deep breath of galvanising country air, closed my eyes for a brief moment, and with trembling voice, offered him the asking price.

I was moving out.

* * *

But before then, I had some major work to do. Otherwise, I was going to end up paying the mortgage on a house I didn't have the

guts to ever move into. To force me into action, I had orchestrated a multi-step plan. The next stage in the plan was happening this evening.

As I set off home, a girl of about ten or eleven was wheeling a bike around the corner of the cottage at the other end of the row. She paused to glance at me as I unlocked my car and climbed in, offering a shy nod of her head and the hint of a smile before starting to pedal in the opposite direction to the village. I watched her whizzing off to freedom, T-shirt flapping in the late-afternoon breeze and, in that moment, I knew exactly how she felt.

* * *

‘Who’s this friend again?’ Mum asked, one side of her mouth twitching downwards as she took three large bowls out of the cupboard.

‘Her name’s Karina.’

‘And you met her at work?’

‘Yes.’ I lifted the lid on the pot of chilli I’d made and gave it a stir.

‘Can you take that sour cream out to the table too?’

Mum just stood there, clutching the bowls to her midriff. ‘So she can’t read?’

‘She found reading challenging when she started classes two years ago. She’s just signed up to do her English GCSE.’

Mum frowned, unconvinced that a woman lacking in basic qualifications was a suitable dinner guest. I smiled and carried on grating cheese. I had absolute faith in Karina’s ability to change her mind.

‘She’ll be happy to tell you if you ask her. In fact, you definitely should ask. It’s a good story.’

She sniffed, but at least went to finish setting the table. I also noticed that she added her favourite hand-embroidered table runner. My optimism cranked up one more notch.

At precisely six o'clock, the exact time I'd asked Karina to arrive, the doorbell rang. Karina entered with a blast of fresh air, an enormous smile, a bunch of Mum's favourite pink roses and a box of Quality Street.

'Oh! How thoughtful of you,' Mum said, sufficiently thrown by the gesture to forget that she was being aloof. 'I love the strawberry creams!'

'What?' Karina cried, her Ukrainian accent booming off the ceiling. 'I brought them because they're *my* favourites. But I hate the strawberry creams. How perfect!'

Mum blinked in surprise. 'Let me take your coat for you.'

By the time I'd brought the pots of chilli and rice out to join the salad and crusty bread, Mum had already spotted Karina's pinafore dress, perfectly fitting her stout frame.

'That's very fine stitching,' she said, peering closer at the appliqué on the front pockets.

'Oh, thank you!' Karina beamed even harder. 'It took me ages, but worth the effort.'

'You made this?' Mum stepped back, her eyes narrowing.

'Of course! I make all my own clothes. I can't follow a pattern, so sometimes the process is slower than I'd like, but it beats paying for tat produced by slave labour on the other side of the world.'

'Yes.' Mum was agog. I mentally punched the air before inviting Karina to take a seat.

All it took was a couple of opening questions, and Mum and Karina were chatting like old friends. They were a similar age, both soap opera superfans who drank revoltingly milky tea with two

sugars. While Karina wasn't divorced, her husband, Mr Rivers, had died eighteen months earlier.

'I'm so sorry to hear it,' Mum said.

'Don't be.' Karina shook her head of cropped grey hair. 'I didn't like him. Or the woman who he pretended to play tennis with every Sunday. That involved a whole different type of ballgame.'

'He was unfaithful?' Mum asked, a forgotten slice of garlic bread now hovering halfway to her mouth.

'For thirty-one years. On and off. Mostly on. But. Eh. You know how it is.'

'I do.' Mum certainly did. 'Why didn't you leave him?'

Karina shrugged. 'He ran our lives; everything was in his name. How can a part-time care worker who can barely read survive on her own?'

'Why on earth couldn't you read?' Mum asked. I gave her a sharp glance. I'd told her to ask, but she could have phrased things more tactfully.

'I mean, you're clearly an intelligent woman!' Mum added, before taking a flustered bite of her bread that forced her to continue with her mouth full. 'Creating a quality garment without a pattern takes a lot of skill.'

'Thank you.' Karina nodded. 'Ollie helped me get diagnosed as severely dyslexic last year. Before that, I had always been diagnosed as stupid. I'm certain Mr Rivers married me on that basis, hoping for a compliant little wife who would be grateful to clean up his mess, cook his dinners and stroke his ego without asking questions. If people repeat often enough that you're useless, eventually you accept that there's no point even trying. It was only once he died, and I had no choice but to try that I found ReadUp.'

‘Well, at least you got there in the end,’ Mum offered, starting to clear the plates away.

‘That depends on what you mean by “there”,’ Karina said. ‘I still struggle with forms, and computers are like another foreign language. Living alone is not easy.’

‘You don’t have any children?’

Karina smiled wryly. ‘I’m not thoughtless enough to bring children into a loveless marriage.’

By the time we’d finished the pavlova, I’d lost count of how many times Mum had said, ‘Isn’t this lovely!’

As Karina shrugged into her coat, she turned to Mum and took her hands. ‘Thank you for welcoming me into your home, Tina. In these wonderful few hours I feel I may have found a friend. And, to be honest, I am in great need of one. I do hope we can see each other again.’

Mum flushed pink with pleasure as she nodded her agreement, too emotional to reply.

‘Next time, I will bring dinner.’ Karina gave me a wink, and left.

* * *

At breakfast the following day, I decided it was worth sowing another seed. I took a fortifying swig of coffee and cleared my throat.

‘I thought we might have Karina over more often, if that’s okay with you. Make it a weekly thing?’

‘Oh?’ Mum glanced up from buttering her toast.

‘As she mentioned, it’s been tough, living alone. She could really do with some support with admin and forms and things. Maybe we could help? I know you understand what it’s like, and at least you had Aunty Linda and Uncle Geoff. Her whole family are in Europe.’

There was a drawn-out silence, where I wondered for one nerve-wracking moment if I'd pushed too far.

Mum took a bite of toast, chewed and swallowed. 'I was thinking that maybe she should come along to the Buttonhole. That pinafore was exquisite, but fancy not being able to follow a pattern! I might have to put on a couple of sessions for her.' She took a sip of tea. 'I'll ask next Wednesday if she'd be interested.'

'Good idea.' I smiled casually, while inside relief danced the conga up and down my ribcage.

Six weeks later, the first week in May, I picked up the keys to my Dream House. With pounding heart I spent an afternoon stepping through the stillness of un-lived-in rooms with Steph, as we planned and pictured where my current possessions and the items I still needed to buy would go. I'd learnt how to use a sewing machine before I could read, and had already picked out the material to run up curtains and cushions. The previous owners had left behind the furniture they'd purchased before the big win, so I had a red checked sofa and end tables in the living room, and a kitchen table repurposed from an old barn door, along with matching chairs. Upstairs, there were plenty of fitted storage units, but the sagging double bed in the main room would have to be replaced.

Steph had brought a bottle of fizz and two plastic wine glasses, and she insisted we sat in the kitchen and raised a toast to hopes and dreams for the future.

'Don't worry about driving home, it's non-alcoholic,' she said, pouring me a second glass.

'Of course.' Given her parents' car-crash relationship with alcohol, Steph had never drunk.

As soon as we'd taken the first sip, Steph got out her laptop. 'Right, now that this is officially happening, it's time to get some ground rules in place.'

'What?' The steely look in her eye made me wish that the bubbles contained some alcohol after all.

'I know you, Ollie Tennyson, and I also know how tough it is to break habits formed at an impressionable age.' Steph was a social worker in children's services, acting as protector and advocate for children whose parents were either unwilling or unable to do so. She was amazing at her job, but it was somewhat irritating when she started applying the significant psychological expertise amassed over the years to me. 'You've spent twenty-nine years trying to please your mum at the expense of your own wants, needs or opinions. We need to make sure that you don't prise yourself off her only to reattach to the next available person looking for someone to dominate.'

'You make me sound like a limpet or something.'

'You said it, not me. Anyway, my point is this. Until the Dream List is complete, you need a No-Man Mandate.'

'A what?'

'You need this time to focus on you, for once. Like I said, to give yourself time and space to practise becoming your own woman, so that by the time the list is complete you can start dating knowing what kind of life you want, and what kind of woman you are, so that you don't readapt yourself to what someone else happens to want.'

I thought about what Steph said. It was true that the thought of living day to day on my own, with no one to please but myself, felt like yanking out the tether to Planet Earth, leaving me floating off into an unknown universe. The temptation to find someone else to help me decide on what to do and how to do it was at times

overwhelming. After some more discussion, Steph typed up a copy of the No-Man Mandate:

I, Olivia Anne Tennyson, hereby swear to adhere to this No-Man Mandate until the Dream List, as currently stated in my journal, is completed in its entirety, without exception. The No-Man Mandate states that:

I shall not date or accept an offer of a date, even if said date is to be delayed until the completion of the Dream List.

I shall not kiss, hug, hold hands or have any physical contact with a man that is not wholly platonic.

I shall not sign up to any dating apps, websites or other means of acquiring a date.

I shall remain completely single in every conceivable sense of the word.

If at any point I am in doubt as to whether an action is in breach of this mandate, I will consult with Stephanie Prince, and in all instances accept her decision as final.

Before I knew it, the No-Man Mandate was signed, dated and saved on her personal cloud so I couldn't edit it later.

* * *

It was a good job that Prosecco was fake. My head was swirling enough thanks to the combination of excitement and panic-induced terror. This was my house, but unless I somehow found the strength to face what I had to do next, it would never become my home.

To force me into action, prompted by many a challenging comment from Steph, I had agreed with Karina that this evening we

would execute the next stage in the plan. I was expecting fireworks, tantrums, and quite possibly a trip to A & E.

‘Come on,’ Steph said, once we’d rinsed out the glasses. ‘Let’s walk off that stress before we go.’

‘I don’t think it’s humanly possible to walk that far.’

‘Nonsense. It’ll be impossible not to feel better once you’ve soaked up some nature.’

We crossed the lawn and let ourselves into the forest through the back gate. The May sunshine was warm and hazy, the leaves above our heads dappling the dirt footpath as we wound our way through the trees. I sucked in a few lungfuls of air, tangy with earth, pine and hawthorn blossom, and had to admit that Steph was right. Here, in the quiet of the forest, my fraught muscles began to unwind as my thoughts settled.

Apart from a squirrel, and a couple of tiny, roly-poly brown birds, we didn’t spot another living creature, until suddenly, turning past a particularly large tree trunk, we found ourselves at the edge of a clearing carpeted with bluebells.

‘I can’t believe that this is basically your new back garden—’ Steph stopped, mid-word, and turned to me, eyes round and jaw hanging open. In the split second before I had a chance to respond, the surprise morphed into a wicked glint, causing my own eyes to widen in alarm as I mouthed, ‘Don’t you dare!’

She shrugged, pressing one hand to her chest with a puzzled, *who me?* expression that made me want to scuttle back behind the tree. Especially when I grabbed her arm and turned to go, and instead of moving with me she took a big step into the open.

‘Helloooo!’ she called out as my stomach plummeted into the dirt.

The man on the other side of the clearing lowered the chainsaw in his hand and turned to see who’d yelled like a teenager trying to

get a selfie with her favourite boyband. His broad chest was bare, faded jeans riding low on his hips. When I tried to swallow, it appeared as though every drop of moisture in my mouth had evaporated along with Steph's sense of shame.

The man placed the chainsaw on the ground and quickly shrugged into a checked shirt, which only made me feel even more embarrassed. He had the type of physique earned through a lifestyle of hard work, rather than pumping away in a gym, and the way the shirt hung slightly open to reveal the tiniest smattering of hair on a solid chest seemed almost worse than when he'd been half naked.

Crap, Ollie. Don't even think words like 'naked' right now. My current train of thought might not have been in breach of the No-Man Mandate, but I was pretty sure it should be.

Then he pulled off the orange hard-hat with the face visor, and at least I stopped thinking about his chest. Running a hand through mussed-up, light brown hair streaked with natural highlights, he offered us a slightly awkward, yet utterly dazzling grin.

Oh my.

Steph's laughing eyes flickered to mine. 'Now if this doesn't get you packing your bags and whizzing through that boring old list, I don't know what will,' she muttered out of the side of her mouth.

'Can I help you?' the man asked. His voice was warm and deep and matched the rest of him perfectly.

'I hope so!' Steph said, moving closer. It was only when he flicked one hand in a *stay* gesture that I spotted two collies lying in the shade of an oak tree.

'We're new here. Well, my friend Ollie here is new. She's just bought a cottage that backs right onto the forest.'

He nodded in recognition. I sent up a silent, desperate prayer that she'd stop short of giving him the address along with my phone

number.

‘So, yeah, anyway, we’ve sort of lost our sense of direction. Do you know the best way to the road?’

‘Hatherstone Lane? Where it meets the village?’

‘Yes! That’s it. End Cottage.’

‘If you take that path, and follow it round, it’s maybe fifteen minutes.’ He paused, turning to look at me, still hovering in the shadows like Steph’s socially awkward sidekick. ‘Twenty. Depending on how used you are to walking.’

‘Oh, we’re very used to it. Ollie here walks all the time, don’t you, Ollie?’

He quirked one eyebrow up, still smiling as he waited for me to confirm this untruth.

‘Well. Um. Yes. But I mean, that’s more like walking in the city. On the pavement. I don’t really... I haven’t much... anyway, thanks for your help!’

Then I turned and started hurrying down the path he’d pointed at without even checking if Steph was coming with me.

‘Oh my,’ she gloated, once she’d caught up with my frantic strides and managed to stop giggling. ‘You totally love the hot man of the woods.’

‘Excuse me?’ I huffed with the tiny amount of breath I had left. ‘I wasn’t the one shamelessly flirting.’

‘Well, perhaps you should have been!’ she crowed back. ‘I deliberately left flirting out of the No-Man Mandate because you need the practice. And you never blushed like this over Mark.’

‘I’m not blushing, I’m warm from the exertion of trying to get away from a totally embarrassing situation!’

‘Oh, chill out. I was only asking him for directions.’

I didn't bother replying to that, instead tramping along in silence until we saw the cottages up ahead.

'He was pretty damn gorgeous, though, you have to admit,' Steph said eventually. 'For a second there I thought we'd stumbled across the May photo shoot for a Mr Forest Ranger charity calendar.'

I tried my best to give a reproachful glare as I stopped to yank open the gate, instead bursting into laughter. 'Okay, I do admit to finding the random man we happened to walk past in the woods quite pleasing. Happy?'

Steph linked her arm through mine once we started crossing the garden. 'As happy as I can be until I know you've not bottled it at this dinner tonight. Hopefully Mr May will be something of an incentive to get moved in and that list complete. Maybe the countryside is full of charming, rugged men wielding power tools.'

'Well, I'm going to be far too busy to notice, even if it is.'

She bumped her elbow against my side. 'There was nothing in the mandate about noticing, either.'

As I rummaged through my bag for the back-door key, I took another glance around my new garden, hoping it would help me to keep a grasp on the tendril of peace I'd found in the woods. I'd missed her before, but over in the farthest plot was the girl I'd seen last time I was here. She lay on her back on a pale blue blanket, angling a book above her to block out the glare of the sun. It was too far away to see clearly, but I'd recognise *The Hobbit's* cover anywhere. A smart girl. Smiling, I unlocked the door, collected our things and set off to face down my own dragon.

* * *

It might seem downright deceitful that I'd already asked Karina to move in with my mother, but when over a coffee and a custard doughnut I'd first opened up about my Dream List dilemma, back in the beginning of March, she'd come right out and offered.

'Karina,' I'd replied with as much authority as I could muster, while at the same time wanting to fling my arms around her and shout *YES PLEASE!*, 'I've just told you that Mum is a controlling, manipulating hypochondriac with massive abandonment issues. Did you understand what I told you about my Valentine's Day date?'

'Yes, I heard you.' She beamed back at me. 'But I'm not her daughter; she won't have those issues with me. And have *you* understood what I told you about Mr Rivers? I can handle those kind of emotional fun and games, easy-peasy. She's mostly a pleasant person, yes?'

I nodded. 'Well, yes, but I don't know how she'd react to me moving out. She might end up having a breakdown.'

'Well, then we'll have to prepare her for it, won't we? Show her that she can have a life of her own, without you, and lead her up to it gently.' She looked at me steadily. 'Ollie, you saved my life. You gave me the key that opened the door to my own Dream List. To be able to use a cashpoint, or write a birthday card. I used to avoid cafés like this one because reading the menu filled me with dread. This is the least I can do to repay you.'

'Helping you learn to read is my job, Karina. I've already been paid for that.'

She shook her head vigorously. 'No. Any reading coach would have done that. But you did so much more. You gave me the confidence to believe I was worth it. In choosing *me*, stupid, lost little me, as your friend, you helped give me the power to change my life. I won't sit back when I can help you do the same.'

I opened my mouth and closed it again a few times, unsure how to reply. 'I can't even think about letting you do this unless you know first-hand what she's like. I'm going to tell you the good, the bad and the horrendously ugly, and then you have to meet her and get to know her for yourself, and maybe then we can think about having this conversation again. You've just escaped decades of a horrible relationship. I'm not going to let you walk into another one.'

Karina sagged then, and for the first time in a long while, she allowed me to see the pain and the struggle behind her smile. 'Okay, that is sensible. But I also need to tell you that my offer isn't as kind as it seems. I feel very lonely, living on my own. I find it frightening. Being able to read is good, but there is still so much I can't do. I've made silly mistakes and my landlord is not pleased.'

I reached out and took my friend's hand. Eventually, I was the one to break the silence:

'Would you like to come for dinner on Wednesday?'

* * *

Now, two months later, here we were, steeling ourselves for the stealth attack. Yes, it had required some degree of manipulation, but isn't it best to fight fire with fire?

Karina was brimming with anticipation. I was virtually crippled with anguished nerves.

'How are you, Tina?' Karina asked, chopping a lettuce that was waiting on the side.

'I'm very well, thank you. My chest has been so much better these past few weeks.' Mum opened the oven door to check if the quiche was ready. 'How are you?'

‘Oh, not great,’ Karina replied, trying really hard not to sound like an overexcited child on Christmas Eve. ‘I’ll tell you about it while we eat.’

A few minutes later, sitting at the rickety plastic table in the garden, Karina laid out her woes. I’d hoped for a few minutes of craft-talk to lure Mum into the best possible mood, but it was clear Karina couldn’t wait.

‘I mentioned that I’ve been having some issues with my landlord.’

Mum and I nodded. We’d heard it, ooh, once or twice.

‘Well, things have reached crunch point. When I complained again about the leak in the bathroom, the broken fridge and the light fitting that blew up, he sent me a bill for the repair work, saying it was my doing! He hasn’t even arranged for anyone to do the work yet and he wants me to pay!’

This was true, although it had been three separate bills, over the course of the winter. Karina had not paid, and she did now have a replacement fridge.

‘That’s horrendous!’ Mum gasped, outraged that someone would treat her new friend like this.

‘Is it?’ Karina asked, blinking. ‘I don’t really know how things work in this country.’

‘You mustn’t pay him.’ Mum tutted.

‘I *can’t* pay him.’ Karina shook her head woefully. ‘But now he has said that I must leave. I have to find a new place to live, as quickly as possible.’

‘What?’ Mum considered this for a couple of seconds. Karina and I surreptitiously held our breath, willing her to reach the intended conclusion herself. ‘What are you going to do? Where will you go?’

‘I don’t know.’ Karina cranked things up a notch with a sniff and a wipe of one eye. ‘I’ve had a look as best I can, but I can’t find

anywhere close enough to work that's affordable. If I could find a nice person to share with, that would help, but I dread having to move in with a stranger. There are such unpleasant people about, anything could happen!

Mum sat up straighter, eyebrows furrowed in thought. *Come on, Mum, make the offer!*

'I could ask around at the Buttonhole, see if anyone's heard of anything? You never know.'

'Thank you.' Karina smiled weakly. 'I'm scared I will end up homeless if I don't find somewhere soon.'

'Oh, shush now, I'm sure it won't come to that.'

Okay. Time to steer this back on track...

'What about here?' I said, as if the idea had just come to me that very second.

'What?' Mum frowned.

'You and Karina get on so well. Maybe she could stay here for a while, at least until she's managed to sort something else out?'

'Oh my goodness, I couldn't possibly!' Karina exclaimed, shaking her head so hard her chin wobbled.

Mum sat back in her chair. 'It's a lovely idea, Olivia, but our tiny box room is full of things. It doesn't have a bed. I mean... obviously if it came to that or the streets... but for anything other than a night or two, we don't have the space...'

Right. Deep breath, Ollie, here we go...

'Actually. I have been meaning to talk to you about that.'

'About what?' Mum pressed one hand to her chest, eyes wary.

'I've been thinking that it's time I moved out, found my own place to live.'

She turned pale as the blood drained from her frozen face.

‘I’m starting my new job in a couple of weeks, and commuting from here would mean really long days.’

Mum cleared her throat. It sounded as though she was choking on her own panic. ‘Well, you didn’t think that was a problem when you accepted it.’

I took my time in answering. I knew that this was incredibly hard for her. I tried to understand, to be patient and kind, even as I resolved to be clear that this wasn’t negotiable.

‘I did consider it, actually. I decided that the best option would be to move out.’

‘And you didn’t think to mention this to me?’ The question was forced through stiff lips, the words hoarse.

‘I didn’t want to worry you until I was sure.’

‘Oh! So you’re *sure*?’ She kept patting and rubbing her chest, as though comforting a fractious baby. ‘Well. There’s not much point discussing it then, is there?’

In the next instant, her face collapsed, and she let out a long, all-too-familiar moan.

I don’t know how I managed it, but I simply looked straight at her and said, ‘No.’

Karina jerked her head towards me. I caught her gaze, and she gave the tiniest of nods.

Mum, taken completely aback, paused mid-chest-rub, her mouth drooping open.

‘You can have, once again, some conveniently timed chest pains. You can call an ambulance, and I will come with you if, instead of making the usual miraculous recovery, the paramedics decide you need to be admitted. I will do whatever is reasonable as a daughter, in the unlikely event that you turn out to be genuinely ill. But I am still moving out. I’m twenty-nine. You can’t keep me here forever.’

I took a deep breath. 'You can stay here, alone, which is a perfectly valid option if that's what you want. Or, you can offer a home to your good friend in urgent need of a room to rent. Either way, I'm moving out at the weekend.'

The only sounds were Mum's uneven breaths and the rumbling of a lawnmower in a nearby garden. A prickle of sweat ran down my back. This was the first time I had stood up to Mum like this. I had run headlong into uncharted territory, with no idea where it would lead.

'What do you say, my friend?' Karina spoke, her voice soft, eyes gentle. 'Team Trina, telling that evil whatshisname on *Coronation Street* what for, needles clacking, a packet of Jaffa Cakes to share?' Emboldened by Mum looking up, an ocean of pain and confusion in her eyes, Karina reached across and took her hand. 'Let your girl go and be a woman, Tina. She's going either way, but if she leaves without your blessing, you may lose her altogether.'

'I can't... I won't...' She lurched to her feet, fleeing into the house and clattering up the stairs to her bedroom, the door slamming behind her.

I called Aunty Linda while Karina cleared away the meal. It took a full three days of heart-wrenching conversations, tears and accusations, but we got there. I didn't have my mother's blessing, not by a long shot, but we had her name on a rental agreement for Karina, all important bills and accounts back in her name, and we only had to call the GP out once.

It was the hardest, most hellish three days since Dad had left. If it wasn't for the strong women who had my back – Steph, my aunt and Karina – I would have changed my mind a zillion times.

* * *

It didn't take long to pack up my empty life into a couple of suitcases and the boot of my car. Friday evening, Linda dropped off the bulk of Karina's things, and the following morning we switched the room over.

I'm sure that leaving home, saying goodbye to the woman who raised you is always an emotional occasion.

When I finally said goodbye through a bedroom door that had remained locked the whole time I'd been ferrying boxes down the stairs, the emotions included anger, guilt and more than a little relief, in amongst the stress and sadness.

'Are you absolutely sure about this?' I asked Karina, as she handed me a tissue to wipe my tears. 'It's not too late to change your mind.'

'She'll have to come out eventually.' Karina patted my arm. 'I'll let you know.'

'Give us a ring once you're settled.' My aunty pulled me into the giant hug that my mother should have given. 'Now, go and make those dreams of yours come true. And no looking back!'

I did look back. As I left the house. When I reached my car door. Once I'd backed out, I paused and pretended to be fiddling with my satnav for an achingly long minute.

When I finally knew she wasn't coming, I switched my gaze to the road ahead, turned up my Dream Life playlist and did my very best to keep on going.

It was Thursday before I had my big breakthrough. The week had been a hodgepodge of anxiety, guilt and unbridled joy that seemed to flip at the slightest thing. Sleeping alone was taking some getting used to – my new bed wasn't arriving until the weekend, so for now I was camping out on the sofa, and it was disconcertingly quiet away from the constant rumbling of the city. I wasn't afraid but I was alert. Being the sole person responsible for locking the doors, popping to get more milk or deciding what to do in the evening was a strange, new world. It reminded me of the bridesmaid dress I'd worn for Steph's wedding – I absolutely loved it, but at the same time it felt uncomfortable and far too sophisticated for me.

I'd sat on the kitchen doorstep to sip a black tea before leaving for work each morning, and ventured into the forest for a short walk every evening. My head buzzed with plans and ideas for the garden, the bedroom, my empty weekends, while at the same time the endless possibilities frequently threatened to overwhelm me. How did anyone make these kinds of decisions on their own?

On Monday morning, I had made the gut-twisting decision to block Mum's number. She'd started calling and messaging just

before midnight on Saturday, and it had been a relentless barrage since. Mostly disguised as motherly chat:

Just wondered if you know where the potato peeler is?

Or:

Good luck with your 1st day in the new job! Thinking of you xxx

A few were more blatant:

It's so empty here without you

I'm really struggling, Ollie, can you call me?

My chest is really bad today. I don't want you to worry, but just in case the will is in the bottom drawer of the dresser.

Karina had texted once each day, as agreed, and would continue to do so until things had settled. She said that Mum was weepy and withdrawn, but physically fit and well. She'd reluctantly agreed to teach another embroidery course, and Linda had taken her out for Sunday dinner.

Before I left, I had patiently explained to Mum that if she bombarded me with messages, I would block her number. She had demanded to know what 'bombarded' meant, so I had told her that more than a couple of text conversations and one call a day was excessive, at least while we were getting used to things. She'd mocked me for being a control freak, but I'd anticipated what was coming and didn't want to block her without warning.

Silencing the constant beeps was like ditching a forty-pound rucksack. With the security of knowing Karina would tell me if an emergency arose, for the first time in twenty years I could stop mothering my smothering mother, and pay some attention to me.

But like I said, the crunch point came on Thursday.

I'd been interviewing potential reading coaches for most of the day, using a hired room in the Nottingham Central Library. The regional manager, Alec, had been interviewing with me, and he'd waffled on so much that every interview had overrun. Once the final candidate had left, he'd then wanted to go over each one in detail, despite the fact that it was obvious which three would be best for my team. Before I could make up some excuse to leave, it was after five thirty.

'I'm so sorry, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk this all through with me, but I have to get on.' I was going to be massively late for dinner, and anxiety about needing to get home was crackling in my veins.

'Oh?' Alec sat back in his chair, as though settling himself in for a thorough discussion about why I needed to leave. 'Have you got plans?'

But before I could try to fudge some sort of explanation about how we always ate at six, it hit me.

I'd eaten dinner at six o'clock on the dot every night that week. I'd even *paused* the middle of a TV thriller, at the moment the main character was literally hanging off a cliff, because it was *dinner time*.

I was feeling stressed about being late to cook and eat a meal by myself, despite having nothing to do the rest of the evening, except yet more paperwork that could quite happily wait until the morning.

What was to stop me having dinner at seven? Or eight?

Or how about this wild suggestion – I could order a takeaway!

I could stay in town, and go to a restaurant *alone*. Without telling *anybody*.

I could do whatever I liked.

‘Hello, Ollie? Are you all right?’ Alec asked, waving a hand in front of my face.

‘Yes, thank you.’ I grabbed my bag and cardigan. ‘And no, I’ve got no plans whatsoever, so to be honest, I’m absolutely fantastic!’

I had dinner at six forty-five, because I was getting hungry. I ate a giant slice of coconut cake while the pasta boiled, because I felt like it, and I left my dirty plate in the living room all night, because I could, and no one was there to moan about it.

I was free.

I was free.

* * *

The following day, still simmering with possibilities, I met my first new reader for an hour-long introductory session in the Bigley Bottom library. ReadUp coaching was always held in public places, for safeguarding reasons, so I’d reserved us a table in the computer area.

I’d spoken to Trev on the phone, and recognised him immediately by how he nervously stepped into the library, eyeing the room as though it might detect an imposter. It wasn’t the books he needed to be wary of, but their fearsome guardian, Irene Jenkins, library manager at large.

She’d been initially snooty about the prospect of me meeting with ‘illiterates’ in her precious library. I’d pointed out that the whole purpose of a library was to encourage people to read, and she snapped back something about how *her* library was for those who

appreciated and respected literature; it wasn't a hang-out for school drop-outs. A quick chat with one of the directors for Notts libraries, who'd presented ReadUp with an award only the previous year, soon reminded her that this was not, in fact, *her* library but a public building, and we were welcome to further the literacy skills of local residents whenever the library was open.

'Ms Tennyson, I believe your *person* is here.' Irene Jenkins sniffed, glaring over the top of her bifocals.

In the hope of avoiding any interaction between Trev and Irene, I'd already rushed over to meet him, hoping my friendliest smile would deflect her waves of distaste at Trev's tatty tracksuit topped off with a bald head covered in a skull tattoo.

'Trev!' I chirped as he stiffly shook my hand. 'So great to meet you in person! I've got us a spot over here, where we can chat *without being disturbed*.' I gave Irene a firm smile, and she wrinkled her long nose to reassure me that she'd be keeping well away from the riff-raff.

We spent the next hour doing some simple assessments to find the best place to start. The vast majority of new readers found even contacting us a huge hurdle, and before I could help with anything else, I often had to help them overcome a lifetime of shame, fear and low-to-no self-esteem.

Trev's was a familiar story. I fetched us both a mug of over-stewed tea from the machine, and he tentatively began to describe how he'd fallen behind at school due to what he described as a 'mad' home-life. Once he'd missed the basics, there was never the chance to catch up, and he'd covered up being so 'stupid' by messing about and getting into trouble. He hung his head in shame when he confessed that he'd spent decades in and out of prison, and for a

long time he couldn't see any way to break the cycle, even if he'd wanted to.

'So, what's changed now, Trev?' I asked. 'I know it's not easy facing up to something like this, let alone asking for help. What pushed you to call our number?'

He ducked his head. 'Well, I know it's hard to believe, but I met someone.'

'Oh?'

'Yeah. Who'd a thought it at my age!' Trev was fifty-one, but he looked nearer to seventy. 'We met at the pub quiz. I can't write the answers down, but I know enough not to embarrass meself. Anyway, we got to talking, and I thought, *Bloody hell, Trev, she's a proper lady, this one, she deserves better than a deadbeat like you.* So, me brother gave me the number for this. I'll probably never see her again, but I want to be ready so next time I click with someone, I can at least send her a text without spelling mistakes.'

Which was such a lovely reason, I had to scoot back over to the hot drinks machine to hide my watery eyes.

* * *

Trev left once the hour was up, earnestly clutching his new workbook, and I started packing up my bag, becoming aware of Irene, sturdy shoes planted two feet apart, hands on hips, berating someone just out of sight in the adult fiction section.

'The library is closing in ten minutes; you must return your book now and be on your way.'

'Please let me stay for the ten minutes!' a child's voice replied, carrying a faint Liverpool twang. 'The Ringwraiths have found Frodo

and I have to know what happens! I'll just read for another eight minutes, then put it away. Six! Five, even!

'The library is not designed for *children*' – Irene shuddered as though the very thought disgusted her – 'to be loitering about, blocking people's way and preventing me from closing on time.'

'There's hardly anyone else here!'

I had a quick scan of the library. There was only the three of us, which wasn't surprising given the warmth of Irene's welcome.

She made a show of checking her watch. 'Nine minutes. Come along.'

'You can't do this!' the child begged. 'All I'm asking for is the chance to read three more pages. Otherwise I'll have to wait the whole weekend to find out what happens.'

Irene bristled. 'If you want to find out what happens then you must check the book out. That's how a library works.'

'Fine! Please can I check out this book?' The child sounded unnecessarily angry, given that this was surely a reasonable solution.

Irene clonked back to the reception desk. 'No, you may not.' She glared. 'That is an adult book, and as we've discussed many times before, you have a children's library card. Three minutes until the library is closing. Unless you want to have your *children's* library card confiscated, please return your book to the correct location on the shelf and leave the premises.'

'What about her?' The child, who I could now see was a girl, stomped out from behind the bookshelf and pointed at me. 'You aren't ordering *her* to leave. This library is completely ageist and discriminatory and anti-children!'

'I'm sure Ms Tennyson has no intention of abusing the library rules and regulations.'

The girl gave a defiant toss of her ponytail, slamming the copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring* on the counter, her library card quickly joining it. As she flounced out the door, she yelled, 'You can confiscate my stupid *children's card* all you want! I've already read every single book in the children's section – *twice!*'

It was the hair toss that caused me to recognise her. I made a quick decision, and pointed to the clock on the wall behind Irene. 'Your watch must be fast. That says five minutes until closing time.'

As she automatically turned to look, I swiped the library card from the counter, slipping it into my pocket. 'I'm going to check out a couple of books before I go.'

I went straight to the fiction section and hurriedly grabbed two novels. Ignoring Irene vibrating with suppressed rage, I swiped my card in the self-service machine and used it to check out the books, alongside the one that the girl had left behind. I gave a cheery wave as I left, doing my utmost not to flinch when she slammed the door behind me.

* * *

The bike propped up against the cottage wall explained why I'd not managed to catch up with my neighbour, despite hurrying through the May sunshine all the way back to Hatherstone Lane. I ignored the pull of an ice-cool drink in the shade of next-door's cherry tree, and knocked on next-door-but-one's door.

After a long wait, and another, firmer, couple of knocks, the door swung half an inch open and a suspicious eye peered through the gap.

'Hi!' I smiled brightly. 'I'm Ollie. I've just moved into End Cottage.'

The door closed a couple of millimetres.

I quickly lifted up the books and thrust them at the crack.

'I was in the library earlier. I thought you might like to borrow these.'

'It's against library regulations to lend out a book you've borrowed to someone else,' the girl replied, despite being unable to hide the quiver of hope in her voice.

'Well, I won't tell if you don't.' I lowered my eyebrows conspiratorially. 'I don't think that's an actual rule; I think Irene made it up along with most of the other ones.'

The door opened another centimetre, but not quite far enough to poke a hardback Tolkien through the gap.

'Trust me, I work in libraries, I know what I'm talking about.'

She grimaced. 'I don't want to make her mad. She might ban me again.'

I thought for a moment. 'Can you wait here for two minutes?'

The girl wrinkled her forehead, scanning the road behind me.

'How about I see you in the garden?'

She nodded, before closing the door.

In the end, it was nearly ten minutes before I stepped over the two rows of flower beds to the side of the garden where she waited, hovering just outside her back door. As I approached, I couldn't help noticing that her jeans revealed a good three inches of skinny ankle, and both her faded green T-shirt and mousy hair were in dire need of a wash.

'Here.' I offered her the three books now in my hands. 'These are my copies. The only rules about borrowing them is that you have to love them as much as I do.'

She hesitated, hands twitching. 'You can't lend me these.'

'Of course I can! I only checked the other ones out to annoy Irene.'

'You don't know me.' She looked at me sideways.

Right. Don't accept gifts from strangers.

'Okay. Well, we could have a drink and a piece of cake and discuss our favourite character so far, and then maybe you'll feel like you know me well enough?'

That hardly constituted a DBS check, but I did have one of those, and this was a literary emergency, after all.

The girl rolled her eyes, the corners of her mouth tweaking up in the suggestion of a smile. 'I'm not worried about that. I know how to be safe around adults. I mean, you don't know me.'

I rolled my eyes back at her. 'I know you're a book lover. As far as I'm concerned that makes you the best type of person, and I am willing to take the risk that you're trustworthy.'

She took another moment to consider, before finally accepting the books.

'I also know that your name is...' I paused while I pulled out the card and squinted at the name before holding it out to her. 'Diamanté Butterfly Brown. That's a pretty name.'

She grimaced. 'If you're a My Little Pony.'

'Um...'

'My actual name is Joan.'

'Oh, okay.'

'I'm changing it legally as soon as I'm sixteen.'

'Well, lovely to meet you, Joan. I'm Olivia Anne Tennyson, but my actual name is Ollie. Are you interested in that drink? I've got a packet of Magnums in the freezer.'

'Err...' Joan's gaze darted to me before fixing on the grass between us. 'That's... um...' She squeezed the books tighter to her chest and I realised what was causing her discomfort.

‘Of course, I’m being completely thoughtless!’ I made a shooining notion with my hands. ‘Get back to the Ringwraiths and Frodo!’

A few minutes later, I left a glass of lemonade and a Magnum beside her blanket before settling back on my own patch of the lawn with a brand new thriller.

* * *

Later that evening, once I’d eaten a chickpea salad (Mum hated chickpeas) and was doing some follow-up admin from Trev’s first session, there was a loud banging on my door.

I knew it wasn’t Steph, because she wouldn’t turn up without letting me know. A spike of anxiety lodged itself beneath my breastbone. Surely Mum hadn’t somehow found out where I lived?

Tiptoeing to the front door, I slowly eased it open, feeling a whoosh of relief when I saw someone much younger than Mum. The anxiety muscled its way back in again when, opening the door wider, I got a better view of the woman’s body language.

She stood there in cut-off jeans and a pink vest top, arms folded, flip-flop tapping the pavement as she chewed the side of her mouth.

‘Hello?’ I asked, immediately clearing my throat to try to clear the rasp.

She reached out one hand, yanking into view what turned out to be Joan. I noted the resemblance, then. This woman’s hair was several shades darker than Joan’s, but she had the same grey-green eyes, and a mouth slightly too big for her face. She was small and wiry and wound up like an angry wasp.

‘This one says you gave her some books,’ she snapped, in a much stronger accent than Joan’s.

'I said she *lent* me them,' Joan said through gritted teeth, her eyes on the ground.

'I thought it seemed a bit suspicious, a complete stranger giving three massive books like that to some kid.'

Oh crap.

Was she going to accuse me of something awful?

'Wouldn't be the first time she's nicked something, so I thought we'd best come and check if your interpretation of events matches hers.'

Oh! Okay...

'I'm not the type of mum who lets her child get away with that kind of behaviour.' Joan's mum folded her arms and glared at me. 'Just want to be clear so no accusations can be made at a later date.'

'No!' I said, loud enough to make Joan jump. 'No, I mean. She's right. I did lend her the books. I was working at the library and the manager, Irene Jenkins—'

Joan's mum sneered. 'That old bat! I might have known she'd have something to do with it.'

'Right. Yes, well, she wouldn't let Joan check out the library copies, so I lent her mine.'

The woman's eyes narrowed.

I swallowed hard, and pressed on regardless...

'I mean, I've been meaning to pop round and say hello since I moved in last weekend. I don't know anyone in Bigley yet – apart from Irene – and, well, I appreciate I should have asked you first. But they're amazing books, and Joan was right at one of the most exciting parts, where, well... have you read *The Lord of the Rings*?'

She jerked her chin. 'I've seen the films.'

'Right. Great! I love the films, too. Anyway, I hope that's okay?'

'She even checked out the library books too, just to wind up Irene,' Joan added.

Her mum raised one eyebrow. 'Okay. But for the record, my daughter's name is Diamanté Butterfly. Please don't forget that.'

Joan hunched her shoulders, mouth pursed angrily.

'Mine's Ollie,' I said, as the woman started to usher her back around.

'And hers is Annoying Dumbhead Liar,' Joan, or Diamanté, muttered, just loud enough for me to hear.

At that, her mum stopped dead, three steps from my front door. She dropped into a squat and looked her daughter right in the eye. I'd have probably wet my pants facing that expression from only a few inches away. 'What was that?'

Joan shuffled her scruffy trainers back and forth a couple of times. 'Sorry, Mum.'

When her mum didn't move, she opened her mouth and closed it a couple of times, before blurting, 'I like Ollie and she did something nice for me and then you told her I steal stuff and she has to call me my stupid old name.'

Her mum waited for a few seconds. 'Do you have anything else to say to anyone?'

Joan darted her eyes up towards mine for a microsecond. 'Sorry, Ollie.'

'That's better.' Her mum sighed. 'I'm sorry, too.'

She straightened up, nodding her head in my direction. 'Leanne. Thanks for lending the books. And forget what I said about her stealing stuff. That was... something different.'

'Of course.'

As they walked away, I gave myself a mental slap. I'd made a thousand judgements about this woman, badly drawn tattoos

scrawled across her arms and legs. A face with every soft angle chipped away. Eyes sharp and fierce. I did my best to ditch every ill-conceived one of them.

The next day, Saturday, my new bed arrived. Because I was still new to all this doing-what-I-want Dream Life, I had drawn up a carefully planned schedule for the day:

1. *Get up when I want*
2. *Read as much as I want*
3. *Eat what I want, when I want*
4. *Swap disgusting old bed for lovely new bed*
5. *Do some more of what I want*
6. *Go to sleep in lovely new bed*

This schedule was rudely interrupted before it even got started when I was woken up by more banging on my door. I stuck one hand out of the duvet and checked the time on my phone. Seven a.m.! On a Saturday! I would have buried my head under the covers and waited for whoever it was to go away, but then they started knocking on the living-room window.

Peering out with sleep-addled eyes, I saw to my dismay that I hadn't closed the curtains properly, and there was a man now gesturing at me through the gap.

Thankfully, I was at least wearing a T-shirt and pyjama shorts. I waved in acknowledgement, and reluctantly heaved myself up. By the time I'd shuffled the five steps into the corridor, undone the lock and opened the front door, the man – and his van – were disappearing over the crest of Hatherstone Lane. And there, propped up along the wall of my house where anyone could help themselves as they walked past, were the huge boxes containing the pieces of my oak bed frame and extra-thick new mattress.

I rubbed my face a few times and went to put the kettle on.

* * *

'No. I have a text *and* an email to confirm that delivery would be between twelve and two.'

I took another angry bite of bagel, while the person on the end of the phone waffled on about a blip in the system.

'I'm not denying the blip; I'm asking you what you're going to do about it. I paid extra for a specific delivery slot that didn't happen, and more importantly I now have a double bed frame and mattress dumped on the pavement, while the old bed I paid for your company to take away is still upstairs, in my bedroom.'

'Well, you should have asked them to take the old bed away,' she droned back, as if – *duh!* 'We had a blip on the system so they weren't informed about that.'

'I told you they left before I'd opened the door!'

'Well, I'm sorry, madam, but I'm not sure what you expect me to do about it.'

'I expect you...' I took a moment to swallow another mouthful while trying to calm down enough to speak instead of shriek. 'To

refund me the extra delivery money, and then send someone out to take my new bed upstairs and then remove the old bed, as paid for.'

'Certainly, madam. Let me check the system for you... One moment please... One moment... Yes, I've booked you a bed removal for the twenty-second of July.'

'What!? That's over two months away! I can't leave a bed and a mattress outside my front door for weeks on end. And even if I could drag them inside, my house is tiny; there's no space until the old bed is gone.'

'Well, drag the old bed outside, then.'

'Move an iron bed, single-handed, down the stairs and outside, where I have to leave it on the pavement until your company can be bothered to come and do the job I paid them to do today?'

'I'm sure you can ask a friend to help.'

'Really? For all you know I don't have any friends!'

I hung up, eyes smarting with frustration.

I did have friends. I had Steph and her family. Who were on holiday in Cornwall for the week. I had Karina, who had taken Mum to Matlock for the day. I had... Joan.

I waited until nine o'clock, not wanting to disturb anyone's weekend lie-in.

'Hello?' Joan answered the door eventually. She was already dressed in grey jersey shorts and the same T-shirt as the day before. She had *The Fellowship of the Ring* dangling from one hand, her finger propping open the page. 'Oh, hi, Ollie.'

'How's everyone getting on – still in Rivendell?'

Her face lit up. 'Under the Misty Mountains!'

We chatted for a few moments about the story, before I got to the point. 'Is your mum around? I've had a mess-up with my bed delivery and I need an extra pair of arms.'

Joan's expression went blank. 'She's at work.'

'Okay. When will she be back?'

Panic flickered through her eyes, like a fish darting through a riverbed. 'Not till this afternoon. And then she'll need to sleep. She gets really tired after working all day.'

'What does she do?' I tried to sound curious, not concerned.

'She's a cleaner. She does Hatherstone Hall weekday mornings, and then some houses in the afternoons but on Saturday she spends the whole day at the hall. She goes on her bike.'

'And then she sleeps? That doesn't sound like much fun.'

'She's not very well at the moment. That's why she has to sleep so much.'

'Is there anyone else here to look after you?'

Joan lifted her chin. 'I can look after myself.'

'I'm sure you can. But I'm on my own all day today, too. It's my first weekend living without my mum, so if you wanted to bring your book over, have some company, that would be fine.'

Joan pursed her lips. 'Maybe. I'll see how I get on.'

'Okay, great.' I turned to go, then stopped to add, 'I've also got far too much food for lunch, if you wanted to help me eat some. I'm not used to shopping for one person, either.'

Joan gave me one sharp nod, and closed the door.

I took another look at the giant packages and decided it was time to meet my other neighbour, the one sandwiched between Joan and Leanne and End Cottage.

If I wasn't so desperate I'd have given up waiting long before the front door finally creaked open. Was this how things worked in the countryside? You finished what you were doing, put the kettle on, fuffed about for a few more minutes and *then* got around to answering the door?

But when I saw who'd answered it, my impatience was instantly replaced with a mixture of guilt and sympathy. The man who now hunched a good few inches below me looked as though it had taken every last ounce of energy just to open the old door. He had no hair on his head, though a bristling beard covered his chin. Dappled legs poked out of baggy cargo shorts, and he wore a T-shirt that said, *With a body like this, who needs hair?*

'Yes?'

'Hi.' I smiled. I had spent a lot of time with older people in the Buttonhole, and knew that if you didn't speak as if they were deaf, senile or stupid, they generally appreciated it. 'I'm Ollie, I've moved in next door and thought I'd come and say hello. I hope I didn't disturb you?'

He looked me up and down. 'Well, you did.'

'Right. Sorry.' I waited for him to accept my apology, but from the look on his face I'd be waiting all day. 'And, um, you are...?'

'None of your business.' He took so long to slam the door that it took on the guise of slow-motion. I was so taken aback that by the time it finally clicked closed, I was still just standing there.

Great.

Across the road was an empty field. I could try the houses further down the lane, but after that welcome I wasn't feeling optimistic. I spent a wistful minute or two imagining how switching the beds would become a funny, romantic story were my Dream Man here to take the bulk of the weight on his broad shoulders, before slapping that pathetic fantasy to one side and determining to solve this problem alone.

Right. First things first... another cup of tea.

It was nearly eleven by the time I'd donned disposable gloves and had succeeded in wrestling the old mattress off the bed. In

between the odd retch caused by my face coming within inches of the worst combination of smells imaginable, I was eventually able to get it through the bedroom door. By the time I'd manhandled it to the top of the stairs, I was dripping with sweat, scarlet-cheeked and covered in grime and dust. However, the next bit was easy – one good shove and the mattress skidded down the stairs, momentum carrying it right out of the front door.

'Ow!' The loud yell was accompanied by an ominous clattering noise. I waited at the top of the stairs, my body frozen in a wince.

'What the hell?'

Tiptoeing down the stairs, I peered out the door to see a man untangling himself from a mountain bike, a process that was hindered by being on top of a saggy old mattress.

'I'm so sorry!' I gasped, trying to squash down the urge to laugh.

'It's bad enough having all these boxes obstructing the pavement. Next time, maybe check the coast is clear before shooting a large object out your front door,' the man replied as he finally jerked free from the bike.

'I was at the top of the stairs. I couldn't see that far.' I cringed. 'Barely anyone ever goes past the house, so I didn't think to call out a warning. At least you had a soft landing.'

'Well, that's true.' He looked up from where he now squatted, inspecting the bike, one side of his mouth tugging up into a reluctant smile. 'I only hope no one was filming it. Won't do much for my reputation, that pratfall going up on the Bigley Facebook page.'

I'd recognised him when he looked up, causing embarrassment to race up my chest and further flood my overheated cheeks. It was Mr May, from the forest. Steph would have a field day. He was wearing navy shorts and a white T-shirt. The shadow of a beard

highlighted his jawline, and, standing this close to him, I could see that his eyes were light brown, like honey.

Straightening up, with a satisfied pat of his bike saddle, he glanced at the pile of huge boxes. 'New bed?'

I nodded, acutely aware of my dirty and dishevelled state.

'Is there an old frame to follow this mattress?'

'Yeah.'

'Please tell me you've got a plan that doesn't further risk injury to a passing member of the public.'

'I'll... close the front door.'

He shook his head, smiling, before glancing at his watch. 'Come on, show me the way. Oh,' he held out one hand, 'I'm Sam.'

I tentatively stretched mine out to shake his, before we both saw the state of the glove and changed our minds. 'Ollie. I moved in last week.'

'Nice to meet you, Ollie. Welcome to Bigley Bottom.'

* * *

'I did have a better plan,' I explained, as we tried and repeatedly failed to angle the frame out of the bedroom door. 'I'd paid for the old bed to be taken away, and the new one delivered upstairs. The delivery man just dumped it and ran before I'd opened the front door. I tried asking the neighbours for a hand, but, well... they're either working, eleven years old or not feeling very helpful.'

His brow wrinkled in sympathy, producing the sudden need to clarify that I wasn't a sad, sorry loner with no one to help me move a bed. 'I mean, I could have asked a friend, or family, but it's a bit of a trek out here. I'm trying to prove I can manage by myself, so I thought I'd improvise. Be resourceful.'

‘Who are you trying to prove it to?’ Sam gave the frame one final yank and it scraped through the doorway, taking a strip of cracked paint with it. We began walking it down the tiny landing to the top of the stairs.

‘Oh, everyone, probably. My mum, and aunt and uncle. My best friend. The kids who snubbed me at school. The guy I was in love with who ended up marrying someone else because of my interfering mother. Myself, mostly.’ I squinted at him through the springs. ‘Sorry, that was an overly deep answer from someone you’ve just met.’

‘I asked,’ Sam grunted as he started lowering the bed down the first step. I focused my attention on the matter in hand, not his straining arm muscles. ‘And I can totally relate to needing to prove yourself. When I left the family law firm to become a forest ranger, my family were all waiting for me to come crawling back. Three years later, I still don’t think they’ve accepted that I’m happier doing something I actually enjoy.’

We bumped a few more steps down.

‘Oh, and we haven’t just met,’ Sam added, once he’d nearly reached the bottom. ‘I saw you out walking, a couple of weeks ago. Your friend asked for directions.’

That nearly caused me to drop the bed, which to be honest wouldn’t have made much difference. I’d been doing my best to take as much weight as I could, but it was more of a token gesture than genuine support. This kind man had remembered me from a random encounter! That was enough to nudge me dangerously close to a crush.

Which was a terrible idea, even if I hadn’t recently signed a No-Man Mandate. Even if a man this lovely was miraculously single, men like Sam weren’t interested in women like me. Time to shut that nonsense down before it had a chance to get started.

* * *

We made reasonably fast work of lugging the boxes upstairs. I assured Sam that I could assemble the pieces myself, and we then carried the old bed around the side of the cottage out of the way. I felt horribly awkward about the protocol for thanking him properly. Was it rude to offer some money, or worse not to? Fortunately, he graciously dismissed my fumbling mumbles about repaying the gesture with a grin and a wave of his hand.

‘Buy me a pint in the Merry Men sometime.’ He hopped back on his bike. ‘Even better, next time I need a hand moving a tree trunk, I know who to ask.’

I was still staring at his bike disappearing into the distance when a voice startled me out of my stupor.

‘Are you all right, Ollie?’ Joan asked. ‘You look like you need a cold drink.’

I turned to find her right behind me, hands gripping her backpack straps. Her pale face was stark against the midday sunshine, her knobby legs displaying several scabs and bruises.

‘I’ve got a better idea.’ I smiled, hoping to hide my growing concern. ‘How about lunch instead?’

* * *

I nipped upstairs for a much-needed shower while Joan settled herself on her blanket on my third of the lawn. I made a mental note to buy a couple of comfy garden chairs and a table sooner rather than later. The back step was fine to perch on for my morning cup of tea, but it was no good for a lunch designed to fill a hungry child. I made us huge Subway-style sandwiches crammed with cheese,

salami and salad, added a bowl of strawberries and thick wedges of carrot cake that I'd picked up in a local bakery. It was twice as much as I'd normally eat, but I'd been working hard that morning, and my urge to feed Joan up was almost primal.

From the way she devoured her food, I guessed my urge was right.

Once Joan had dabbed up every last speck of cake, I stood up, brushing the crumbs from my shorts. 'Well, I have a bed to build.'

'Do you need any help?' Joan asked, hopeful green eyes peeping through her fringe.

'Are you sure? Can the Fellowship do without you for a couple of hours?'

She jumped to her feet. 'Well if they can't, they don't stand a chance of making it to Mordor!'

'In that case, your help would be very much appreciated.' We started walking into the house, before I stopped. 'What if your mum comes home and finds you missing – won't she be worried? Had we better leave a note?'

'No. She'll just think I'm at the library or in the woods or something.'

I was no parenting expert, but while I supposed that kids had more freedom to roam free in the countryside, leaving an eleven-year-old alone all day seemed a bit much. I might talk to Steph about it next time I saw her.

'Let's get to work, then.'

Joan hurried up the stairs, waiting for me to point her to the main bedroom.

'*Ugh!*' Gripping her throat with both hands, she pretended to choke. 'This is *disgusting!*'

'Yeah.' I cringed all over again when I remembered how Sam had politely scanned the room before asking if I was sure I wanted the bed to go in there. Given the size of the smaller room, I had no choice. Tomorrow's job was stripping the wallpaper.

* * *

'Why Joan?' I asked, nearly three hours later, as we tightened the last of the screws. 'I mean, for your name. It's pretty unusual these days.'

'Which is one of the reasons,' she said, slightly breathless from twisting a reluctant screwdriver. 'Also, it's a name for someone strong, and brave, who does amazing feats instead of just reading stories about people doing them.'

'Joan of Arc?'

'Yep.' She sat back, checking if the headboard was tight enough not to wobble. 'A true heroine.'

'Well, it beats being named after an actress your dad fancied, which is where Olivia comes from.'

'I never met my dad.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.' I stopped twisting and looked at her, mortified.

'It's fine. Mum says he wasn't worth knowing.'

I nodded. 'My mum says the same about mine.'

'Did you meet him?'

'He left when I was six, and that's the last I heard from him, so he can't have been that great.'

'Did your mum have boyfriends after that?' Joan moved on to the next screw.

'No. Did yours?'

She nodded. 'Lots. Archer was the last one but he was horrible, so we packed our bags and snuck out when he was at the pub. We got on the first train, and then rode a bus to the middle of the forest where he'd never find us.'

'Wow. How old were you when that happened?'

'I was eight.'

'It must have been hard, moving here out of the blue. Where did you stay?'

Joan wrinkled her forehead, remembering. 'It was sort of scary and good at the same time. I was happy to get far away from Archer, but Mum was really worried. She cried a lot when she thought I was asleep. First we stayed in a caravan on the campsite, and then after they gave her a cleaning job, she got more jobs and we moved here.'

'And you like it here?' The screws all finished, we picked up the mattress and began manoeuvring it onto the frame.

She thought about that as she tugged and wiggled. 'I love the forest and having a garden. And no one shouting or smashing things up, of course. But I really miss the library. The librarians there let me stay as long as I wanted. Sometimes they brought me biscuits or fruit.'

'I can't imagine Irene Jenkins bringing you a biscuit.'

'You might drop a crumb on a book!' Joan said, putting on a snooty voice.

'Disgraceful!' I mimicked back, before with one final shove the mattress dropped into place. 'There! Who knew a *child* could build such a magnificent bed?'

'It's awesome!' Joan grinned, flopping onto it and spreading out her arms and legs. 'The biggest bed I've ever seen! It's a waste to have only one person sleeping here!'

I couldn't help laughing. 'Well, you never know. But for now, I'm very happy to sleep here without someone else bothering me with their snoring and duvet-hogging.'

For now.

The following day, I decided to get another item ticked off the Dream List. It had to be a simple one, as I was worn out from all the bed-building the day before, so I plumped for item two: a lazy Sunday morning.

This particular dream had been fashioned from adverts presenting an idyllic picture of the utterly-in-love couple spending their Sunday morning in bed drinking coffee or pottering about in the kitchen making a lovely breakfast, then reading the paper together in romantic, companionable silence. Mine was a budget version, in that until I'd decorated the bedroom my bed was still the sofa and the best I could come up with for breakfast was a fried egg sandwich. I also didn't have a newspaper, so had to settle for scanning articles online, which wasn't quite the same.

What was delightful, however, was not having Mum interrupting me every two minutes or criticising me for still being in my pyjamas at midday. She liked to clean on Sunday mornings, and that meant I had to either clean too, or suffer her stream of passive-aggressive snipes.

I wasn't sure what I enjoyed most – doing what I liked, or finally discovering what it was I liked to do. I did have to admit, as I spent a

blissful hour soaking in the bath, interruption-free, that Steph was right. It would be far too easy to slip from pleasing Mum to pleasing a man, if I jumped into a relationship without taking the time to figure out how to please myself first. If the rest of the Dream List was as good as this, my only regret was waiting so long to get started.

* * *

After adding a big tick next to 'lazy Sunday morning' on the Dream List (now typed out on A3 paper and pinned to my office notice board), I spent the rest of the day stripping wallpaper, blaring out music that Mum would have hated (basically, anything more recent than 2000 that wasn't Take That or Adele), and singing along at the top of my voice. Exhausted, but thrilled at having made some decent progress, I finally stopped once my stomach rumbles threatened to drown out the feel-good playlist, changed into clean pyjamas and went to find something to eat.

There was a note pushed through the letterbox:

This is a terrace. If you are going to spend all day caterwauling, at least learn how to do it in tune.

The note wasn't signed, but I didn't suppose that either Joan or Leanne would write such spindly scrawl – or use a fountain pen. Hot tears pressed against the backs of my eyes, and I slumped into a kitchen chair, hand trembling as it clutched the note. What had only minutes ago felt like glorious serenity now seemed horribly lonely and overwhelming. I felt like a stupid child playing at being grown-up, and for the first time in over a week, I desperately missed Mum.

I hurriedly unblocked her number and clicked to call. She answered after one ring.

‘Ollie!’ she barked. ‘I’ve been out of my mind with worry. I can’t believe you blocked your own mother!’

I swallowed back the lump in my throat and prepared to go with an ‘I’m fine!’ reply, but before I could speak she carried on.

‘Honestly, this week has been a *nightmare!* You wouldn’t understand, not having your own child, but it’s felt as though someone chopped my arm off and hid it somewhere. Cutting off all contact, refusing to tell me where you live or if you’re okay is downright cruel. Everyone agrees! After all I’ve done, you repay me like this. For all you know I’d taken ill again and was in hospital... or *dead.*’ She broke off into sobs.

‘It was one week, Mum. And Karina would have let me know if anything happened—’

Before I’d finished my sentence, she’d started up again. ‘You can’t imagine how lonely I am without you. I’ve barely seen a living soul all week. Felt so awful I couldn’t face leaving the house.’

‘Karina told me you went to the cinema on Wednesday, and saw Linda last Sunday.’

There was a long silence, punctuated by her sulky sniffles. ‘Well, it’s still been dreadful without you.’

‘I know it must be hard; I’m sorry you’ve struggled.’

‘Alicia Jones asked how you were getting on, and I couldn’t even reply. How do you think that felt? I was *humiliated.*’ She sniffed a couple more times. ‘Anyway, I have to go. Karina’s paused *Call The Midwife* and I need an early night after all this stress.’

She hung up.

‘Thanks, Mum,’ I muttered at the silent phone. ‘You’ve made me feel much better about living here by myself. Oh, and I’m doing really

well, in case Alicia's interested.'

I sent a note back to my delightful neighbour.

Thanks for the heads up. I will endeavour to hit the right notes next time. Any special requests? Ollie

* * *

Monday, I carried out a full day's induction for my new team of part-time reading coaches, followed by stripping off the remaining dregs of the bedroom wallpaper. This time, I kept my headphones in and my singing subdued. On Tuesday, I welcomed my second new reader to Bigley Bottom library.

In my initial chat with Yasmin, she told me she'd been granted asylum earlier in the year, and was now looking for work. She didn't volunteer any information about where she'd come from, or why, only that she'd previously worked as a dental hygienist, and was hoping to eventually gain the right qualifications to find a similar job here. She'd ended up in Bigley because a volunteer at the refugee support group she attended rented out flats in the village. Refusing to accept any benefits, she'd initially survived week to week by dog-walking, which then led to dog-sitting for a wealthy businessman who spent half the year travelling. Yasmin came across as a sombre woman. Hunched shoulders and haunted brown eyes suggested far deeper wounds than the burn scars covering the backs of her hands and forearms. However, when she talked about those dogs, her entire demeanour transformed.

'Half the month, I live on rice and vegetables. But when Mr Howard tells me to help myself to the fridge, I won't say no. Those dogs eat steak and organic chicken, so why shouldn't I?' She shook

her head, dark plait swaying. 'This is what my life has come to – I eat like a dog now!'

She burst into laughter so unexpected, I couldn't help joining in.

We established that while Yasmin's spoken English was competent, she needed help getting her reading and writing up to college level. Given the focus with which she tackled our first session, I predicted she'd be there in a couple of months.

As soon as she left, Irene stomped over.

'Good morning, Irene. How are you on this gorgeous day?'

Irene's nostrils flared in reply. I waited for her to get to the point.

'While I appreciate that your *lessons* require some verbal communication, may I remind you that this is a library, not a gossip club. If your clients can't adhere to appropriate standards of behaviour, you will have to find an alternative venue.'

'Excuse me?' I sat up, meeting her steely gaze with my own. 'What standards of behaviour are those?'

Her eyes flickered to the side before coming to rest about three inches to the right of my face. 'Raised voices. Outlandish laughter.' She pursed her lips in disgust. 'Attention-seeking behaviour.'

'You're objecting to my client laughing?'

'Well...' Irene flicked her hand. 'She was... distracting other library users.'

My jaw clenched. A handful of people had come into the library that morning. Most of them had smiled and said hello. One elderly couple had asked what we were studying, and we'd had a brief conversation about adult education classes. Another man had openly listened as Yasmin recounted how she taught Mr Howard's bichon frise to put his toys away, her smile lighting up the dingy atmosphere.

Yasmin and I had laughed maybe four times. On two occasions, other people had joined in. For a moment there, the library had been in severe danger of transforming into a community space where people connected with one another.

‘Did any of these users complain?’ I asked.

‘Not in so many words.’

‘Because I heard some comment on how lovely it was to see the library being used in such a positive way,’ I added. ‘Someone suggested we hold more classes in here. Perhaps restart the creative writing and the book groups. I’m sure I heard them making that suggestion to you.’

Irene blinked, her scowl briefly giving way to a flash of panic before she regained control of her features. ‘I beg your pardon?’ she spluttered. ‘This isn’t a community centre. We have strict policies about what goes on here. I’ve run this library for twenty-seven years. Who do you think you are, telling me how to do my job! It’s bad enough installing all this new-fangled technology. Self-service machines and drink dispensers! Expecting me to hold toddler story-time and school holiday nonsense, like I’m a children’s nanny, rather than a highly qualified librarian. If people like you had their way, we’d do away with the books altogether!’

And then I saw, beneath the bitterness and the bluster, the faint glimpse of a woman who had given her life to this library, and was feeling it pulled out from under her one inch at a time. Her animosity wasn’t because she thought I lowered the tone – quite the opposite: she saw me as part of the threat.

‘Would you like to join me for a coffee before I head off?’ I asked, resolving to convince her that I was not interested in being her enemy.

Irene jerked her head back. Her mouth twisted in a sneer. 'Certainly not.' She marched over to the help desk. 'The sign clearly states that refreshments are for library users only. If you're finished with your session, I must insist that you leave the hot drinks facilities for those legitimately entitled to them.'

I packed up and went home, refusing to allow a sour grouch to deflate the high of such a positive coaching session. Another note had been pushed through my letterbox:

My only request is that you clear the clutter off your lawn before tomorrow morning.

A friendly lot, this Bigley bunch.

I cleared the forgotten empty lemonade bottle and bin bags full of wallpaper strippings and went to search online for fence panels.

At eight o'clock on Wednesday morning, as I perched on the step for my morning tea, it took a moment to realise what was different. The lawn had been mowed into perfectly aligned stripes. The weeds that grew in the cracks between the paving slabs by the back door had disappeared. I wandered in my bare feet to where my section of garden met the far hedge. The windows in my neighbour's cottage were shrouded with Venetian blinds, but I offered a huge smile and a wave, just in case.

* * *

I spent most of that day on the phone, contacting local agencies to tell them about the new service and following it up with emails and information packs. In the afternoon I baked a batch of sticky toffee muffins, placing one carefully inside a gift bag, with a note saying:

Thanks for tidying up the garden! I'm happy to mow next time, if you don't mind me using your mower.

I placed it on the doorstep of Middle Cottage, knocked firmly on the door and scuttled back home.

An hour later, the doorbell rang. It was Joan, holding up the gift bag. 'This was outside your door.'

'Oh, right.' I peeked inside – the muffin still sat there. A line had been added to the bottom of my note:

Wheat-intolerant. And I do mind.

'Have you met the man in Middle Cottage?' I asked as we walked through to the kitchen.

'Ebenezer?'

'Is that his name?'

Joan shrugged. 'He looks like it should be.'

I took a bottle of still lemonade out of the fridge and poured us each a glass. 'So you don't know him?'

'He does a lot of gardening, but it's always in secret when nobody sees. And sometimes he puts a letter through the door asking us to stop shouting or turn the TV down.' She took a long gulp of her drink. 'I've seen him going to the shops sometimes. He wears funny T-shirts but he doesn't seem very friendly.'

'Hmm.' I offered her the muffin from the bag, which appeared untouched. 'I'm thinking that maybe we can win him round.'

We chatted a bit more about what Joan had been up to at school. She told me that she had a couple of good friends, but they lived on the other side of the village, and spent their free time at music lessons, swimming and gymnastics.

'Is your mum still at work?' I asked, noticing that it was nearly six.

'She gets home late on Wednesdays because she cleans at a farm and it's a long way back.'

'Does she walk?'

Joan nodded. 'She used to cycle but now she's poorly she walks instead.'

'Right.' I debated for a moment whether to ask... 'How is she poorly, if you don't mind me asking?'

'Well.' Joan sighed. 'First it was a bad cold, and then it turned into the flu. Now it mostly makes her really, really tired and sometimes sick, and she gets headaches. She doesn't feel hungry, either.' She stopped, blinking hard as she took another deep breath.

'That sounds awful. I hope she's been to the doctor.'

Joan simply shrugged, refusing to meet my eye. Taking the hint, I moved over to the fridge.

'Are you going to keep me company for tea, then? We could do... let me see... how about tacos?'

'What-os?'

I handed her a packet from the cupboard.

'I've never had them before.'

'Neither have I.'

'Um... they look a bit dry.'

'That's because we haven't stuffed them yet.'

'What do we stuff them with?'

I grinned at her. 'Whatever we want!'

I sent Joan home around seven, with a plastic box full of 'leftovers', conveniently leftover due to me making enough for at least five people, as well as half a dozen muffins. I then switched into leggings and trainers and took advantage of the late evening

sunshine to explore some more of the enchanted forest behind my hedge.

The park officially closed at eight this time of year, and it already appeared deserted. I might have felt nervous, a woman walking alone in the woods, but the air was sweet with the promise of summer, the butterflies were dancing with the wildflowers and the birds' evensong buoyed my spirits. I rambled for a good hour, in and out of clusters of bright green deciduous trees, before weaving along tiny dirt footpaths through the darker pines. Every few minutes I came upon a clearing, or a stream, or the crest of a hill with a view across the fields beyond the forest. I felt drenched in beauty, and surrounded by wondrous life in all its fullness, and had to keep stopping just to soak it up and breathe it in.

I would have missed all of this, if I'd listened to the guilt and the fear. Spent my evenings watching other people out there enjoying the world. Interesting people. With lives and dreams and minds of their own.

And now I was one of them.

My final treat came about half a mile from home, when I broke out of a particularly overgrown path into a clearing. The last rays of the day bathed the oak trees in soft gold, and a blackbird pecked amongst the scrubby grass. The air was utterly still, as if the trees were holding their breath. And then, a flicker of movement opposite me, and I saw her: the dappled coat and twitching ears of a deer, in the split second before she turned and slipped into the shadows.

I felt a fleeting pang of regret that I had no one to share this with, before shaking my head at the concept that you have to share something in order to fully appreciate it. I'd experienced a moment of magic, and that was something to treasure.

* * *

I was making a mug of herbal tea the following night when I heard a *THUD* outside the kitchen window. Grabbing my frying pan from the draining board, I zipped up my hoodie and slowly, slowly crept over to the door.

More scuffles accompanied frantic whispering loud enough to be heard through a pane of glass.

Wondering if Ebenezer might be up to more secret odd-jobs, I slowly pulled back the bolt, unlocked the door and then whipped it open.

'Oh!' a familiar voice cried out, accompanied by a louder thump as Joan toppled back into my overturned wheelie bin, landing in the mush spilling from a split bin bag.

'What are you doing?' I asked, unable to hide my shock. I'd suspected that Joan and Leanne were struggling, but resorting to pawing through my rubbish was horrendous.

'I was... looking for something,' she said, breathless with panic. 'I dropped it earlier and thought it might have fallen in your bin.'

'Joan.' I moved closer, offering a hand to help her up. 'Are you looking for food?'

Eyes downcast, she nodded, miserably.

'Does your mum know?'

A slow, sorry shake.

I squatted down to look at her properly, still holding on to her hand. 'Have you run out of food?'

A scrabbling sound interrupted us from behind the bin, immediately followed by a high-pitched whine. Joan's eyes grew round with alarm, darting to one side before she resumed her forlorn expression.

‘What’s that?’

‘What’s what?’ This girl was no actor, that’s for sure.

I dropped her hand and took a tentative step towards the bin, lurching forwards and banging it with the pan a couple of times before jerking back again.

‘STOP!’ Joan cried. ‘You’ll scare him!’

‘Scare who?’ I folded my arms as she shuffled and fidgeted and decided whether or not she could trust me.

‘Nesbit,’ she finally muttered.

‘And who – or should I say what – is Nesbit?’

Turning around, she bent down and reached behind the bin, moving back to reveal what appeared, in the darkness, to be a bedraggled gremlin. The gremlin tilted his head, cocked one ear, and gave a soft whuffle, followed by another desolate whimper.

My heart dissolved right then and there.

‘Okay, so why are you and Nesbit knocking over my bin in the middle of the night?’

‘He’s hungry. And Mum would flip out if she knew I’d let him in the house. He’s trying his best but he weed on my bed and she thought it was me and went mad and if she knew Nesbit had done it she’d never say I could keep him so I’m just keeping him a secret until he learns to go in the garden and I save up enough money to buy his food and then she might let him stay.’

‘Joan, stop.’ I spoke softly. ‘Take a breath. No, even better, let’s go inside.’

‘Can...?’

I sighed. ‘Yes, that thing can come in, too. We’ll stay in the kitchen, though. I don’t want a wee on my sofa.’

In the glow of my fancy kitchen lights, it became clearer that Nesbit was, in fact, some sort of dog. I filled a plastic tub with water,

but he wasn't interested. When I opened a tin of tuna he immediately started whining again, unable to restrain himself once I'd tipped the contents onto a plate and placed it on the floor.

'You'd better fill me in. And quickly, so you can get back to bed before your mum finds it empty and panics. Where did you get a dog?'

'I found him in the woods, earlier on.' Joan's eyes filled with tears. 'There was a plastic bag and I saw it squiggling about and when I opened it up, he was there.' She swiped at the tear trickling down her face. 'Someone tried to kill him, and not even in a kind way. He was shaking and crying and it's not his fault if he's only small and that nasty owner never taught him how to wee and poo outside.'

By now, Nesbit had wolfed down every last speck of the fish. He trotted back to Joan and waited for her to scoop him up again.

'You know he may well have fleas – or worse.'

Joan buried her head in his fur. 'That's not his fault, either!'

'No, but I think Nesbit needs a level of care and attention that you can't give him right now. He needs to see a vet, for starters. He might be microchipped, so we can find out his proper owner.'

'No!' Joan looked up in horror. 'He can't go back to them! They tried to kill him!'

'Somebody tried to kill him. But what if he was stolen, and his owner is heartbroken, wondering where he is?'

Joan shook her head, squeezing Nesbit tighter.

'How about this: in the morning, I'll take him to the vet and see what he says. In a village this size, he should recognise the dog if he belongs to someone local. We can sort out his fur and whatever else he needs, and then decide what to do next. I think there's a very strong possibility that you're right, and Nesbit needs a new owner, but we need to check. Otherwise it's stealing. And if you are going to

keep him, you need to think about all the things he's going to need, like a collar and lead, and a bed.'

'He can sleep on my bed.' Joan sniffed.

'Maybe. But I don't think he can live off bin scraps. It's not safe for you or him.'

She pressed her head back into his fur, shoulders juddering.

I took a deep breath, as item nine on the Dream List elbowed its way into my head.

'How about he stays here? For tonight, until we see what the vet says. And while we make a proper effort to try to find his owners, just in case he was stolen or lost. Then we can talk to your mum.'

Joan sat up, her tear-streaked face glowing. 'Are you sure? Do you promise?'

I nodded, rolling my eyes while secretly delighted.

'Now, get yourself back home to bed while I clear up the mess outside and find something for this one to sleep on.'

I made a cosy bed for Nesbit on the kitchen floor out of an old pillow and a blanket. He came to just below my knee, but it was impossible to tell what breed he was beneath the tangled mat of chocolate fur.

'Right, time to get some sleep, boy,' I said. 'It might be a busy day tomorrow.'

Nesbit didn't agree. After half an hour of plaintive cries and scratches at the kitchen door, I gave up and moved his bed into the living room. Plopping him back onto the blanket, I turned to get under my duvet and found him already stretched out across my pillow.

'No!' I scolded, plonking him back on his bed. 'Bed!'

In the end, we agreed to compromise. I eventually drifted off to soft, snuffly snores emanating from the furry ball curled up on my feet.

Getting woken up just before six by a stinky, mangy dog licking your face is as disgusting as it sounds. Once I'd recovered my senses enough to push him away and sit up, he gave me another wet nose-nudge for good measure, then hopped off the sofa.

'Okay, okay. Are you hungry again?' I yawned, looking for my phone to check the time. I flipped back the covers and swung my legs onto the wooden floor. Straight into a warm, yellow puddle.

Nesbit grinned up at me, pink tongue lolling out the side of his mouth.

'I don't know about you, but I need a coffee.'

* * *

By the time the vet opened at eight, we'd shared a companionable breakfast of scrambled eggs, cleaned another puddle and he'd thankfully managed a poop on the lawn. Joan found us in the garden at seven thirty, and enthusiastically helped give Nesbit a bath.

Six sopping wet towels, a bathroom sprayed ceiling to skirting board in muddy water and a change of clothes later, Nesbit found

time to wee one more time on the floor before Joan took him outside to try to teach him some manners.

I found her there a few minutes later. 'The vet said to walk him down in about twenty minutes.' Bigley Vets' Surgery was located in the middle of the tiny shopping precinct, in between the bakery and the chemist, so a lead would be essential. I cobbled something together out of a fabric belt, tucked a couple of plastic bags in my pocket, and off we went, Joan letting Nesbit drag her down the road as far as the turning towards the primary school.

'Promise you won't let him go back to that murderer!' she begged, before finally handing me the lead. 'Or back to a nice owner who lost him, without me saying goodbye first!'

Promises assured, Nesbit and I went to find out what would happen next.

* * *

By the time Joan came bursting into the back garden at three forty-five demanding answers, I was able to provide nearly all of them. To her overdramatic relief, Nesbit wasn't microchipped and there'd been no reports of missing cocker spaniel puppies. He was probably around five months old, and it said a lot about his background that he wasn't yet housetrained and he was tiny for a male spaniel. The vet had treated him for fleas, ticks and worms, sorted vaccinations and prescribed some stinky lotion for a skin condition that I didn't want to know the details of, along with precautionary antibiotics.

I'd printed off a poster to go on the vet's notice-board, and shared it on the local pet lost and found social media pages, but the vet was fairly confident that no one would be coming forward to claim him.

‘He seems healthy apart from the flaky skin,’ I said, placing two cold drinks and a plate of flapjacks on my newly purchased garden table, safely out of reach of bad-mannered puppies.

‘You got him a collar!’ She squealed in delight, lifting him onto her lap. ‘With your address on! Does that mean we’re keeping him?’

I couldn’t help sharing in her glee. ‘For now. It’s illegal not to have a dog tag, and I thought my phone number was best. He’s chipped now, with my details on the system. If your mum agrees to let him move in with you, we can swap it to hers.’

Joan nodded, enthusiastically rubbing Nesbit’s tummy.

‘I’ve also got him a lead, dog food, bowls and some toys to hopefully stop him chewing the entire contents of my house.’

‘What about a bed?’

‘Yep.’

I had a feeling that the bed was the biggest waste of thirty pounds I’d ever spent, but you never knew – if I was keeping this dog then I needed to establish who was boss.

‘Oh, and I got these.’ I handed her a couple of books on owning a dog. ‘Essential reading if we’re going to get Nesbit properly trained up.’ I’d had more than a few pointed glances as we’d walked home, Nesbit continually darting into the road, tangling himself up in the lead and lunging at every living creature we passed, be it human, canine, a huge ginger tom cat or a tiny snail. I was clueless when it came to pets, and with Nesbit it was clear I’d taken on no easy challenge.

‘We should do puppy classes,’ Joan said, flicking through the book. ‘I’ll teach him how to fetch and roll over.’

‘Sounds great, but you might want to teach him to respect other people’s property first.’

As if on cue, he wriggled out of her grasp, leapt at her shoelaces and started tugging them with his tiny teeth.

‘This is the best thing that’s ever happened to me,’ Joan declared. ‘Even better than when we ran away, or meeting you at the library.’

‘Oh, so I’m second to a stray furball now, am I?’

Joan looked at me out of the corner of one eye. ‘Well, duh!’

I sat at my lovely garden table catching up on emails while Joan cavorted about in the sunshine, distracting Nesbit from the holes in the hedge, the niggles about Leanne, Mum and Irene Jenkins all safely tucked in my mental in-tray for another day. For a couple of hours, this felt pretty darn close to the life I’d been dreaming about for so long.

By the time I went back inside to throw together some home-made turkey burgers, there was another note pushed through my door:

Please ensure all dog mess is removed from the lawn and disposed of.

Any chunterings about the rude presumption that I might not clear up after my dog dissolved when I got up the next morning and found a chicken-wire fence had been installed around the entire border of the garden, thwarting any doggy escapes.

* * *

Steph and Drew were back from their holiday and came straight over to have a nosy at how I was getting on. They brought paint brushes and rollers, God bless them, and Nicky arrived proudly brandishing

the new toolbox that his brothers had given him as a flat-warming present.

‘Got any jobs need doing, Ollie, then I’m your man!’ he announced, eagerly glancing around in case anything presented itself.

‘Well, now that you mention it...’

‘Um, kettle on first, if you don’t mind,’ Steph interrupted, before getting nearly bowled over by a fluffy whirlwind. ‘What is *that*?’

‘You got a dog?’ Nicky cried, pushing past his sister to follow Nesbit back into the garden.

‘You got a *dog*?’ Steph echoed, eyebrows raised in surprise.

‘Dream List number nine.’ I shrugged.

‘Well, yeah, but I’d have thought items one to eight might take priority. Like, getting your house sorted so you can sleep in an actual bed, and work in your home office.’

‘Those things aren’t on the list,’ I replied airily. ‘And I didn’t plan to get a dog. If anything, he found me. I’ll fill you in while I make us a drink.’

‘Is this a sticker chart?’ she asked a few moments later, nose wrinkled in disbelief as she stood staring at the fridge. ‘For the *dog*? Blue sticker for a wee, red for a poo? Ollie, I’m not sure living alone is working out for you.’

I shrugged, laughing. ‘It’s for me, really. Nesbit’s accidents were driving me mad, so I thought a sticker chart might help me keep track of progress and feel less stressed about it.’

‘What do you get when he makes a full day without an accident? A Bonio?’

‘He gets a Bonio. I’ll decide what I get once I know how long it took. Now, stop laughing at me and tell me about your holiday.’

We spent the rest of the day painting the bedroom in a pale green while Drew and Nicky repaired the cupboard doors and then ripped up the carpet, sanding the floorboards before painting them a fresh white. Joan appeared shortly after lunchtime, and she joined in with the painting too. After an early morning walk in the woods followed by the excitement of meeting new people, Nesbit was mostly happy to watch from the dog crate I'd bought so that I could leave him home alone without risking him gnawing a tunnel to Ebenezer's house.

With Steph's summer playlist on at a neighbourly volume, the windows open to allow the paint smell out and the country air in, a picnic lunch and a giant coffee cake for afternoon tea, I'm not sure it could have been any better had my friends been replaced by a Dream Man.

Did I think about Mum? Yes. Often. Karina had decreased her texts to every other day, and while I knew that Mum was starting to cope without me, this was the longest I'd ever gone without talking to the person closest to me. I found myself wondering what she'd think of the paint colour I'd picked, or wanting to let her know how my promotion was going, to laugh about Irene Jenkins. I knew she'd be nonplussed about me having a dog, and I found myself having imaginary conversations with her in my head, trying to justify this new life I was leading, in some vain attempt to win her approval.

During the week, it was easier to ignore that part of my life, to shut it away and focus on the million other, nicer things I had to think about. But my friends being here was a reminder that I was Olivia Tennyson, with a history and an identity outside of End Cottage and Bigley library. I asked myself a hundred times that day whether it was time to see her, or to at least try another phone call. I asked Steph, once, and the force of her reaction was enough to ensure I

didn't ask again. But now I was moving into my beautiful new bedroom, it needed curtains and bedding. Before long, I would make a trip to the Buttonhole to use their sewing machine. And before then, I would have to decide whether or not to ask Mum to join me.

* * *

Once Steph and Drew had taken a flagging Nicky home via the promised McDonald's drive-through, Joan and I finished off the last of the picnic and decided to take Nesbit on an evening walk, with the hope of increasing the likelihood of earning a red sticker.

'Just a short one,' I instructed her, clipping on his new lead. 'We'll do the loop along the edge of the forest, round the clearing with the picnic benches and then back. Puppies this age can't manage a long walk yet.'

But Nesbit didn't agree. After fifteen minutes of joyful investigating, at the point we were turning for home, he froze, head lifted, nose twitching. As Joan gave a tug on his lead to pull him around, he suddenly lunged forwards in the opposite direction, yanking the lead out of her hand. Before we had time to react, he'd disappeared into the undergrowth.

I said a word that you aren't supposed to say in front of eleven-year-olds, before racing after him. Joan plunged through the bushes, but that was going to be impossible at my size, so I ran around, down another footpath that would hopefully meet him somewhere on the other side.

'He's gone that way!' Joan panted when we reunited a minute later. 'Quickly!'

Huffing, puffing, leaping over fallen branches and launching ourselves past overgrown brambles, we blundered after him for what

felt like forever, but was in actuality about half a mile. Every so often we'd spot him in the distance, stopping to sniff the air before he scampered off again.

And then we saw the focus of his mission. Up ahead, Nesbit wiggled through a slat in a wooden fence, into the most stunning of settings – a wide, open field with a brook burbling along one boundary, in the centre of which was the kind of house that put my Dream Cottage firmly in its place.

While not huge, it was like something out of *Grand Designs* – a wall of windows that spanned two storeys, a wide wooden porch beneath a steel and glass balcony.

One of these super-modern bi-folding glass doors was open, and without pausing in his stride, we watched, horrified, as Nesbit sprinted up the solid porch steps and straight inside the house, leaving a trail of muddy footprints behind him.

Joan looked at me, eyes wide, mouth open, as if to say, *You're the adult here – do something!* Horribly aware that she was right, the only thing I could think of to do was follow him. I clambered over the fence, pointlessly calling the name he hadn't figured out was his yet, hurried across the lawn and into a stranger's kitchen.

Oh my. The kitchen was as stunning as the outside of the house. A huge island took up one half of the room. Behind it was a wall with a smaller window, a Smeg fridge and open shelving. The other half contained a magnificent wooden table and chairs. The table was set with numerous places, and the centre space was filled with bowls of salad, bread and other food all covered in cling film.

And there, underneath the table, was a puppy wagging his tail in ecstasy, jaws firmly clamped around an enormous roast chicken.

To make things worse, on the other side of the kitchen, sitting politely on a dog bed, no crate necessary, were two familiar-looking

collies.

Crap.

At that point, a thirty-something man in a shirt and smart trousers walked in holding a wine glass.

‘Hello, is someone there?’ he called out, before spotting me, frozen in agony just inside the doors.

He instantly frowned, which was understandable. ‘Can I help you?’

Crap crappity CRAP!

‘Um... my dog...’ My voice trailed away into a whisper.

The frown deepened.

There was nothing to be done but step further into the house, get on my hands and knees and scabble under the table to grab hold of the worst dog in the world and drag him out of there.

Nesbit, of course, disagreed. He’d hunted down a treasure beyond his wildest dreams, and he wasn’t about to surrender it without a fight.

As I crawled in, he backed out, dragging the poor chicken with him. After a couple of feet, the leg he was holding broke off from the rest of the bird, and he turned and fled.

Further into the house.

The man yelled, ‘What the hell?’ and was calling for back-up before I could think about extricating myself from underneath the table.

‘Some woman’s dog just ran upstairs with our dinner!’ the man barked.

‘What?’ There was a chorus of exclamations and animated questions. I contemplating remaining underneath the table until everyone had gone away, but then one of the collies wandered over and gave a soft growl.

There was nothing else for it. I scrambled through to the other side and straightened up, clutching the remains of the chicken. Here I came face to face with a gaggle of adults and children staring at me from the kitchen doorway. I was even more embarrassed to see that one of them was Sam.

‘I’m so sorry!’ I managed to squeak. ‘I’ve only had him since yesterday. My eleven-year-old neighbour found him in a plastic bag in the forest and I said I’d look after him for her.’

An older man in a suit glared at Sam. ‘What the hell is she doing in your house?’

‘Um... perhaps it’s best if I get him back, and then I can explain...’ I waved in the general direction of the doorway.

They looked at me, a mixture of confused alarm, outrage and one or two secretive smirks.

‘Where is he?’ Sam asked, face serious but thankfully not angry.

‘He’s... gone through there.’ I winced. ‘I think I heard him go upstairs.’

At least three of the children instantly pushed through the adults to find him, Sam straight on their heels. I took a couple of tentative steps to follow them, but the man who’d initially found me in the kitchen moved to block my way. ‘I don’t think so!’ He looked me up and down. ‘You can wait here.’

I glanced at my dishevelled jeans and top, covered in smears of dirt and bits of undergrowth. Reaching up to my hair, a tentative hand came away clutching a handful of twigs and a dead spider. I was sweaty from the chase, and burning with shame. When Joan appeared a moment later, her T-shirt sporting a giant rip, mud encrusting one cheek and wearing only one trainer, I didn’t suppose it helped my credibility.

'Hey,' I whispered, holding out a hand. She crept in and took it, eyes round with questions.

'He ran upstairs, so some of the people here have gone to fetch him,' I murmured. 'It's okay, one of them is Sam, who helped me move the bed.'

She nodded, face pinched with worry.

After an excruciating couple of minutes, where the only sound was various people huffing in indignation, Sam and the children returned, Nesbit firmly grasped in Sam's hands. The collies hadn't moved since he left the room.

'Here we go.' He handed me a very contented-looking dog. 'I'll need to change some bedding, but apart from that, no harm done.'

'No harm done!' Sam's dad retorted. 'That organic chicken cost your mother a fortune. Not to mention I'm bloody hungry. This woman's ruined Tom's birthday dinner! I said if we held it here it'd end in disaster! Bloody typical, Sam, well done.'

'Darling, it's fine.' An older woman, who I assumed was his wife, placed a soothing hand on his arm. 'We can rustle up something else. Look at all these gorgeous side dishes. If the worst comes to the worst, some of us can run to the shops.'

'Well, it's not really fine,' a third man interjected. He looked remarkably similar to Man Number One, other than the colour of his linen shirt. 'Who knows which of these bowls that mutt slobbered on. And why should the kids have to wait while someone drives to that poky supermarket in Bigley and picks up whatever they've got leftover on a Saturday night? You know I don't eat meat that's not high welfare. I'd rather go home and make something myself.'

Joan shrank closer into my side.

'Um. I have some organic mince I could bring over, if that's any help?' I ventured.

'Um, why are you still here?' Sam's dad snapped.

'Dad,' Sam said, moving to stand in front of me. *'Thanks, Ollie, but we'll sort it. It was stupid of me to leave the food unattended with the doors open. Anything could have snuck in and helped itself.'*

'Too bloody right!' his dad scoffed.

'Oh for goodness' sake, don't be making excuses for her!' the first man said. *'You should be able to leave your kitchen for five minutes without risk of a mongrel stealing your meal.'*

'Nesbit's not a mongrel, he's a cocker spaniel!' Joan blurted.

'It's unfathomable why people who can't control their dogs don't keep them on a lead,' one of the other women added, ignoring Joan. *'If he'd got in with the livestock, we're legally entitled to have shot him.'*

'If there's an animal trespassing in your home, I'm pretty sure you're entitled to shoot them.'

'Perhaps we could have roast dog to replace the chicken,' an older teenager droned, not bothering to look up from her phone.

It was definitely time to leave.

'Again, I am so sincerely sorry,' I garbled, backing out onto the porch, still carrying Nesbit. *'He was on a lead, but took us by surprise and escaped our grip. If there's anything I can do, anything at all, please just say. I'm a pretty good cook... or I could do the washing up... once I've taken Joan and Nesbit home.'*

'For goodness' sake, just go!' Sam's dad roared.

We didn't need telling again.

By the time we'd found our way back home, the air was cool and twilight hung over the treetops. Nesbit happily scampered through the back gate and over to my door, waiting to be let in.

'Will your mum be worried?' I asked Joan, pausing to say goodnight.

'Nah. I messaged her that I'd broken into a strange man's house in the middle of the woods, stolen his chicken and gatecrashed a birthday party, so not to expect me home until late.'

I blew out a long sigh.

'Too soon for jokes?'

'Waaaaay too soon. Try me again after I've spent the night replaying the horror over and over a squillion times, and failing to sleep a wink due to drowning in my own shame.'

'It was just a chicken!'

'Yeah.'

It was just me, trying to survive out here in the big wide world alone, handling adult responsibilities and navigating each day without starting wars with librarians, annoying my neighbours or ruining birthday parties.

Sunday, I left the Dream List well alone.

Thanks to now being a dog owner, I couldn't, however, spend the day hiding under my duvet as hoped. Nesbit allowed me the luxury of a seven a.m. Sunday lie-in before sniffing me awake. A strong coffee, a red and blue sticker and a very cute gambol around the garden later, I was ready to start working on my atonement. I spent the latter half of the morning in the farm shop at Hatherstone Hall, where Leanne worked on Saturdays, and most of the afternoon chopping, mixing, baking and roasting.

I then showered and changed into my most respectable-yet-flattering summer dress, because despite the No-Man Mandate, I still couldn't help wanting Sam to think well of me. I twisted my red hair into a bun and did my best to apply some natural-look make-up. I then spent quite a while online trying to figure out how to get to Sam's house via car. Once I was reasonably convinced I'd sussed it, I loaded up and went to see if I could earn my redemption.

Only a handful of wrong turns later, I reached the end of a single-lane track, opened a wide wooden gate and pulled up onto a circular gravel driveway on the opposite side of Sam's house to where I'd approached from the day before.

The front of the house was equally as stunning as the back. The windows were smaller, but there was an impressive set of wooden steps leading up to a double-wide front door, an extensive vegetable plot on one side and what appeared to be a workshop and log store on the other.

The overall impression was tranquil, organised, nature-friendly living. It looked amazing.

As I approached the house, lugging a cool bag crammed with foil cartons, there was a soft woof behind me, and I turned to see the collies sitting calmly on the gravel by the workshop. A couple of seconds later, Sam emerged from its open roll-top door, wiping his hands on a towel. He was wearing a chequered shirt again, over dark green shorts, and I had to redirect my brain away from the memory of what he looked like underneath it.

‘Hey!’ He broke out into a smile that was far from warranted, given previous events. I was starting to realise that Sam’s default mood was happy.

‘Hi.’ I managed a nod, but not quite a smile, in return. For now I was relieved not to have imploded into a gibbering heap of humiliation.

‘No Nesbit?’ He grinned, walking over to join me at the bottom of the steps.

I shook my head firmly. ‘He’s enjoying the confinement of my garden.’

‘So my chickens are safe for now?’ he asked, eyes sparkling in a way that lit up my rebellious heart. ‘I think they were fearing for their lives after last night’s invasion. Tom would have readily singled one out for sacrifice if he could have persuaded someone else to be executioner.’

‘You have live chickens?’

‘Six, out the back. Purely for the eggs, though.’

‘Lovely!’ I nodded, before finding that my ability to converse had absconded, replaced by an inexplicable compulsion to keep nodding.

‘Can I help you with that? It looks heavy,’ Sam said, thankfully breaking the nodding loop by gesturing to the cool bag.

‘Actually, it’s for you. Well, you and your family. I didn’t get a chance to count heads yesterday, but I’ve gone for a generous ten.’

‘Eleven.’ He gave me a hopeful look. ‘Is it edible?’

‘I sincerely hope so.’ I tried to hold out the bag, but it was too heavy so I ended up dropping it at his feet.

‘Tell me more.’ Sam smiled so wide that a dimple appeared on one cheek. I tried not to stare.

‘Okay, I’ve roasted two organic chickens with a few herbs and lemon. There’s classic potato and then sweet potato and feta salads, apple and sultana coleslaw, a tomatoey thing, some honey mustard cocktail sausages – outdoor-bred pork, of course. Rosemary focaccia, rye sourdough... um... some couscous, lemon drizzle cheesecake and chocolate brownies.’

Sam stared at me for a moment, his frozen smile in contrast to furrowed eyebrows. ‘A chicken would have been more than enough.’

I shrugged. ‘Not really, though. That was genuinely one of the most appalling moments of my life. I will remember it and shudder for the rest of my days. And I wrecked your special night, not just a chicken.’

Sam shook his head. ‘It was fine. There was plenty of other stuff to eat.’

‘Your family were fuming, though – and rightly so.’ I paused, unsure about whether to continue. ‘Your dad seemed annoyed at you.’

If *annoyed* could also mean *disapproving and overbearing*.

Sam sighed, the smile finally disappearing. 'He'd have found something to complain about. Nesbit just made it sooner rather than later. Look.' He fixed his eyes, almost amber in the sunlight, on me. 'Accidents happen. No harm intended and no real harm done. I fully accept your apology, and would like to move past the whole thing, so if this elaborate and unnecessary feast means you can do that, then fine, I graciously accept that, too.'

I scrunched up my face, still reluctant to let myself off this easily.

'To be honest, I was far more miffed about you mowing me down with a manky mattress,' Sam said with a wink.

I burst into surprised laughter. 'That was you miffed? I'd hate to see you on a really bad day.'

'Ask anyone, I have a fearsome reputation around these parts.'

'Wild man of the forest?'

Sam grinned. 'Maybe.'

We shared another potent silence, while I wrestled between acting like a normal, socially intelligent person by saying goodbye, and wanting to stay and chat more with what I was hopeful might become another new friend.

After a while, Sam returned to the sort-of-smile-combined-with-furrowed-brow face. 'I have to say, however, that Parker family gatherings are mercifully rare. It's virtually impossible to get us all together in one place at the same time without weeks of logistical gymnastics by my mother. And, if I'm honest, this food sounds too good to waste on my grumpy brothers, even if they were prepared to drag themselves out here for the second time in three years. I think the only viable solution is that you stay and help me eat it.'

'I can't do that!'

'Why not?'

‘The whole point was to replace the meal I ruined, not invite myself round for dinner.’

‘You didn’t invite yourself, I invited you.’ Sam picked up the cool bag and started walking up the steps to the house, his dogs falling in perfect line behind him. ‘I’ll give Mum whatever’s left; she’ll try to refuse but I’ll just dump it in her kitchen and run.’

He opened the front door, glancing back with a look of such open good cheer that before I could protest any further, my feet followed him right inside.

* * *

We took our loaded plates along with a pitcher of peach iced tea out onto the porch, and sat at a table with surprisingly comfortable wooden chairs.

‘These are great,’ I exclaimed, sitting back and stroking the arms.

‘Thanks.’ Sam grinned.

‘Where did you get them? I just bought a couple of chairs and table for my garden, but I really need two more.’

‘Here,’ he replied, pointing the chunk of potato on the end of his fork at the trees to one side of us.

‘They’re made from Bigley Forest trees?’ I asked, impressed.

‘Yep.’

‘So where could I get some from, given that my city girl skills don’t include turning a tree into a comfy chair?’

He shrugged. ‘I can knock you a couple of chairs up. Let me know when you need them by.’

‘You made these chairs.’

The dimple was back.

‘You really are the wild man of the forest.’

‘Apparently so.’

We chatted for a while about the other things he’d made (which turned out to be most of his house, as well various pieces of furniture for friends and family). It was nice. Very nice. And remarkably non-awkward, considering that I was eating dinner in a beautiful setting with a man who looked like Mr May Forest Ranger. After a lifetime of meals rife with subtext, emotional manipulation and self-absorption, this was refreshingly pleasant. The more time I spent with Sam, the more I hoped we would become genuine friends.

And, possibly, somewhere deep down where I could mostly pretend it didn’t exist, was hidden a tiny hope that if I raced through the Dream List fast enough, we could, perhaps, one day grow to be more than that.

When Sam went to fetch the cheesecake, and returned with a bottle of white wine, offering to walk me home if I wanted a drink, with the option of fetching the car tomorrow, I did wonder for a flabbergasted second if he might be thinking along those lines, too. But then, I scolded myself when he excused himself to take a call from someone called Lilly, he was gorgeous, easy-going, ridiculously friendly Sam. It was probably unthinkable for him not to offer me some of the food I’d brought round. He’d have almost certainly done the same for Irene Jenkins. Or Ebenezer. I heard a guffaw drift through the sliding door and realised that for all I knew, Lilly was his girlfriend and she was rolling her eyes at him inviting in yet another waif. They’d probably had a right laugh about the woman with the uncontrollable dog.

‘Sorry about that,’ he said, returning to the table. ‘Would you like some wine?’

By now, I just wanted to go home again.

‘I would,’ I said apologetically. ‘But I’ve got work tomorrow, so I’d better not. I don’t want to get home too late.’

‘Right, of course!’ Sam replied, a twinge of pink creeping across his cheeks. ‘Me too. You’ll stay for some pudding, though?’

‘Ooh.’ I pretended to check my non-existent watch. ‘I think I can just about squeeze in a big slice or two.’

‘The other day, you mentioned needing to prove yourself to people. Wanting to be independent,’ Sam said, once he’d handed me about a quarter of the cake.

I nodded, feeling a flush of warmth that he’d remembered.

‘Do you mind me asking why you moved out here?’

I took a moment’s pause to consider how to answer, eventually deciding that I might as well go with the truth. ‘I was living with my mum, in Nottingham. And, well... she isn’t always the easiest. Ever since my dad walked out on us – and he literally just walked out the door one day and never came back – she’s had this fear of being abandoned again.’

‘By you?’

‘Primarily me, yes. So, if she caught any hint that I was drawing away, spending a bit more time with friends, or, worst of all, starting a potential relationship, she’d make things very difficult.’ I paused to take a sip of my drink. Sam’s forehead creased in concentration.

‘It sounds ridiculous, but I always thought that one day I’d finally meet the right person, and then I could get married and move out, and she’d just have to deal with it.’

‘You mentioned that the person you were in love with married someone else, because of your mum.’

Wow. This man really paid attention.

‘Yes. He’d asked me. More than once. But it was never the right time.’ I frowned. ‘I suppose eventually he realised it was never going

to be the right time, as far as Mum was concerned.’ I rolled my eyes in anticipation of what I was about to share. ‘I had this Dream List. Something I’d started in sixth form, with all the things I wanted to do once I finally had someone to do proper couple things with. Silly things, really.’ I could feel myself blushing, but Sam held such a warm look of interest that I carried on. ‘Assembling flat-pack furniture together.’ I threw him a pointed look. ‘Having a party. Getting a dog.’

‘That doesn’t sound silly at all.’

‘Perhaps not... but it was definitely stupid to think I needed a man to do all those things.’ I nodded at him. ‘Although it turned out I did need one to help with the bed!’

I turned to look at where the sun was sinking in a pool of orange behind the treeline. ‘I also realised that for my whole life I’ve been like this little planet, revolving around the star that is my mother. Relying on her for warmth and light and direction. I’m thirty this year, and I don’t really know who I am.’ I took a deep breath. ‘So, here I am, trying to find out.’

‘That’s amazing,’ Sam said, his voice soft as the twilight settled around us. ‘Genuinely, I know how hard it can be to break away from domineering parents. And at least I have brothers so the heat isn’t all on me. You are one brave woman.’

I fidgeted under his gaze. ‘I don’t know about that.’

‘Anyone who chooses to relocate to Bigley Bottom is no coward.’ He laughed. ‘So, what about the Dream List? You seem to be working your way through it alone.’

I shrugged. ‘That’s the plan. I’m going to complete the whole list solo, and hopefully figure some things out as I go.’

Sam looked at me steadily for a moment while my heart fidgeted about in my chest.

‘You’re not allowed any help?’

‘Well, I’m allowed a bit of help from my friends. Friends, or random strangers.’

‘But not a boyfriend.’

‘No. Not even a date. The friend you met made me sign a contract. A No-Man Mandate.’

‘What else is on this list?’

I smiled. ‘I’m not telling you.’

‘Okay.’ Sam nodded, smiling back as he raised his glass in a toast. ‘Well, good luck with it, and God speed. I look forward to you completing it.’

Um, excuse me?

I managed to just about avoid choking on my tongue, before stuttering a thank you and hotfooting it out of there while that statement zipped about my head like a pinball.

* * *

‘He was totally flirting!’ Steph said, when I called her the next day to recount my weekend escapades.

‘I don’t know... he’s so friendly and nice. Maybe he was just being supportive.’

Steph snorted. ‘Yeah, like when Drew said he liked my hair it was a general observation.’

I couldn’t help smiling at this. Drew had joined our school in year twelve, and one week into the new year he’d approached me in the lunch queue to ask who my friend was.

‘Which friend?’ I replied, rolling my eyes as if I actually had more than one friend. Inside, I couldn’t help bracing myself, in the way I’d learnt to do when people spoke about Steph. They didn’t usually

mention her weight, but it had come up enough times to make me instinctively on the defensive.

‘The one with the hair.’ His used his hands to demonstrate Steph’s wild mass of curls.

‘Pretty sure all my friends have hair,’ I replied, but I smiled to indicate that I knew who he was talking about, and I approved of him asking. ‘Her name’s Steph.’

The boy grinned in relief, nodding as he filed away the information.

‘Who shall I say’s asking?’

‘Oh! Um. Well. You don’t have to mention it...’

‘She’s my best friend. On what planet wouldn’t I mention that the new boy is asking after her?’

He gripped his rucksack straps with both hands. ‘It’s Drew.’ Turning to go, he paused to add, ‘Oh, and if you’re going to mention it, you could also tell her that I liked the plait thing she did on Monday. And the curls on Tuesday. And the Princess Leia things on Wednesday.’

‘Why don’t you tell her yourself?’ My cheeks were turning pink on Steph’s behalf.

‘Oh, I will,’ he called, walking away. ‘But now she gets to hear it from you, too. She’ll be prepared.’

The next week, Steph had her first kiss, sitting on a park bench in the glow of the September sunset.

A year to the day later, Drew proposed to her on that exact same bench.

Eleven years after that, the most patient man on the planet finally got to marry the love of his life.

‘Even if he was flirting,’ I said, focusing my mind back on the present, ‘it’s irrelevant, isn’t it?’ I paused for a couple of seconds,

before asking tentatively, 'Is it?'

'For now, then one hundred per cent yes!' Steph replied firmly. 'You can't abandon the No-Man Mandate every time one bats his eyelashes at you. Short-term pain for long-term successful relationship gain, remember?'

'Yes, sir!'

'Having said that...' Her voice softened. 'It is going to be completely relevant once you've finished that list. It'll be far easier to ask him out now you know he's interested.'

'Um, what?' I retorted. 'I wasn't planning on asking him out, and I still don't know if he's interested. Even if *I'm* interested, which I don't know yet, because I still don't know what or whom interests me, hence the No-Man Mandate, remember?'

Steph burst out laughing. 'Whatever, darling, you keep telling yourself that. For now.'

The rest of the week was fairly uneventful in comparison to the weekend. Of course, for me, simply waking up in my own house, and getting on with my own life was eventful enough. From Monday to Wednesday, it rained almost continually. I scurried through the woods with my hood up while Nesbit tumbled and sniffed and wagged his tail beside me, and stood huddled for hours under an umbrella while waiting for him to earn a sticker.

It was working, though. Between us, Joan and I had taught him to sit and wait, to answer to his name and to do what he was supposed to do where he was supposed to do it.

On Thursday, I woke up to another note:

*Trampling about a lawn in wet weather destroys the grass.
Please stop.*

I posted one back later that day:

Thank you so much for erecting the shelter so I don't have to stand in the rain! That was unbelievably thoughtful of you. Please accept my small gluten-free token of appreciation.

This time, the cinnamon muffin didn't arrive back on my doorstep.

One consequence of the weather was that instead of hanging about outside with me, Joan called round to End Cottage once I was home from work and she had finished school. This felt more of a big deal than simply being in our joint garden together. While she was here mostly for Nesbit, I also knew she was bored and lonely at home. As the week passed, my growing unease at becoming her impromptu childcare provided enough courage to call round and talk to Leanne.

I'd positioned myself in view of the window, Ebenezer style, so I could spot Leanne coming home from work and catch her before she went to bed. I waited a courteous five minutes then went to knock on her door.

Joan answered, the traditional eon later. 'Hi, Ollie,' she said, glancing behind her as she spoke.

'Hi, Joan. I was hoping to speak to your mum.'

'Ummm...' Joan's eyes flickered side to side a few times. 'She's resting now. She's not feeling good today.'

I sent a shooting-star-style prayer skywards that 'resting' wasn't a cover-up for something far worse.

'Could you ask her if she wouldn't mind anyway, please? I'd really like to have a quick chat.'

Joan's mouth drew into a thin line as she pushed the door until it was only open by the merest crack, and disappeared into the house. If it had been any other house, I'd have given up and gone back home long before the door finally creaked open. Leanne looked... well, like she needed a rest.

The contours of her face were stark against the purple shadows encircling each eye. A white tracksuit only highlighted skin that was sagging and sallow. She raised her chin, pale lips twisting. 'What?'

'I wanted a quick chat about Diamanté Butterfly, if that's okay?' I was relieved to see that, while bloodshot and lifeless, Leanne's eyes appeared focused. I took a slow, subtle breath in but detected no whiff of alcohol. She'd only been home a few minutes, though.

Leanne folded her arms, lips pursing in annoyance. 'What's she done now?'

'Nothing! Well, I mean nothing she shouldn't have. As far as I know.'

'That makes a change.'

'Really?'

She raised one eyebrow in a question. 'What, then?'

'Do you mind if I step inside?' While the unrelenting downpour of the past few days had eased, it was still drizzling, and it was hard to remain composed while droplets were running down my face into my mouth.

Leanne glanced behind her, in a startling imitation of her daughter earlier on, and sighed before turning and disappearing through a doorway a couple of steps down the hallway. Taking that as an invitation, I followed her into a mirror image of my living room.

That is, in basic layout only. I tried my utmost to keep my face pleasantly neutral, but it was not easy. Leanne and Joan were living in a giant bin. A ratty sofa covered with a musty blanket and two battered end tables were the only furniture, apart from an old wine crate acting as a television stand. Every available surface, including the windowsill and empty fireplace, were crammed with dirty pots, empty cartons and other mess. The room stank of stale food, unwashed bodies and worse. The floor was covered in mismatched pieces of lino that looked as though they'd never seen a mop. The walls were a dank beige lined with boxes and plastic bags bursting with clutter.

It was without doubt the most depressing room I'd ever set foot in. Leanne nodded to one end of the sofa, perching herself on the other. I took a swift visual sweep of the rubbish as I sat down, but spotted nothing concerning. Having said that, I had been left waiting on the doorstep for a good five minutes. Plenty of time to hide any bottles or other incriminating evidence. Leanne picked at a nail, leaving me to resume the conversation.

'She's probably told you that I've been taking care of the dog she found.'

Leanne gave me a sharp glance. 'That's your decision. I ain't paying for it.'

'No! It's not that. But Joan – Diamanté Butterfly—'

'You can call her Joan,' Leanne muttered. 'I've given up arguing with her. Might as well fight a brick wall.'

'Right. Well, she considers Nesbit to be partly hers, which is fine, so she's been spending a lot of time with him in the garden after school, and on Saturday. Only, this week, while the weather's been so bad, she's come to see him in my house every day.'

Leanne stood up. 'I'll tell her to stop bothering you. She gets bored when it's too wet to get outside. But there's not a lot I can do about it. Not unless old Ebenezer decides to plant a money tree.'

'She's not bothering me,' I said, trying to sound as friendly as possible. I didn't stand up to join her – and not just because my jeans were stuck to something that I really hoped wasn't a blob of chewing gum. 'I really like having her over. She's been a great help training Nesbit while I get on with some work, too. I just wanted to check that you were okay with it. I've given her dinner a couple of times. It's as easy to cook for two as for one, and to be honest this is my first time living alone, and I appreciate the company. I definitely don't want any money or anything, far from it – but if you could do

with someone to watch out for her while you're working, I'm happy to help.'

Leanne took a step back and sagged against the wall behind her. Her head dropped, and for a moment I wondered if she was crying, but then she pushed back her shoulders and looked me straight in the eye.

'If you don't mind her hanging around, then that would be very helpful, thank you.'

'Not at all. My mum raised me on her own. I know how hard it can be.'

Leanne gave one brief nod. 'Let me know if she's being a pain, though. Or does anything out of order. Send her right back again if she's not behaving.'

I shook my head. 'She's always behaved brilliantly.'

Leanne folded her arms. 'You must know something I don't. I've lost track of how often school have dragged me in to tell me that she's kicked off or told the teacher to stand further away because he smells like eggy farts.'

'She didn't!'

Leanne grimaced. 'It was all I could do not to laugh, because it's true.'

'Well, maybe she's fine at mine because she's trying to impress Nesbit.'

'Yeah. Maybe. Either way, I appreciate it.' She shifted her gaze to the ceiling. 'And the leftovers.'

'You're very welcome.'

I took a deep breath, deciding that after such a surprisingly positive conversation it was worth taking things one step further. 'Um. Joan also mentioned that you've not been well. Is there—'

Leanne's face instantly set like concrete. 'Like I said, thanks for keeping an eye on Joan. As soon as I've a spot free, I'll come and clean your house. But it's been a long day and I need to spend some time with my girl.'

'Of course. I'll see myself out.'

* * *

Friday, I had back-to-back coaching sessions with Yasmin and then Trev. Usually I allowed half an hour between sessions, but I'd started telling Yasmin about Nesbit's chicken theft, and her air of bleak sorrow had once again shifted to animation as she'd spent the next twenty minutes giving me an impromptu dog-training class.

'You're too nice, this is your problem!' she cried, causing Irene Jenkins to flinch as though Yasmin had screamed in her ear. 'If you act like a pushover then of course everyone is going to push you right over and trample on your face. Dogs especially.'

I cringed at the accuracy of her statement. Was it that obvious?

'So what can I do about it?' I asked. 'I mean, when it comes to Nesbit.'

'Show him that you are the boss!' She pointed at the ceiling to emphasis the point. 'Fun, kind, generous boss. But still the boss. He needs to respect you. Otherwise before you know it you'll be feeding him steak and smoked salmon. You have to show him his place.'

'I totally agree,' a tiny woman bent over her walking stick said as she hobbled past. 'Teach him who's boss, and make sure he don't forget it. A husband needs to stay in his place. Earn his steak.'

'Um, that's not actually...' I tried to interrupt, but Trev, who had just appeared, got there first.

‘Excuse me,’ he said, folding bulging arms. ‘That’s a load of codswallop. How about mutual respect, love and understanding? What she said is verging on abusive, and to be honest, Ollie, I’m shocked you would sit here listening to this rubbish.’

Yasmin sprang to her feet, eyes blazing. ‘Abusive? How dare you accuse me of that! You never even met me before. I would never hurt a living creature. I don’t even touch the slugs in my vegetable pots.’

‘Oh, so now you’re comparing us to slugs?’ Trev shook his head in disgust. ‘If a *man* spoke about controlling a woman like that, we’d be locked up. And I speak from experience. I met enough men like you in prison to know where that attitude leads.’

Yasmin looked as though she was indeed on the verge of doing something abusive. ‘*Men like me!*’ she yelled. ‘*Prison!*’ She waved her hands around in frustration before jabbing one arm forward and poking Trev in his belly, which was about her shoulder height. ‘Take that back! This is nothing like the same and only an ignorant fool would say it is.’

I’d only met Trev twice before. I knew that none of his convictions had involved violence, but who knew what being poked and insulted might trigger. Besides, who knew what defensive skills Yasmin had picked up in her past. She might not be the one at risk here. I quickly got up and attempted to insert myself between them. ‘She was talking about dogs,’ I said firmly to Trev, before turning to Yasmin, holding my hands out to create some distance between them. ‘He overheard the woman say “husband”, and thought you were talking about men.’

‘What?’

‘Eh?’

My two ReadUp clients eyed each other suspiciously for a moment.

'You thought I was saying a woman must be the boss of a man?' Yasmin asked, eyes narrowed.

'You thought I accused you of mistreating animals?' Trev replied, his expression easing a millimetre.

'Ollie's dog stole a roast chicken off someone's kitchen table,' Yasmin replied.

'What? Sounds like she needs to show it who's in charge.'

'Precisely!' Yasmin said, folding her arms.

'Ms Tennyson.' An icy blast cut across the library as Irene Jenkins stomped towards us, her face mottled with indignation. 'Explain... *this!*'

'Oh, it was nothing to do with her,' a now amused Trev responded. 'Just a mix-up between this lady and myself. You see, I thought—'

'I am not interested in what you thought,' Irene ground out between clenched teeth. 'What I see is Ms Tennyson's clients on the brink of a public brawl in my library.' She glared at me with eyes like deadly lasers. 'Raised voices. Aggressive language. Physical assault. I don't know where to begin. Not that I didn't foresee this happening.'

'Irene.' I stepped to one side, hoping to draw her away for a private conversation before she revealed quite how prejudiced she was about ReadUp using the venue.

She didn't follow me, instead breaking her own rules and raising her voice to ensure that I, and everyone else in the library, could hear. 'I suggest that your next lesson is teaching them to read this.' She held out a copy of the library rules. Or, more accurately, *her* unofficial, unenforceable library rules.

'I shall of course be reporting this to my superior,' she said, before marching back to the reception desk.

'Excuse me.' An older woman looked nervously at Yasmin. 'I couldn't help overhearing your conversation.'

Irene, filing returned books onto a nearby shelf, twitched her pointy ears and tutted.

'I was wondering if you did classes?'

'Yes.' Yasmin nodded. 'I've just started with the ReadUp programme. It is very helpful.'

'No.' The woman shook her head. 'I meant dog-training classes.'

'Oh?'

'Only, my dog won't walk nicely on the lead. He pulls so hard he sounds as if he's choking on his collar, and it's agony on my bad back. I'd love to know how to stop him yanking all the time.'

Yasmin smiled. 'It sounds as though you could benefit from a one-to-one training session. If you give me your number I can let you know the next available slot.'

The woman hesitated.

'I provide a free initial consultation. And we very rarely need a second.'

The woman sagged with relief. 'Thank you. I would be so grateful.'

Once details had been exchanged, and the woman left, Yasmin turned back to me and Trev, a grin on her face. 'A new venture!'

'Yasmin, I'm not sure you can just set yourself up as a dog trainer.'

She shrugged. 'I think I just did.'

'It's not much of a business if you don't charge anything.' Trev shook his head. 'My niece paid a couple of hundred quid to sort her nervous lurcher.'

Yasmin stuck her hands on tiny hips. 'Did she look like she can spare two hundred pounds on a professional dog trainer?'

'Well, that's beside the point,' Trev said, frowning.

'Precisely.' Yasmin's voice had risen again. 'This isn't about her. A dog needs help. Do you think I should sit back and let an innocent creature suffer, because their incompetent owner can't afford to learn how to correct her mistakes? It's not as though I'm starving and need the money.'

Trev scratched one of the eyeholes of his skull tattoo. 'Well, when you put it like that...'

'This is as much for my benefit as for hers,' she went on. 'I will not sleep, knowing a poor dog is suffering. I might even pay her to let me fix the problem.'

'I don't think that's going to be necessary,' I added. Yasmin might not be starving, but she definitely could do with the money. However, I did wonder whether it was wise, or even legal, to charge when she didn't have any formal training. There might be insurance or a licence required. 'She sounded pretty keen to have the training.'

'That's about right,' Yasmin practically bellowed as she marched to the door. 'It's not the dog who needs the training. It's virtually *never* the dog.' She paused to yank open the door, her eyes roaming the room until they found Irene. 'It's the people who need to learn how to behave.'

'I couldn't agree more,' Irene huffed as Yasmin allowed the door to swing shut behind her.

Halfway through Trev's session, a woman entered the library with a double buggy containing a screaming baby and a toddler. Shooing two older boys ahead of her into the tiny children's section, she collapsed on one of the preschool-sized seating blocks, sat the

toddler in front of the forlorn crate of toys and proceeded to start breastfeeding the baby.

Within moments the toddler had tipped the crate over, the toys clattering across the wooden floorboards. One of the boys was robotically pulling off every single book from the 'confident readers' shelf and his brother, who looked to be around seven or eight, had started spinning on his back in the middle of the spilt toys, sending them skidding under bookcases and off into the adults' section.

The mum started pleading with her kids to choose a story, tidy up the mess, stop Holly chewing a book, please stop yelling, and please, *please* behave themselves so she could read them a story.

To give her credit, Irene waited a good five minutes before clonking over. Trev paused, his finger still pressed underneath the word he'd been attempting to sound out in his workbook, and wrinkled his forehead. 'This ain't going to end well.'

Irene cleared her throat a few times, but given that the woman was too busy trying to persuade her children to stop ransacking the place while pinned to a seat with a nursing baby, she was hardly likely to notice a couple of irritated coughs.

'Excuse me!' Irene barked eventually, causing the boys to momentarily pause in their wrestle over a fire engine before resuming with increased vigour. 'I have previously been clear that if you can't keep your children's behaviour under control, then you must leave. This is your final warning.'

'I'm so sorry,' the mum replied, tears welling up as her cheeks burnt with shame. She slid off the seat, causing the baby to let out a squawk, and tried to prise the soggy book from Holly's hand.

Irene twisted her head, eyes scrunched in disgust. 'Please cover yourself! While I am obliged to permit you to feed your baby here, I

must ask you to do it in a dignified manner. Have you no self-respect?’

‘What do you think?’ the woman asked, her voice breaking. She huddled on the floor, tucking her baby in closer so that it could resume feeding. Her head drooped, hair obscuring her face.

One of the boys opened a picture book and began to slowly tear a strip from one of the pages.

‘Harry!’

‘That will need to be paid for!’ Irene shrieked. ‘Stop it at once!’

Holly dropped her mangled book in shock and after a moment’s stunned silence began to howl. I glanced at Trev, aware that we still had seven minutes on the clock.

‘Go on.’ He jerked his head in the direction of the ruckus. ‘I’m sure you’ll make the time up next week.’

Hurrying across to the children’s section, I ducked past Irene and practically threw myself onto the floor beside the toddler.

‘Hey, what’s this?’ I asked, grabbing the nearest toy, which happened to be a grubby plastic ice cream, and looking at it as if I’d discovered a trove of buried treasure. ‘Oooh, tasty! A lovely ice cream on a hot day. Yummy!’ I yelled over the sound of the younger boy screeching like a monkey as he climbed the shelf behind me, the other impersonating a police siren as he began racing up and down. I moved the chew-marked plastic as close to my mouth as I dared and pretended to give it a lick. ‘Mmm!’

The girl looked at me, her cries dying away as she focused on this bizarre stranger who’d appeared out of nowhere. ‘Would you like a try?’ I beamed, thrusting the ice cream into her hand before spinning around and grabbing the boy as he slipped off the shelf.

‘I know a good book about monkeys,’ I told him, as he wriggled out of my grip. ‘If you can find it before the book-exploding

countdown, I'll read it to you.'

'What?' The boy squinted at me suspiciously.

'Ten, nine, eight...' I began, trying to sound ominous, while pointing at the messy pile of books urgently.

To my immense relief, he started searching amongst the picture books, slapping them this way and that as he looked for one with a monkey. By the time I'd counted down to five, Trev had arrived, holding the hand of the older boy, and the mum had managed to position herself so that she could keep feeding while cuddling Holly.

'What's this?' Trev asked. 'A book hunt?'

'We need to find the monkey book 'fore it explodes! Help me, Hudson!'

'I can find it quicker'n you!' Hudson bent down next to his brother, who by process of elimination must be Harry, and joined in the hunt.

'Here!' Harry announced a second later, just after I'd drawn out a slow three. I breathed a whoosh of relief. I'd spent enough time in libraries to know a monkey book was a fairly safe bet, but the selection here was more limited than most. 'I found it! Now you have to read it to us!'

I took the offered book, and felt a prickle of pleasure that it was a good one. One so good, I'd used it in adult literacy classes more than once. Without needing to open the first page, I quoted the opening line, eyebrows dancing, eyes wide with anticipation.

'All was dark and quiet in Monkey Forest. Until, just as the wise, old owl hooted midnight, something stirred in the bushes below...'

'What was it?' Harry squealed, jumping up and down in excitement. Hudson, trying to pretend he wasn't bothered, nevertheless gave me a sideways glance through his overgrown fringe.

‘Sit down and I’ll tell you. But you must be quiet! Otherwise you might scare it away...’

‘Excuse me, it’s saying my card isn’t valid again,’ a man called from the automatic checkout machine, freeing Irene from where she’d been standing at the edge of the children’s section in a frozen stupor. She took a moment to regain control of her flapping mouth before ordering us to return the children’s corner to its previous order, and heading back to deal with the growing queue.

Twenty minutes later, we’d read five stories, chosen another armful each to check out and tidied up while Trev fetched the mum, whose name was Chloe, a coffee. While Chloe fumbled in her purse for enough money for the ripped and chewed books, despite me reassuring her that she didn’t need to pay for damage on a children’s book, I nipped over to the general fiction section and found two of the lightest, brightest, most uplifting novels I could find, adding them to the pile awaiting their turn in the machine.

‘Irene, don’t you think that Hudson and Harry have done a wonderful job in tidying up?’ I asked, smiling as though I was her best friend, rather than her arch-nemesis.

Irene strode over, ducking down and peering around and desperately trying to find something we’d missed. ‘Hmph,’ was the closest she got to agreeing that yes, there wasn’t a toy or a book out of place.

‘Could you please show Hudson how to check out his books?’ I added.

‘What?’ Irene flinched.

‘Hudson needs to be shown how to use the machine.’

‘I’m sure you can do that.’

‘I’m sure I could. But I wouldn’t want to undermine your role as librarian.’

'Oh. Right.' Irene stiffly took Hudson through the steps, then repeated it all again at Harry's insistence. Both of the boys were chattering about how amazing the library was and how much they loved stories and that they couldn't wait to read these and then come back and choose some more.

'What do you say, boys?' Chloe prompted.

'Thank yooouuuuu,' they chanted dutifully.

'And what else do you need to say?'

'Sorreeee.'

I suspected these boys had needed to say this once or twice before.

'Well. Next time please remember that the library is for everyone. If you rip up all the books there'll be none left for you to read.' Irene sniffed.

Although, I have to say, it was a tiny bit less sniffy than usual.

It had been three weeks since I'd seen my mother. A fortnight since I'd spoken to her. According to Karina, she was still bitter, still grieving, but yielding to Karina's invitation of companionship, already forming new routines involving morning yoga, afternoon trips out and crochet and Jaffa Cakes in front of gruesome detective series.

While part of me wanted to stretch out this sparkling new freedom for as long as possible, basking in the glorious, wide-open vista where my mother's strangulating opinions and emotional issues had previously blocked the view, the more sensible part of me knew that the longer I left it, the harder it would become to break the silence.

Besides, she was my mother, and I missed her.

I phoned Aunty Linda and concocted a scrupulously managed meet-up, escape route at the ready just in case.

Late Sunday morning, I left Nesbit in the safe care of Joan and Leanne, then drove to meet Aunty Linda at the Buttonhole, which was closed on Sundays apart from occasional events such as a Crafternoon Tea or a guest workshop. After enfolding me in a much-needed hug, she started getting things ready while I made us each a drink. It would take me a good few hours to run up curtains for the bedroom and office, along with cushions in various complementary

designs. Linda would be offering her expert advice and adding extra touches to the cushions like buttons, some hand embroidery and tiny felt decorations.

I filled her in on life in Bigley while we worked, and she updated me on the latest goings-on in the shop and with my cousins, who both lived in London. She was relieved and optimistic about Mum agreeing to revive her quilting course.

‘Honestly, Ollie, I think you moving out is the best thing that ever happened to her. It’s like now the worst thing has happened, she’s free from worrying about it any more. She misses you, of course, and is confused and angry, but we’ve somehow managed to convert it into a catalyst to get her enjoying things again instead of using it as an excuse to wallow. Not that she didn’t enjoy you being around, of course.’ She paused to deftly thread the tiniest of needles with gold embroidery silk. ‘But you know that subconsciously she was always playing the helpless victim to ensure you didn’t leave. She could never be too happy, in case you spotted that she didn’t need you any more.’

‘Is she really angry?’ I asked, apprehension jittering about in my stomach.

Linda looked at me. ‘I haven’t the foggiest.’

Just before six, the final cushion was zipped and plumped and loaded along with the curtains into my car, hiding in the small parking space behind the shop.

I took a shuddering breath, nodded to Linda and she made the call.

Seven minutes later, my mother burst through the Buttonhole door.

‘Ollie?’ she said, chest heaving, eyes wild until they spotted me. ‘I was halfway through my tomato and broccoli quiche.’

I could see the crumbs still sticking to her jumper.

'Hi, Mum,' I offered, not getting up from my seat near the back corridor that led out to my car.

'Well, what is this? Am I allowed to give you a hug?'

After a short, stiff squeeze, I backed away and gestured to a seat.

'Here we go.' Linda placed a pot of tea and three slices of flapjack on the table between us.

'Have you been speaking to Linda?' Mum asked, her face brittle with hurt. 'Meeting up? Is that how it is? She gets special treatment and I'm discarded like a used tissue?'

I tried my hardest not to mind. Not to drown in the swamp of guilt and self-loathing that I'd been trying to ignore for the past three weeks. I gripped my mug with both hands and willed myself to resist apologising, or making excuses.

'Tina, making accusations like that is not helpful. If you can't speak respectfully to Ollie, then she'll leave.'

'Oh, are you her mouthpiece now, as well? She can't even tell me herself how she's feeling?'

'You haven't asked me how I'm feeling,' I managed to say, hating how my voice sounded so weak, on the verge of whining. I accepted that Mum was the one who'd suffered here; it was her feelings that mattered, not mine. I just couldn't help wishing that she would act like a mother, just once, and put her child's feelings first.

Mum's mouth twisted in derision. 'And how am I supposed to do that, when you've blocked my number?'

'I told you that I needed some space.' *Stop shaking, voice!*

'Oh, and what, now you've had enough *space* it's time to come crawling back to Mummy? Found the big, bad world isn't much fun

on your own after all? I knew it wouldn't take long for you to realise how badly you need me.'

'Tina,' Linda warned.

'This was a mistake,' I muttered, starting to push back from the table. 'We're not ready.'

Linda reached out and gave my hand a squeeze as I stood up. Some of her steely strength must have zipped through her fingers into mine, because I straightened my spine, hitched my bag up onto my shoulder and looked my mother straight in the face.

'I'm sorry that moving out hurt you. I'm sorry that I had to block your number. But this isn't all about you. I needed to do this for me. And while I do appreciate everything you've done, I think in the past few years I've more than repaid my debt.' I paused to catch my breath. 'As if a mother should expect anything in return for raising their own child. Right now, you can't see past your own hurt to consider things from my point of view. I understand, but I won't sit here and be spoken to like this. Take care of yourself, Mum.'

I gave Linda's hand a reciprocal squeeze, turned and walked towards the back door.

'I'm sorry!' The inevitable wail trailed after me. 'I'm sorry, I just miss you so much. I feel lost. I can't help it when I say these things. I'm your mother; you can't just cut me off. I need you, Olivia. Please don't go!'

I paused for the minutest of microseconds, waiting to hear even a hint that she was, in fact, sorry about anything other than not having everything her own way.

The last thing I heard as I pushed through the door and stumbled to my car was the sound of my mother's wretched sobs, stabbing at my heart like a blunt knitting needle.

I spent most of the evening clutching my new daisy-embroidered pillow, while Nesbit snuffled and licked my tears away. My guilt gradually dissolved into self-pity, until, after a night of restless dreams, I dragged my duvet out to watch the sun rise. I curled up in my new garden chair staring at the trees and the birds and the sky, and I nudged that sorrow into gratitude that I was here, and not there any more, and that today was a new day, rich with endless possibilities as beautiful and magnificent as this new dawn.

* * *

I knew the best way to stop replaying my encounter with Mum, each time imagining increasingly convoluted conversations that brought me no sense of satisfaction whatsoever, was to keep pushing forwards. After a day of meetings and admin, followed by Nesbit dragging me around the woods for half an hour, I sat and pondered the Dream List, wondering which item to tackle next.

Something simple, and stress-free, given the tender state of my heart. Item one was perfect.

I decided to wait until Friday, given that I had a new reader on Wednesday to prep for, and Yasmin had insisted on meeting me in the park on Thursday for some puppy training ('No, it isn't fine and you can't sort it yourself and if we wait any longer you'll have trained him to do everything you *don't* want.')

That also gave me enough time to make sure I could create the type of evening I'd intended when I originally added it to the list. I was going to cross off item one in style.

* * *

But before then, I met with my third new reading client in the library. Jaxx was fairly typical for ReadUp. He'd left school at sixteen with no qualifications and no aspirations beyond hanging out with his mates and having a laugh. However, a few years on he'd learnt that having no money was no joke. He was bored and his parents were always on his case. It was time to grow up.

'So, Jaxx,' I asked, once I'd shown him to my usual table. 'What are you hoping to get out of this?'

He shrugged. 'I want to set up my own business.'

'Okay, that sounds interesting. What kind of business?'

'Like, sellin' stuff and that.'

'What type of stuff?'

Jaxx sat up in his chair; he held up his hands as if displaying an imaginary sign to accompany his grand announcement. 'Nomato!'

He then sat back, grinning slyly as though he'd just revealed a hitherto unknown secret of the universe.

'Nomato? I've never heard of that.'

His grin grew. 'That's because I'm ahead of the game.'

'So... what is it?'

'A substitute for tomato sauce, innit? Only without any tomato.'

'Of course!'

'Cheaper, tastier, one hundred per cent laboratory manufactured, so no need to rely on natural ingredients once the environment's gone whack. No stress about tomatoes going rotten, stuff like that. Don't need to keep it in the fridge or nothin'. And it lasts for years.'

'Wow. Did you invent this yourself?'

'Nah. A gaming mate told me about it. He's sold bucketloads where he's from, in Russia. People can't get enough of it. Raking it in.'

'And it tastes better than actual tomato sauce?'

He pulled out a tiny jar, like the type a hotel might use for individual jam pots, and reverently placed it on the table. 'Tasting is believing.'

'Um. Thank you. But we aren't allowed to consume our own food or drink in the library.'

I could see Irene's nostrils twitching from here.

'Take it home, try it later. You can use it on anything – pizza, pasta, stick it in a curry. Use it as a dip, or in burgers or wraps – literally *anything* tastes better with a dollop of Nomato.'

I took the sample. 'There's no list of ingredients or nutritional information.'

'Nah, that's just a prototype, innit. Most of the ingredients people here wouldn't understand anyway.'

'I think you still need to list them, by law. There's quite a lot of regulations involved with importing and selling food.'

Jaxx winked. 'That's where you come in, so I can figure all that out before I invest any more capital. Get my website set up. And I need to read the fine print when I'm making serious deals. I don't want no one taking advantage because I was too busy developin' my social game in school to bother with books.'

I dropped the jar into my bag. 'Have you considered any useful qualifications, like studying business?'

Jaxx shook his head, laughing. 'Nah. I'm all about business in the real world. Alan Sugar didn't need no qualifications, did he?'

Jaxx did his best to portray himself as some kind of gangsta-boy. However, piercings, gold chains and an accent couldn't disguise his white, middle-class upbringing in the posher end of Bigley. His mother, a physiotherapist, had been the one to call me. His father, a senior manager at a computer software company, offered to pay an

extortionate amount if I could 'sort him out'. Both parents referred to him as Jack.

I nodded, pretending to make a note on my pad.

'Though my old man says he'll stop paying for my phone unless I do this.'

'Shall we get started, then?'

'S'pose.' Jaxx chewed on a tatty nail and tried to look unbothered.

Less than five minutes into our assessment of his current reading ability, an elderly woman called out from the refreshments table. 'Help! It won't stop!'

The cup she'd placed underneath the coffee machine was rapidly overflowing as liquid continued to sputter out. The woman was trying to get another cup to replace it with, but her hands were so twisted with arthritis that she could barely pick up the stack of compostable cardboard cups, let alone tug one free.

In one fluid motion, Jaxx dived across, whipping his cap off and thrusting it under the spout as he yelled, 'Get back!' Unfortunately, the woman didn't get back, so he also knocked into her, sending her stumbling into a bookcase.

An instant later, Irene also rushed over. 'What are you doing!' she screeched, yanking Jaxx's arm and catching him off guard just at the moment he picked up the woman's full cup.

I watched, horrified, as scalding hot coffee splashed out of the cup and all over Irene, as well as Jaxx's pristine white trainers and the wooden floor.

I quickly got up to help, but in the three seconds it took me to get there, Jaxx had ducked under the table and turned the machine off at the plug, bringing the spurting to a stop, and was now facing the

wrath of Irene, who appeared no less fearsome due to coffee dripping down her neck and soaking into her cream blouse.

‘Ollie, call the police.’

‘I don’t think that will be necessary.’ I crouched down beside the woman, who had landed in a crumpled heap by the bookcase.

‘That thug assaulted us.’ She glared at Jaxx, but her whole body was shaking. ‘If you want to mug someone, do it in the street, not my library!’

‘Er, no. I came to help her with the coffee machine,’ Jaxx replied, frowning.

‘It got stuck, Irene,’ the woman added, her voice trembling. ‘The coffee was spilling everywhere.’

‘Here.’ Jaxx offered Irene a pile of napkins. ‘Did your hand get burnt?’

‘What?’ She ignored the napkins, looking at her hand as though she wasn’t quite sure who it belonged to.

‘Need to get that in cool water,’ Jaxx added. ‘Come on.’

‘I’m sopping wet,’ Irene said, sounding alarmed.

‘It’s fine. We can sort it.’ Jaxx gently took hold of Irene’s elbow with one hand, his other cradling her wrist, and he led her into the back office, where there was a tiny kitchen area. A couple of minutes later he led her back out again, wearing his hoodie and dipping her hand in a jug of water. Settling her down in her chair, he checked the jug was safely positioned on the desk and came back to where I was trying to clean up the mess while still keeping an eye on the woman, who said she was feeling a bit strange and wanted to stay where she was for now.

‘Are you all right?’ Jaxx asked, kneeling down so she could see his face.

‘I’m not sure,’ she replied, face crumpled in confusion.

‘Okay, well, how about we find out?’ He smiled reassuringly. ‘Let’s start with your name.’

‘Dolly. Dolly Carter.’

‘Nice to meet you, Dolly. Is it okay if I call you Dolly?’

She gave a shaky nod.

‘Are you hurt anywhere?’

Dolly’s threadbare eyebrows pulled down as she tried to think.

‘How about your legs and ankles? Hips? Is your back okay?’ Jaxx slowly talked her through it as I continued mopping, transfixed.

‘Well, no worse than usual.’ Dolly managed a tiny smile.

‘What about your head, then? Are you feeling sick at all, or dizzy?’

She managed a full smile, then. ‘Not any more.’

‘Vision okay?’

‘No. But that went to pot in 1979. I’d be very grateful if you could find my glasses.’

‘Here.’ Grinning, Jaxx took them from where they’d been dangling off one ear and repositioned them on her nose.

‘Oh, that’s much better. I think I might be ready to get up now.’

Fifteen minutes later and we were all cleaned up, an *Out of Order* sign had been stuck to the coffee machine, Irene had decided her hand was fine and Dolly had checked out a stack of gruesome detective stories and insisted she could walk herself home.

‘That was very impressive,’ I said to Jaxx, who had resumed his slouch.

‘Nah. Everyone knows you need to stick a burn in water.’

‘Well, yes. But not everyone can react that quickly and clearly. And I’ve never seen anyone handle Irene so well. She accused you of trying to mug Dolly.’

He twitched one shoulder in a vague shrug.

‘Jaxx, have you ever considered a career helping people? Like, a healthcare assistant on a ward, or working in a care home?’

He pulled a face. ‘Why would I wanna do that when I’ve got a genius business to run?’

‘How about a paramedic?’

He sat back, crossing his arms. ‘I ain’t got time for that. Don’t you need all sorts of qualifications?’

Before I could suggest we took some time in the next session finding out, Irene had strutted over, Jaxx’s hoodie now replaced with a zipped-up cagoule.

‘I shall wash your jacket and return it next week.’

‘No need, you only wore it for a few minutes. My mum’ll sort it.’

Irene bristled. ‘Why would a grown man let his mother do his laundry? Do you enjoy being treated like a child?’

Jaxx pulled his head back in surprise. ‘Well, no, but...’

‘And another thing. You are clearly not a total deadbeat, despite trying to appear otherwise. If you want to be taken seriously, you need to start dressing in a way that demands respect. No one – and I mean no one – not even the type of young woman whose opinion you might care about, and believe it or not I was once young enough to know – wants to see your nipples.’

I choked back a burst of laughter. Underneath his hoodie, Jaxx had been wearing one of those basketball jerseys with no sleeves that was, to my unfashionable eyes, at least three sizes too big. The neckline hung below his breastbone instead of anywhere close to his neck, and every time he moved the whole thing gaped, revealing a pale, skinny chest.

Jaxx crossed his arms, pinning the top in place.

‘Don’t blow this,’ Irene snapped, nodding at the workbook in front of him. She then spun on her sensible shoes and clomped away.

Jaxx and I agreed to meet again, same time and place, nipples thoroughly covered up.

On Friday afternoon, I had more back-to-back sessions with Yasmin and Trev. Trev arrived five minutes early, nervously shuffling up to where Yasmin was hunched over her book.

‘Afternoon, Ollie. Is it all right if I wait here?’

I took in Trev’s frayed, but immaculately ironed, bright blue shirt and jeans. A flat cap covered his skull tattoo, and it completely changed his look. He’d trimmed his beard, and I caught a whiff of spicy aftershave when he lifted one arm to nervously adjust his cap.

‘No, of course. If that’s all right with you, Yasmin?’ I glanced at her, still engrossed in the book, the end of a pencil pressed against her bottom lip, thick hair tumbling around her soft face.

She nodded, not bothering to glance up. Trev eyed the chair next to her, before deciding to take the one opposite.

Yasmin finished a couple of minutes later, letting out a heavy sigh as she packed up her things. ‘This is hard work, Ollie.’

‘You’re doing great. You’ve made genuinely amazing progress for only three sessions.’

‘It feels amazingly slow when another bill comes through the door. Or somebody smiles at me with terrible teeth and all I can do is tell them to floss more often.’

'I can imagine. But trust me, we'll be booking you in for an exam in no time.'

She stood to leave, causing Trev to spring out of his chair, too.

'Oh, I don't think you two were properly introduced last week,' I offered. 'Yasmin, this is Trev. Trev, Yasmin.'

Yasmin looked at him for the first time, giving a polite nod. 'Hello.'
'Hello.'

Trev adjusted his hat again. A droplet of sweat ran down the side of his face. It was far too hot to be wearing a woollen cap and a thick shirt, but I suspected that might not be the reason for the perspiration.

After a lingering silence, where I supposed I should really come up with something to say, but was too intrigued to see what would happen if I kept quiet, Yasmin eventually gave a small cough and lifted her chin to meet Trev's gaze.

'You have nice teeth.'

Before he'd had a chance to gather his wits together, she'd floated out the door.

Trev and I were packing up when Chloe returned, Harry, Hudson and Holly proudly placing their returned books on the counter. 'We read them all!' Harry announced. 'That one I read all by myself!'

Irene peered at him over the top of her glasses.

'Can we take some more out, please?'

'That is what the library is for.'

'Yes, I know, but can one of the library ladies read them to us first again so we know what the funny voices are and if we like the story or if it's boring or not?'

Chloe gave him a nudge.

'Pleeeeeeaaase.'

Irene searched the library until she found me, already hitching my bag on my shoulder. 'Sorry, I'm in a rush today.' I offered an apologetic smile, but the only thing I was sorry about was not having time to stay and hear Irene's funny voices.

'Please, Mrs Library Lady, you have to!'

'It is your job, after all,' Trev added, grinning.

'Well.' Irene cleared her throat, her thumb rubbing the dressing on her burnt hand. 'I have a lot of very important things to do.'

'What things?' Hudson asked. 'There's no one else even here.'

'Things like... replacing your books on the shelves.'

Hudson picked up the stack of books that had been checked back in using the automatic machine, and carried them over to the children's section. 'We'll help you, then you'll have time.'

Chloe leant forwards. 'I know you have a ton of things to do, but they'd be so pleased if you could squeeze in just a couple. They've been telling everyone about how brilliant the library is, what great books it has and how the women who work here are really nice.'

'I'm the only woman who works here at the moment,' Irene replied, stiffening her shoulders.

Chloe beamed. 'Well, they must definitely have meant you, then, mustn't they?'

'Oh! Well. I could probably make time for one.'

The children let out a noisy cheer.

'On the condition that you behave yourselves.'

I opened the door to go, stepping back as two more families were about to enter.

'Are we too late for the Library Lady's stories?' one girl asked as she rushed past.

'No, you're just in time.'

I couldn't resist dawdling long enough to see Irene Jenkins perched on a cubed seat, her knees up near her elbows as she turned the page of a giant picture book about bugs.

As she read the first page, the words coming out in a nervous croak, two of the younger children gasped.

'See, I told you they do dead good voices!' Hudson said, nudging the boy next to him.

Irene glanced up, blinking a few times before resuming the story, now deliberately using a reedy, feeble tone.

But I didn't hang about for long. For some reason, seeing Irene with the children made me think of Mum, so I shook off the ache of painful memories, set my mind on the future and turned my feet towards my new home.

* * *

According to the No-Man Mandate, I had to put the same effort into each item on the Dream List as if I was doing it with my Dream Man. That meant preparing for my romantic night in with a long shower, extensive hair removal and a 'radiant glow' face mask. I did a quick clean of the house, changed the bedsheets and slipped into my new outfit, including lingerie I'd ordered online earlier that week. Given that this was the first time I'd ever tried non-supermarket underwear, I'd bought two differently sized sets of the tiny, lacy knickers and matching bra, one black and one dark red.

Deciding the black set was a better match with the charcoal jumpsuit, I curled my hair and applied a heavy layer of dark grey eyeshadow and swiped a glossy layer of Plum Passion across my lips.

Finishing off the look with the silver heels I'd worn as Steph's bridesmaid, I tottered downstairs to start prepping.

An hour later, I had the lights down low, a moody ballad warbling and a table set for one. Having Nesbit trailing me around the kitchen as I wrapped dates with bacon and pan-fried two pieces of salmon (because Bigley Tesco Express didn't sell a single fillet and I thought Nesbit may as well benefit) helped me feel a tiny bit less weird, but I still wasn't sure if going to all this palaver for a night in alone was empowering or just plain pitiful.

By the time I'd drunk a large glass of wine and eaten the bacon canapés, I'd ditched my impractical shoes and switched to a girls' night in playlist and had decided that I should do this every Friday night. Well, every Friday night I didn't have anything else to do, anyway. Hopefully at some point I'd have some friends to hang out with at the weekend, as per Dream List item ten.

I slid the salmon onto a plate, added a spoonful of buttery new potatoes and half the fancy salad I'd picked up from the deli counter at the Hatherstone Hall farm shop, and sat down to eat, facing the kitchen window, Nesbit curled up underneath the table.

Three mouthfuls in, there was a knock on the front door, sending Nesbit into a flurry of barking as he skidded up and down the hallway. I checked my phone – it was just after eight. Not unsociably late. But the only person who'd called unannounced since I moved in was Leanne, and Joan had told me they were having a movie night this evening. My anxiety twitching, I went to answer it, trying to avoid standing on Nesbit, still doing his very best impression of a ferocious guard dog.

When I opened the door, Nesbit entered a whole new level of excited, announcing this awesome visitor with a victory sprint around the entire house, including up the stairs.

'Hi!' I said, surprised to see Sam standing there, before realising that, really, who else would it be, given the number of people I knew in Bigley and beyond.

'Hi!' He grinned, before seeming to register my appearance, his jaw dropping slightly, eyes widening. 'Oh – am I interrupting?'

I glanced down to where his eyes had temporarily paused before darting back up to my face, only then remembering with a spasm of horror that I'd undone the top two buttons on my slightly-too-tight jumpsuit and there was now an inch of black lacy bra on display, along with the kind of cleavage that my supermarket bras could only dream of.

'Um...' *Is it better to say yes or no?*

I had told Sam about the Dream List, but really, standing here in my slinky suit with my boobs half-out, the whiff of wine and James Morrison wafting down the hallway, the idea of spending Friday night on a date with myself couldn't feel any more pathetic.

'Hello!' a cheery voice called out, as Sam's mum appeared out of nowhere. 'Sam mentioned that he needed to bring your pots back, and I insisted on coming to thank you for a simply *delicious* meal.'

Sam awkwardly held up the cool bag I'd delivered the meal in two weeks earlier.

'Oh, and by the way, I'm Pia.' She moved forwards to shake my hand, forcing Sam to step to the side. To give her credit, when Pia noticed what I was wearing, she didn't even blink.

'You're busy, we won't keep you.' She offered me a female version of Sam's stunning smile. 'Enjoy the rest of your evening!'

At that point, Nesbit decided to return, clattering down the stairs to proudly display his new treasure. My heart sank even deeper into my inappropriately exposed chest as I tried to shove him back with my foot.

‘Well, hello again!’ Pia reached down, hand extended, and Nesbit squirmed his way past me and out the front door into the evening sunshine, proudly depositing my red lacy knickers at her feet.

‘Whoops!’ Pia said, scooping them up and handing them to me, while Sam suddenly became fascinated with the trees on the other side of the road.

‘Fab brand,’ Pia leant in and whispered. ‘They do the most gorgeous bottle-green bralette that would look divine with your hair. So comfy you don’t even notice you’re wearing it.’

‘Right... thanks.’

‘Anyway, Sam – stop messing about so Ollie can get back to her evening.’

Sam turned back around, looking me squarely in the eye as he handed the cool bag over. ‘Thanks again. It was a really great meal.’

It was all I could do to nod while feebly clutching the bag until they’d moved away so I could shoo Nesbit inside and slam the door, sliding down onto the welcome mat and burying my head in my hands.

* * *

On Saturday, I drove into the city to have breakfast with Steph. This time Nicky and Drew joined us, so I had to wait until they’d moved off to play football on the computer before I could fill Steph in on my solo date.

‘I don’t know what was worse, flashing my chest or the knickers.’

‘What’s worse is you telling him you’re off dating, when he clearly was hinting about asking you out, and now he thinks you were either on a date or at the very least hooking up with someone. The obvious conclusion is that you *are* interested in dating, just not him.’

'Ugh.' I tipped forwards until my forehead rested on the table. 'It's the complete opposite! I'm not dating but I *am* interested in him!'

'I told you to order a size twelve; that brand has no respect for women with fuller breasts.'

'I told him about the Dream List. Maybe he'll figure out that I was having a fancy night in by myself.'

'Even better.' Steph picked up the curtain of hair covering my face, and bent her nose to mine. 'Maybe he'll think you saw it was him out the window and popped open a couple of buttons with every intention of inviting him in, until his mum showed up.'

'*That is not better!*' I closed my eyes. 'I really like Sam and I want him to like me. Whether he thinks I was hooking up with someone else, or trying in some crass and creepy way to seduce him, neither of those things are me, or like anything I would do.'

'Well, it's clearly something you *want* to do, or it wouldn't be on the Dream List.'

'The Dream List is for when I'm married. And nowhere on there does it have popping open my top because it's too tight, or letting my dog run about with my underwear.'

'It'll make a great story for my chief bridesmaid's speech.' She giggled, before pushing a blueberry lemon muffin under my nose. 'Come on, eat this, I'm supposed to be watching my calories.'

At which point I remembered that my best friend had genuine problems, not least that her dad was recently out of prison for the umpteenth time and had been contacting her brother Simeon, and that her mum was drinking too much again.

* * *

‘So, enough of my gut-wrenching problems, what’s next on the list?’ Steph asked, once she’d cried about the mess that was her parents, and then cried again when she proudly told me how her brother Jordan had decided to specialise in oncology.

‘Ugh. I can’t even think about that stupid list, let alone choose something. A romantic night in was supposed to be the easiest thing on there.’

‘Come on, then, hand it over.’ She held out her hand.

‘It’s an A3 sheet; I don’t carry it about with me.’

‘So you’re telling me you don’t have a picture on your phone?’

Sighing, I scrolled through to the photo and passed her my phone.

Steph pursed her lips as she scanned the list. ‘Number six.’

‘Number six?’

‘Yes. You need to do something bold and brazen to get your confidence back.’

‘I don’t think I’m ready to sit in a restaurant that posh by myself.’ Item six had started out as a meal in one of Nottingham’s stuffiest restaurants, but when that closed down a year earlier I’d updated it to Hatherstone Hall. Originally opening up as a wedding venue, its boutique restaurant had swiftly garnered a reputation as the most exclusive eatery in the county. When a well-known Nottingham actor had proposed to his girlfriend there a few weeks earlier, it had been unofficially crowned the ultimate romantic place to dine.

I squinted at her. ‘Eating in a restaurant on your own by choice, knowing you have friends to eat with if you wanted, is one thing. Eating alone because you have no one else to ask is a whole different matter.’

‘Ollie, you have friends – and family – who would love to eat out with you. Not that long ago Boring Mark specifically asked you to eat

in a restaurant with him. That's not the point of this.'

'I know.' I wriggled awkwardly on her breakfast bench. 'Maybe I'll do some of the other out-and-about things on the list first, and have a couple of incidental meals with other people, then I'll feel okay about getting pitiful looks from the waiter when I blow a day's wages going to an expensive restaurant on my own.'

Steph tried arguing with me, but it turned out that the next possible booking was a month away, so that decided it. For the next few weeks I balanced work, hanging out with Joan, trying to teach my puppy who was boss, and ticking off the things on the list that would help build up my courage to complete item six.

I went to the Nottingham Contemporary Art Gallery one Saturday, soon feeling quite comfortable wandering about and forming my own opinions about the artwork, and even having a perfectly pleasant conversation with a forty-something man who then invited me to join him for a coffee. I of course turned him down, on the one hand because he was a man, and this was the No-Man Mandate, and on the other because I was meeting Karina at an Italian restaurant for a late lunch that ended up lasting until an early dinner, thanks to cocktail hour and lunch being taken up with talking about how Mum was doing. In summary: not great, but better than before. She missed me, but still couldn't comprehend how I felt, or that what I needed also mattered. Karina and Aunty Linda were trying to persuade her to see a counsellor. Karina had also signed her up for a silver singles night out. I wasn't sure which of these was more improbable.

One Thursday evening I watched *Romeo and Juliet* at Newstead Abbey's outdoor theatre, surrounded by groups of middle-aged friends and younger couples with picnic hampers while I sipped my single glass of wine, a plastic plate of cheese and crackers balanced

on my lap. At the half-time interval, Sam's mum, Pia, spotted me. She invited me to join her group, while somehow not making me feel at all strange for being at the theatre alone. When I politely declined, she discreetly pulled down the neckline of her tunic to show me her bottle-green bra strap – 'This is the one I was telling you about. So comfortable!' – before patting my arm with a wink and leaving me to it.

I had tea and cake with Aunty Linda, and met Steph and a couple of her work colleagues at a gin bar. Not on the Dream List, but equally vital in helping my confidence grow as I wobbled my way through my newfound freedom.

The only outing that I found a real challenge was item five – a dance class. Going to Ballroom for Beginners with a dance partner is one thing. Going alone, it turned out, is a different experience altogether. There were half a dozen or so couples at the class, held in Bigley village hall one Wednesday evening. There were also six women, including me, and one man. The man, and most of the women, were regulars, and he had seemingly cultivated some bizarre hierarchy that determined which women got to dance with him, and who had to partner up with the other women. He instantly started sniffing around the new girl like a tomcat, which did not go down well with the others. One woman tried to trip me up during the warm-up, and another commented on how I looked like a 'right trollop', and how dare I think I could 'waltz in here and bag Liam for the tango'.

Believe me, I did not want to bag Liam for the tango. His idea of being 'sensual', as he patiently explained in response to my objection about his creeping fingers, was my idea of borderline sexual assault. And if that meant I had no artistic expression, then fine by me.

Still, it was another tick on the list. Seven down, only five to go.

‘Table for... two, madam?’ the maître d’ asked, with a polite smile, once I’d given him my name.

‘Just one, thank you,’ I replied, lifting my chin and pretending I did this sort of thing all the time.

‘Certainly, madam,’ he replied as though showing nervous women to their solo table was the sort of thing he did all the time, too. ‘A view of the garden?’

I tugged my pashmina a little tighter around my shoulders and followed him through the clinking of crystal and fine china in the dining room to the conservatory beyond. It was simply stunning. The fanciest place I’d eaten in before this was a flashy, ultra-modern hotel in London when Jonathan had sneaked me away to the West End to see *The Lion King*. We’d eaten to a backdrop of pounding dance music and raucous banter, and I’d been too tense to eat more than a couple of mouthfuls.

Hatherstone Hall was the epitome of serenity. The faint notes of a sonata from a grand piano mingled with the evening birdsong and gentle murmur of conversation. It was mid-July, and the air drifting through the conservatory doors was fresh and sweet, the gardens a mix of lush lawns and pretty flower beds. Everything from the

paintings on the walls to the linen tablecloth and single peach rose in a vase spoke of class and elegance. I would have felt utterly out of place and horribly uncomfortable, except that each small gathering was getting on with enjoying their own meal.

I had a feeling that had someone famous walked in, no one would have stirred or even noticed. They certainly weren't going to notice me.

My feeling was wrong. By the time I'd ordered my starter and main course and enjoyed a complimentary appetiser (yes, the prices made my eyelids twitch, and had I not been so adamant in sticking to the spirit of the Dream List, I would have gone for the cheapest thing on the menu and then got out of there) I was starting to genuinely enjoy myself. However, just as the waitress brought out my mackerel, another customer waved at me from their table on the other side of the room, offering a sympathetic smile.

I gave a tentative wave back before turning to pretend I was engrossed in my food, mind racing to think where I'd seen the woman before. She looked to be in her late thirties, definitely not someone I knew from Sherwood, and too old to have been at school or university with me. I scrolled through the ReadUp team in my head, but couldn't place her. It was only when I sneaked another peek, and happened to catch a proper look at the man sitting with her, that I remembered.

Crap.

Sam's brother. The one who, the one and only time I'd seen him previously, had suggested that Sam shoot my dog.

And now his wife was briskly texting, while having a hushed exchange with her husband that included more furtive glances over at me.

I took a deep breath, reminded myself why I was here and ate another blissful forkful of fish, trying not to pull a face that revealed quite how my tastebuds were rolling about in ecstasy as I shifted my chair around a couple of inches to block Sam's family from my peripheral vision.

I'd polished off my starter, enjoyed a palate-cleansing cucumber sorbet and was about to tuck into my guinea fowl when a much louder voice interrupted the soft chatter, causing everyone, including me, to swivel around to see what philistine had disturbed the genteel atmosphere.

My heart instantly plummeted into my overly high heels before rebounding back into my throat on the next beat.

Sam stood beside his sister-in-law, his sun-streaked hair an agitated mess, face creased with concern, wearing a grey T-shirt, worn jeans and scuffed brown boots.

'What's happened?' he asked, causing his sister-in-law to shush him.

'You said it was an emergency,' he said, the worry in his voice slipping into annoyance.

She slid her eyes over to me and back again a couple of times, trying to get Sam to look my way without saying anything. I should have ducked my head, started scrolling on my phone or something but it was a rabbit-in-the-headlights so-awful-I-can't-stop-watching type of moment. Eventually, she did a totally unsubtle pointing gesture, as if by keeping her finger close to her midriff I wouldn't see it, and Sam turned a second too soon for me to avert my gaze.

Which I did anyway, of course, heartily shoving in a far-too big chunk of guinea fowl so that when he arrived at my table a second later and said hi, my cheek was bulging.

I did that awful *please wait while I chew* gesture, rotating my hand near my mouth while sort of smiling and rolling my eyes in a faux-goofy manner. Beneath the stupid expression, I was slowly dying, one humiliated cell giving up on me at a time.

'Hi!' I managed, eventually, after a painfully big swallow. Thank goodness this place served such tender meat or it would have dragged on forever.

'Um, is it okay if I...?' Sam nodded at the chair opposite me. 'I don't want to cause even more of a scene.'

'No, of course.' I patted my mouth with a napkin, tempted for a second to just drape it over my head and stay there until everyone had gone home.

'I'm so embarrassed, and annoyed,' he said, as soon as he'd shuffled the chair as close to the table as possible so he could speak more quietly.

'Oh. Um, sorry...'

'No, not at you!' He shook his head. 'At Megan. Interfering old bat. She messaged and said to come over as soon as possible, and when I called to ask why she turned her phone off. I thought Tom must have choked on a chicken bone or something.'

'So what?' I ate a forkful of fondant potato. I wasn't missing out on this meal, no matter what drama accompanied it. 'I was the emergency?'

'Megan assumed you'd been stood up.'

'And needed rescuing?'

'Precisely. And before you ask, this is more about me than it is you. She's been desperate to set me up ever since... well. Since I've been single. Despite me telling her repeatedly that the last thing I want is a serious relationship.'

The last thing he wants...

Good to know.

Well, actually it was rubbish to know, but at least I knew before I'd completed the Dream List and asked him out or something even more embarrassing.

'So she calls you any time she sees a random woman out alone?'

He sighed. 'Mum told her that you had dinner with me the other week. They were practically planning wedding outfits. I did say that if anything you're even less interested in a relationship than I am. We're friends, and there's no point hoping we'll become anything else.'

Again, good/rubbish to know. I swallowed back the lump of humiliation now blocking my throat and tried not to think about how Steph and I had been discussing my wedding dress only a few days earlier. I could pretend that had nothing to do with Sam, except that we'd considered adding gold beading to match his eyes.

'So we're friends?' I offered a smile, to show how nice and friendly and chilled I was.

'Don't smile!' he muttered urgently. 'It'll only encourage her.'

At that point, the maître d' appeared like a ghost out of nowhere. 'Sir, will you be joining madam?'

Sam shifted in his seat, a faint blush rising up his cheeks that completely contradicted everything he'd just said. My foolish heart pounded a little harder against my ribs. 'Is that okay?' he asked, glancing first at the maître d', then at me.

'You might as well stay now you're here,' I said, trying hard to keep my smile under control. 'Seeing as we're friends.'

'Very good.' The maître d' nodded. 'Can I get you anything, then, sir? A drink, perhaps, or the menu?'

Sam ordered a coffee, we both ordered the same dessert, and then we were alone again.

He looked at me before dropping his gaze to the table and then back up, the question bubbling under his skin.

‘Go on, ask me,’ I said, my stomach deliciously full.

‘It’s none of my business.’

‘And? If we only ever asked questions that were our business it’d be a pretty rubbish conversation.’

‘Were you stood up?’ he asked, after hesitating for another moment.

‘No.’

‘So this was part of the Dream List?’

My stupid, starving hormones couldn’t help pinging to attention at how his face shone with relief.

‘Well, duh!’ I grinned, admiring the beautiful room. ‘What kind of a Dream Man *wouldn’t* have brought me here.’

‘This place only opened a few months ago. I thought you made the list when you were at school.’

Reminder to self: Sam never forgets anything I say.

‘It’s an evolving document. Not sure Pizza Hut is quite my idea of a dream date these days.’

‘Fair enough.’ He paused while the waitress delivered our coffee and chocolate *crèmeux*. ‘So, the other night...?’

‘A romantic dinner for one.’

He automatically glanced down at my jumpsuit.

‘I think Megan and Tom are trying to say goodbye,’ I said after a few seconds, breaking the loaded silence.

Sam glanced over to see Megan grinning and bouncing about on her toes as Tom tried to herd her out of the room. Sam scrunched up his face in apology. ‘I didn’t want to tell her that you’re not interested in seeing anyone. It’s none of her business.’

I took a second to finish off the last of my wine. 'You could have just told her that you aren't interested in *me*.'

Sam smiled behind his coffee mug. 'She's decided beggars can't be choosers.'

'And you're the beggar? I don't know if that's more insulting to you or to me.'

'She didn't actually say that! Just, well. Like I said, she has a hard time understanding why I want to stay single.'

'So why do you?' I asked, feeling bold in the gentle glow of the candlelight.

He fiddled with his fork for a few moments. 'My lifestyle change wasn't as simple as I made it sound. I'd been working for the family firm since I left law school. I didn't hate it – not initially. But it wasn't right for me. Putting on a front, pretending I cared about contracts and closing deals was exhausting. My family thought I had everything – the salary, success. A beautiful girlfriend waiting for a ring. All I wanted was to be out in the open air. It felt like my soul was withering away cooped up in the office for fourteen hours a day.

'Eventually, I couldn't pretend any more. To cut a grim story short, I had a nervous breakdown. I still might not have left, might have fought my way back, to please my girlfriend, Carrie, prove to Dad that I wasn't the weak son, unable to hack it, except that Mum stepped in and told me I had to leave. Told Dad, Tom and Chris that I wasn't coming back.' He paused to take a bite of dessert, but his eyes were fixed on a distant memory. 'Carrie was beside herself with worry. She thought that if she loved me enough, I would get better and we could go back to how things were. She couldn't accept that it was how things were that made me ill in the first place. When she couldn't make me happy, she felt like I'd rejected her. Failing her on top of everything else crushed me.'

'I can't imagine how hard that must have been.'

'Yeah. So, I decided I'm done with having to please other people. And however like-minded or supportive someone might be, a relationship always requires compromise, and working to try to meet expectations, and having to worry about someone. I just can't do that any more. I'm more than happy to have good friends, and a fantastic mum, and the best two dogs who ever lived.'

'I can understand that.'

Sam smiled at me. He knew how true that was.

'So, given that I'm a sworn bachelor, if you ever change your mind and decide you want a totally platonic partner on any of these Dream List adventures, give me a shout.'

'A tempting offer, but that's not how the Dream List works.'

'Fair enough. You'll at least fill me in on how it's going, though?'

I grinned. 'It seems I don't have to. You just keep turning up and finding out for yourself.'

So, that was that. Time to stop fantasising about what could happen between Sam and me once the Dream List was complete.

We chatted for another half an hour or so, as the sun drifted below the treeline. Sam had a dozen questions about my job, and we naturally ended up talking about our families again. When the waiter asked if we'd like to take our (long-finished) drinks out onto the terrace, we took the hint, checked the time and realised that the whole evening had slipped by.

I wasn't about to argue when Sam offered to drive me home in his bashed-up truck because it meant I got to ride through the balmy July night with my new friend, the moonlight shimmering silver through the window and the radio set to late-night cheese as we sang along, laughing, all the way to Bigley.

I was worried about Joan.

A nagging twist in my guts told me something was wrong. More wrong than having a mum who was barely home because she worked gruelling hours just to keep scraping along the poverty line. I knew Joan felt anxious about Leanne being ill and tired all the time. I could see that she was lonely, but I was starting to wonder where the boundary lay between a struggling mum doing her best and emotional neglect.

I'd been relieved when Joan had told me about the movie night. But it hadn't been enough to undo the knot of tension that pulled tighter in my stomach when I saw the blueberry-coloured shadows under her eyes, or found her staring off into the distance with a haunted expression that did little to hide a childhood full of worry and insecurity.

Saturdays, she usually appeared in the garden as soon as Nesbit went out for his first sniff of the day. The morning after my dinner at Hatherstone Hall, I was on my second mug of tea and there was still no sign of her.

I decided to shower and get dressed and then call round and ask if she wanted to come on a dog walk. Before I made it up the stairs, I

spotted a note pushed through the letterbox:

The girl needs checking on. She has been reading the same book for a week.

I tried to remember what Joan had been reading as she lay on her blanket in her corner spot. If it was another Tolkien, then I wouldn't be overly concerned about it taking a week. Then again, if it had been Tolkien, Ebenezer probably wouldn't bother telling me about it.

It was a quick shower, my hair still hanging damp down my back when I knocked on her door. After two more tries, I went around to the back and had a peer through the window. No Joan in the kitchen. At least, I thought there was no Joan. It was hard to see past all the clutter. I banged loudly on the back door a few times and eventually a tiny face peeked around the side of the door that led from the hallway into the kitchen. I gave her a wave from the window so she knew I'd seen her, and after a long moment of indecision, she opened the back door.

'Are you okay? I was worried when you didn't come to see Nesbit this morning.'

Nesbit, upon hearing the door open, had raced over and squeezed past Joan into the kitchen, which to a greedy puppy must have smelt like doggy heaven.

Joan went to pull his head out of a plastic bag stuffed with rubbish, so I used the opportunity to step inside. Amongst the smell of dirty dishes and stale food cartons, when I moved closer to slip Nesbit's lead on, I caught the whiff of unwashed clothes and a body in need of a bath. Joan usually wore her hair up; this morning it hung lank and greasy over her shoulders. As she bent to pat Nesbit, the

nobbles of her spine stuck out above the frayed edge of her vest top, her shoulder blades jutting painfully either side.

My innards twisted even tighter as I blinked back the shock and dismay.

'How's your mum?' I asked, having got no response from my first question.

Joan shrugged, her face buried in Nesbit's fur.

'Is she at work?'

A nod.

'Have you had breakfast?'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Joan.' I crouched down and gently placed one hand on her shoulder, using the other to move Nesbit away so I could see her face. My tone was quiet, but firm enough that she knew I wasn't about to let this go. 'I'm a bit worried that Mum hasn't been feeling well again, and has been so tired she's got behind with some of the things that need doing, like maybe the shopping or tidying up.' I smiled, in a vain attempt to convince Joan that while I might be worried, she didn't have to be. 'I'm wondering if she could do with some help, just until she gets better. What do you think?'

Joan dropped her gaze to the filthy floor, her jaw clenched. 'She's got help. / help her. I know how to clean and cook and do the washing. And I can buy food for us after school when she's too tired. We're in this together; we don't need anybody interfering!'

I nodded. 'I understand. My mum used to say that about me and her, too. But you're a child, Joan. You should be concentrating on school and playing with your dog and amazing books that need reading, not having to look after your mum, and take care of everything else that needs doing.'

Her bony shoulders hunched over, trying to shut out the reality that they desperately needed someone to interfere.

‘Is that what you’ve been doing this week, when you haven’t been over? Helping Mum with the cooking and other things?’

Despite her furious frown, a tear managed to escape and slip down the side of her face.

I took hold of her hand. It was stiff and unresponsive, but I gently held it anyway.

‘We all need a bit of extra help sometimes, and that’s okay. Look at me – I’ve had so much help from you with Nesbit, and Yasmin. Remember when Steph and Drew helped me paint?’

‘She’s...’ Joan’s voice broke on a sob, before she shook her head in frustration, sucked in a deep breath and swallowed the tears back down. ‘She’s just been extra tired this week, so it takes longer for her to clean the houses and then she gets home later, so there isn’t as much time, and then she’s even more tired. Once she’s feeling better, she promised we’ll have a big spring clean and a sort-out and get everything nice again. We’re going to bake cakes and go on a picnic.’

I nodded. ‘That sounds lovely.’ I hoped Joan couldn’t sense my creeping fear that whatever Leanne’s problem was, it wouldn’t be better any time soon. Not without help, anyway. ‘But you know, most people, when they’re not feeling well, really appreciate someone giving them a hand. How about you jump in the shower, I’ll pop a load of clothes in the wash and then we can do some tidying up. We could even cook her a nice meal. That would be a lovely surprise to come home to after a long day at work.’

‘I’m fine. I had a bath yesterday.’

In a sweat-filled, grimy pond, maybe.

‘Okay. Well, you go and grab your school uniform, and whatever else you’ve worn this week, and we can put the washing machine on. We should have time to do your sheets and towels, too.’

Joan made a grunt of frustration. She swiped another tear away, squeezed both eyes shut and folded her arms. ‘It’s fine. We don’t need your help!’

A sudden thought occurred to my ignorant, privileged self. ‘Do you have a washing machine?’

‘Yes!’

I waited. The façade continued to crack.

‘It’s broken, okay? Happy? Like the shower and the oven and most other things in this house.’ She kicked at a chair leg, which tilted three inches to the side, causing the pile of papers and other mess to slip off onto the floor, as if proving her point.

In answer to her question, no, I was not happy. I felt as though my heart had cracked right down the middle. I wanted to scoop this precious girl up and carry her far, far away, to a world where nothing was broken, neither household appliances nor people. Where women didn’t have to bundle their baby out of bed and flee in the middle of the night with nothing but a couple of tatty rucksacks and the scars of trauma and abuse. Where working your backside off six days a week, leaving your child to fend for herself for hours on end, meant that at least you had enough to put food in the fridge and pay for a plumber so you could be clean, and hang on to what remained of your dignity.

I couldn’t take Joan out of this miserable situation. I prayed it wouldn’t spiral to the point where someone else had to, for her own protection. The prospect of having to call social services filled me with thick, black dread.

I summoned up the strength to eradicate the jitters from my voice, and persuaded Joan to spend an hour in my bathroom while I lugged bin bags of clothes and bedding and towels across the garden and piled them in a disturbingly high pile in front of my washing machine.

By the time the first load had finished, a washing line had been strung up between two trees at Joan and Leanne's side of the lawn. I waved my thanks at the kitchen window of Middle Cottage, trying to stem the flood of tears before Joan was finished in the bathroom.

We spent the afternoon cleaning and sorting what we could. I filled both our bins to the brim, avoiding touching Leanne's meagre possessions apart from when it meant clearing a path through the mess, and asking Joan to fetch her mum's dirty washing so I didn't have to go into her bedroom. We scrubbed the kitchen and bathroom, Joan's little face scrunched with effort as she scoured the sinks and cupboard doors, Nesbit wagging his tail beside her. I lugged my vacuum cleaner around and we dusted the chipped, wonky furniture. We finished off by filling old jam jars with flowers from the garden, and placing one in each room. I also left toothpaste, soap, shampoo, toilet paper and sanitary towels in the bathroom. Drawing the curtains and opening the windows did wonders to lift the oppressive atmosphere. By the time I had a bolognese bubbling on the one working hob, a pan of spaghetti at the ready, the house almost resembled a home again.

I couldn't decide whether to wait for Leanne to come home or not. Would she handle the invasion better if I wasn't there to witness her response? In the end, Joan asked me to go. She may have predicted her mother's struggle between pride and gratitude, and wanted to avoid me making clumsy comments that would make her feel worse.

I sat and tried to force down my own plate of pasta, ears straining for the sound of New Cottage's front door closing. I could imagine Ebenezer in between us, holding his breath.

It was nearly eight when she found me in the garden. I kept my head in my book, pretending I hadn't seen her until she came to a stop in front of my chair.

Heart hammering, I looked up to see Leanne standing there, arms folded inside her thin cardigan, hair scraped into a harsh ponytail, jaw set, eyes brimming with tears.

'What the hell?'

I swallowed back my nerves, pretended I was the type of confident, socially adept woman who knew how to befriend other women, and nodded at the chair beside me. 'Would you like a cup of tea?' The warm evening felt perfect for a glass of wine, but I was wary about offering Leanne alcohol.

She stared at me for a long, agonising minute with eyes that were sallow, sunken slits.

'Or lemonade?'

'Go on, then.' She gave a dismissive shrug as though she couldn't care less either way. It was hard not to smile in surprise, having seen Joan perform that exact gesture dozens of times.

I got up and went inside to fetch two glasses, and then a far better idea hit me. A few minutes later I found Leanne, slumped in my spare chair, arms still wrapped tightly across her gaunt body.

'It's this way,' I ventured, suddenly aware that I hadn't figured out this part of the plan.

'What?' Her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

'Come on. It's much comfier inside.' I adopted the smile that I'd perfected over decades of trying to appease my mother, holding up both drinks like a stranger luring a child with a bag of sweets.

With an impatient huff she heaved herself out of the chair with the effort of a woman three times her age. I couldn't quite believe she actually followed me into the house and up the stairs, but I supposed she was simply too weary to argue. I ducked into the bathroom ahead of her, turning off the taps and checking that there were enough bubbles, and that the candles were still lit.

'Towels are there. It's a spare robe so don't worry about giving it back. Chocolate, radio and I'll leave your drink here. Take as long as you need. I'll be in the garden in case Joan wonders where you are. Oh, and there's plenty of hot water if you want to top it up.'

Leanne shook her head, conflicting thoughts wrestling behind bloodshot eyes.

Rather than arguing, I simply nudged her inside, slipped out and shut the door behind me.

Forty minutes later she reappeared – still in her grubby work clothes, but her wet hair was smoothed back behind her ears and her skin was almost rosy.

'I left the glass on the side in the kitchen.' She hovered for a moment, and before I could think of how to break the tension, she collapsed into a chair, face disintegrating into brutal, bone-jarring sobs.

Completely out of my depth, the fact that she'd accepted the bath gave me enough courage to scoot my chair closer until I could place my hand on her shoulder. After about a minute of bawling, Joan appeared at her kitchen door. I smiled, mouthing, 'It's okay,' and she nodded, her eyebrows sharp angles of worry, before disappearing inside again.

'I'll make us some tea,' I said, once Leanne had quietened enough to hear me, reappearing with mugs and tissues to find her sitting quietly, staring at the trees beyond the fence.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘No.’ I handed her a mug, then sat down. ‘Don’t apologise. Not for crying, or for being knackered, or having a broken shower. Or for needing some help. I don’t know the details, and I don’t need to, but I do know that these near-impossible circumstances you’ve ended up in are not your fault.’

Leanne laughed – a brittle, caustic bark of self-contempt. ‘Not true.’

I watched a pair of wood pigeons hopping along the back fence as I thought about that.

‘Wow. You must be the luckiest woman alive if you’ve never had anyone take advantage. If everything has always gone your way and you’ve never had to face stuff randomly going wrong or someone else’s bad decision making your life worse.’

I just about caught the tiniest flicker of a smile.

‘While I’ve not had much luck on my side, I’ve not exactly helped matters by making one stupid decision after another.’

‘Was leaving your boyfriend and coming here stupid?’

Leanne took a slow sip of tea. The summer air was starting to cool as the sun sank below the far edge of the forest, and she huddled further down in her seat. ‘It would have killed me, in the end, if I’d stayed. Either the violence or the drugs. So, no. Even though I’ve spent plenty of time wondering what the hell I’m doing here, and hated myself for what it’s doing to my little girl, I had to leave.’

At the mention of drugs, a tendril of anxiety slithered down the back of my neck.

‘But I brought that monster into our home in the first place. I stayed with him as long as I did. So it was still my fault.’

I took a slow breath, before deciding that I had nothing to lose in reciprocating Leanne’s honesty. ‘I’m starting to realise that my mum

was emotionally abusive. She controlled my entire life, up until I moved here. I lost my twenties doing what she wanted, being who she wanted me to be. I could blame her for it, accuse her of sabotaging any chance I had at happiness, but I was an adult, responsible for my own choices. Any power she had over me was because I gave it to her.'

'It's not that easy, though, is it?' Leanne shook her head. 'Any person who's been abused could say the same thing. Blame themselves for not walking away.' She gave another, more vigorous shake. 'No. I know the courage it takes to escape that, when your confidence has been shredded, one insult, one kick at a time, until you feel like less than nothing. And for me, it was some leech I'd known for five minutes. Your mum is a whole different story.'

'I had a job, at least, and friends not too far away. Leanne, I don't know how you've managed to pick yourself up from nothing, and survive this long all on your own, but I want you to know that you've got me as a friend.'

She raised one straggled eyebrow. 'You might not say that if you knew me. I'm not most respectable people's first choice of friend.'

'Well, I don't exactly have a lot to compare you to, so I'm prepared to take the risk. Besides,' I added after a moment. 'Ebenezer seems to think you're worth looking out for. He even strung up this washing line.'

'Ebenezer?'

'In Middle Cottage. That's what Joan calls him.'

Leanne slowly swivelled her head to face me. 'Ollie, no one lives in Middle Cottage. It's been empty for years.'

'What?' A spurt of adrenaline whooshed through my bloodstream as I whipped around to look at the cottage. It was when I spun back,

hand clutching my chest in genuine horror, that I caught the grin on Leanne's face.

'You absolute cow.'

'Told you I was a terrible friend.'

She burst out laughing, and after giving my heart a moment to start beating again, I had to join her. For no other reason than here I was, on a Saturday night, sharing a drink and a joke with yet another new person (even if I had practically forced her into it).

Here's what I should have learnt years ago, given my job, and my disastrous family: there are imperfect, mixed-up, complicated people everywhere. People who are simply doing the best they can to shake off whatever's been dumped on them, pick themselves up and keep on going. I'd wasted a lot of time disqualifying myself from this grand adventure called life – I might make a mistake, take a wrong turn, fail spectacularly. The truth dawned on me that summer evening, as the sunset lit up the forest in a blaze of fire and the memories that swirled around us slowly sank into the shadows – *I will make a thousand mistakes, I will take many wrong turns, and I may well fail spectacularly, along with every other person who ever lived. And when these things happen, I will shake it off and get back up again – maybe accepting a helping hand, if I need it – and I will keep on going.*

Phew. A lump of fear that had been sitting in my chest for more than twenty years quietly crumbled into dust as we finished our tea.

'Thank you,' Leanne murmured, leaning her head against the back of the chair.

'You're welcome.'

'No, I mean it. I can't remember the last time someone did something nice for me. You hanging out with Joan, I'm dead grateful, but I know it's for her, not me. Probably the same for cleaning and

cooking dinner. But running me a bath? The candles and the fancy shampoo. That little plate of chocolates.’ She was weeping now, in heart-wrenching contrast to the violent sobs from before. Nesbit got up from where he’d been snoozing under my chair and went to lay his head on her knee. ‘That was... It made me feel, for just those few minutes, like someone didn’t think I was an invisible piece of crap. I felt... cared for. It’s a long time since someone did that without trying to get something from me in return.’

‘Like I said, you’re welcome. Please come and use my shower whenever you like. And my oven. Although if you’re renting, surely the landlord should sort them out as a priority?’

She stood up, handing me the mug. ‘The landlord won’t sort them while I’m two months behind on rent. Joan needed school shoes and trainers. I wanted her to have a phone so she could call me if anything happened while I’m at work. A week later, the old washer broke and I got one of them loans out to replace it, only the second-hand one I bought lasted six washes. Now I have interest I can’t pay, one of my clients refused to pay me for last month’s work because I failed to meet her impossible standards, and another one just fired me for being drunk on the job.’

What?

‘I haven’t drunk a drop since the day I left that scumbag Archer. I was feeling lightheaded and they caught me at the wrong moment.’

I had no answers for Leanne. I couldn’t tell her that it would be okay. Clearly, things were far from okay.

And as for being wrongfully fired – I so wanted her to be telling the truth, for her to be the woman who’d found the guts and the grit to walk away. Who then, in a cruel twist of fate, simply got ill, as if life hadn’t been hard enough.

I wanted to believe Leanne – to believe *in* her. But if she was a woman living in the grip of substance abuse, who'd spent all her money feeding her addiction, hoping to dupe the gullible neighbour into feeling sorry for her and helping her out? Well – wouldn't she say exactly the same thing?

I went to bed that night full of disturbing questions. Should I give Leanne the benefit of the doubt, ignoring my growing unease on the basis of one conversation? Or should I assume the worst, hand over my concerns to someone in authority, and potentially start a sequence of events that – should Leanne be telling the truth – would wreak yet more devastation on a woman and a little girl who had already faced more than enough?

It was a long night.

After the conversation with Leanne, it was inevitable that I'd wake up with Mum on my mind. To be honest, I thought about her far more than I wanted to.

I would often make a mental note to tell her something – if someone was rude to me, or a funny incident happened, or I had a mini-victory with an issue to do with the cottage. And then I'd remember that, even if I did phone or message to tell her, she wouldn't be interested. Not unless she could twist it to revolve around her, and how I had made her feel.

The websites I'd been reading about emotional abuse were helping me realise that I didn't *make* her feel anything. She was her own person, and how she chose to react to me was her responsibility. That, however, didn't stop a deep-seated part of me from craving her approval or from hoping that one day she would be proud of me.

I'd have days when it looked like I was making progress – I'd cook dinner without thinking whether she'd like it or not, or leave a mess on the kitchen table and not worry that she was right about me not coping alone. Other times, her miserable moaning haunted my every step.

I didn't know it was possible to miss someone so much while still being so happy not to have to see or hear from them.

I spent the morning going through the Buttonhole website, finding that Mum had continued to get more actively involved – she was running more workshops, had some quilts and other crafts up for sale. There was a blog about the recent embroidery course, and I was shocked to see a photograph of her looking delighted as she demonstrated a stitch. She had a new hairstyle and wore a cotton dress that made her look a decade younger.

For years I had wished and prayed that she'd get a life of her own, leaving me to get on with mine.

So why did it feel like she'd stabbed me in the chest with her crochet hook?

* * *

I took Nesbit out for a long walk once the temperature had eased. I'd called Steph, and she'd listened and sympathised and then ordered me to get back to the Dream List and focus on things I could change, rather than people I couldn't.

I'd been making such good progress with the list that there weren't many straightforward options left. It would need to be something big enough to concentrate my mind, but not so big I couldn't do it soon. There was one obvious choice, but it was one of those items that seemed fun, cosy and romantic with a partner, but cold, scary and pointlessly uncomfortable if tried alone.

I mulled it over as Nesbit and I weaved amongst the trees, stopping to admire the wildflowers or chew on an old pine cone, not at all accidentally ambling in the vague direction of Sam's house. As we walked and soaked up the peace and beauty of the forest, I had

to acknowledge that being out here was like a massage to my stressed-out soul. My breathing slowed, the anxious thoughts settled, and the tension in my stomach and shoulders gradually eased. By the time we'd completely failed to locate either Sam's house or the path back to Bigley, I'd made my mind up. Once I'd passed the same picnic clearing for the third time, which thankfully turned out to have a tiny blip of internet connection so I could figure out the rough direction for home, I'd convinced myself that sooner rather than later was the time to do it.

Item seven: a weekend hiking and camping in Bigley Forest Park.

* * *

I spent most of my free time for the next couple of weeks planning and prepping for the big trip. While I knew one night in a tent less than five miles from home wasn't that exciting to some people, it was a huge deal to me and I was unashamedly treating it as such. I couldn't find anything online about whether camping was permitted in the forest park, so I did the next best thing and asked around (I would of course have loved to have asked Sam, but I didn't have his phone number, he was nowhere on social media and it didn't seem like a good enough reason to drive over to his house).

Jaxx, who had a Tuesday session that week, assured me that it was fine. 'Everyone does it! Me'n the boys've had some mad weekends there. Bevvies and a tin of hot dogs round the campfire. Bigley tradition, innit. Hey – Nomato would go perfect on a hot dog. Here, take another sample.'

To my relief, he didn't ask what I'd thought of the first sample, which had gone straight into the bin.

On Wednesday, Yasmin was horrified. 'Why do you care if it is officially allowed or not? All I can say is, it *shouldn't* be! Sleeping on the ground with no running water or electricity is not nice. This is why we have jobs and earn money, and come to countries where we can have a proper front door with a lock.' She wrung her hands together, the scars a glittering, silver web against her skin. 'Please promise me that if you do this foolish thing, you will not take Nesbit.'

Thankfully, before I had a chance not to promise, Trev arrived in his blue shirt, face glowing, head covered in a bandana made of fabric covered in dachshunds.

'Tell her, Trev,' Yasmin implored, once we'd said hello and Yasmin had wiggled up to make room for him to sit on her side of the table. 'You are clearly a man who knows about these things. Please tell Ollie it is not safe for her to be taking a dog out all night in the middle of nowhere.'

'We'll be in a tent.'

'Depends where you're going, I suppose. In my experience, trouble rarely finds those who aren't looking for it. And taking a dog seems like a grand idea. He'll let you know if there's anything prowling about. Or anyone.'

'So, what, you put an innocent animal at risk when it has no choice in the matter, just so she can... ugh, I don't know what she wants to do! I'm thinking that my English must be worse than I thought because you can't possibly mean that you are choosing this, Ollie.'

'I was thinking of camping in Bigley Forest Park next weekend,' I said to Trev.

At least I had been, until someone mentioned things *prowling about*.

‘Oh, smashing!’ Trev grinned. ‘Used to go there all the time, before... well, you know. Me and my brothers would take our bikes. Sometimes a girl or two, if we were lucky. My brother and his wife still take the kids there if the weather’s good. Find a quiet spot, pitch up and watch the stars come out. Beautiful!’

‘Please tell me you are joking because I thought you said that your brother makes his wife and children leave their lovely, comfortable, safe house with a television and a kettle and a toilet so they can lie in the dirt amongst the bugs *for fun!*’

Trev shrugged. ‘Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it.’

Yasmin rubbed her wrists even harder, her eyes swimming with shadows. ‘I have tried it.’ She shook her head for a few seconds as if utterly bewildered, before abruptly lifting her chin, eyes snapping back to the present. ‘Right, time for me to go.’

‘You don’t have to,’ Trev blurted, before his mouth dropped open in horror.

Yasmin looked at him, puzzled. ‘I couldn’t possibly interrupt your session.’

‘Oh, well, I didn’t mean...’ Trev took off his bandana and used it to wipe his forehead.

‘Thanks, Ollie, I’ll see you next week. If you haven’t been mauled by a wild animal or caught some hideous disease from putrid water.’ Yasmin paused, her eyes glinting at Trev. ‘Nice bandana.’

* * *

Thursday evening, all thoughts of camping were hurled to one side when Leanne charged into the garden, slamming her back door so hard it rattled my teeth from the other side of the lawn.

'You absolute bitch,' she snarled, the trail from her cigarette like smoke from a dragon's nostril.

'Excuse me?' It was the first time I'd seen Leanne since she'd cried with me last Saturday. It was as though that vulnerable, open version of my neighbour had been a temporary illusion.

'I can't believe I fell for your nicey-nice, "Ooh, I understand, Leanne, I only want to help, we all go through hard times, Leanne." What a complete load of crap.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Oh, of course you don't.' She took a long drag on her cigarette, before breaking off into a cackle. 'You're just a friendly, helpful neighbour! Not at all interested in poking around in my business so you can run straight to the phone with all the juicy gossip you found. As if our life wasn't shitty enough, Miss Neighbourhood Watch has to chuck in a hand grenade. I mean,' she scoffed, 'I tolerated this weird little obsession with my daughter, put it down to you having no life of your own. I can even believe you'd get a nasty little kick from interfering, because you're bored, and I don't know, in some twisted way jealous of me having Joan. I've met people like that before. But to do this to Joan? To that beautiful child? The only thing stopping me from beating the crap out of you right now is because I won't give anyone another excuse to take my daughter.'

'Leanne, I genuinely don't know what you mean. I haven't gossiped to anyone about you.'

'No? No secret little calls to social services from a concerned Bigley citizen?'

My stomach shrivelled into a cold, hard lump.

Certain that the guilt of all the times I'd thought about doing exactly that must be showing on my face, I jumped to my feet, flailing

about for a response that conveyed the truth, but perhaps not the whole truth.

‘Someone called social services?’ I held out my hands. ‘I promise you that wasn’t me.’

Leanne studied me for a charged few moments, thoughts racing behind her eyes. ‘Well, why else did a social worker turn up on my doorstep, looking to investigate an allegation of neglect?’

‘Leanne.’ I had to sit back down again. ‘If I had concerns that serious, I would have spoken to you about them first. Offered more help.’

I might not have spoken to her – I couldn’t imagine confronting this fire-breathing monster about her parenting standards – but I would definitely have offered more help.

‘I had to wait while some old bag took my daughter into the kitchen and interviewed her about her mum!’ Leanne started pacing up and down the lawn, an anxious Nesbit trotting up and down alongside her. ‘Pretending it was just a normal thing, like all kids have someone randomly show up and start interrogating them on what meals they eat and whether Mummy ever drinks too much and starts acting funny. This is Joan, not some four-year-old. She knows that someone reported me for not taking care of her. How do you think that’s made her feel?’

‘It’s horrendous.’ I breathed an internal sigh of relief that I’d helped Joan clean up a few days earlier. The cottage was still a chaotic mess, but at least it wasn’t a health hazard.

‘I am hanging on by a thread here, Ollie. By a thread. One bad break away from snapping. And for someone to be that malicious, that spiteful...’ She stopped pacing and collapsed into a chair. ‘To go behind my back like that. I felt ashamed, at first. Guilty. And don’t get me wrong, I’m so angry I could spit. But most of all, I feel hurt.’ She

blinked both eyes, hard. 'I feel like someone I know – and if it's not you then I'm sorry for calling you a bitch, I hope you understand I was raging – someone smiled to my face and then stabbed me in the back. Stabbed *Joan* in the back. I hate them for that.'

'It wasn't me. I promise you it wasn't.'

'Any ideas about who it was, then?'

'No.'

'Go on, then, ask me.' Leanne stubbed her cigarette out on the arm of the chair, then dropped it into a plant pot, before immediately lighting another one. 'I know you're dying to hear the outcome.'

She was right, I was itching to find out.

Leanne let out a shaky sigh. 'She's not taking it any further. Whoever snitched on us can stick their allegations up their arse.'

'Oh, that's so good to know.'

'Yeah. Also good to know that someone out there thinks I'm an unfit mother.'

'Please believe that I knew nothing about this.'

She leant back, closing her eyes. 'Yeah, well, I kind of have to, seeing as school summer holidays start tomorrow and I've just told that snotty cow you're helping out with childcare.'

'I'm so sorry this happened.'

'Not half as sorry as whoever did it will be if I ever find out it was them.'

I looked at Leanne, face etched with fear, fury and devastation, knuckles white where they gripped the arms of the chair, and I knew this was no idle threat.

* * *

On Friday, seven families squeezed in the children's corner for the Library Lady. Irene appeared stricken when one after another they jostled and hopped and skidded through the door, pushchairs knocking into bookshelves and children chattering, squabbling and in one case making continuous fart noises.

I wrapped up Trev's second ReadUp session of the week and we both started moving chairs across to try to help create some sort of order. To my surprise, Irene intercepted us. 'No need,' she snapped, with a smug tilt to her chin, before striding over to the preschoolers' book trolley, reaching behind it and bringing out a stack of carpet tiles.

She then pulled a whistle out from her beige blouse and gave a fearsome toot that stopped the chaos in its tracks. The gaggle of small children stared, waiting to see what would happen next while the adults looked on, equally as intrigued. Irene held out a carpet tile to the nearest child.

'Sit.'

The little girl gingerly took the tile and sat on it. Within moments the others had joined her, all except for one girl crying in her mother's lap because she wanted a yellow tile and they were all industrial blue.

'This week, stories about animals. I shall make an exception to the silence rule, on one condition.'

'If you ask a question or talk or make a noise then you have to go,' a boy whispered to his friend, loud enough to have Irene glaring at him down her nose.

'Questions, chatter and bodily sounds are still forbidden. However, the Library Lady shall permit the appropriate animal noises, as long as they are made at the right time.'

‘Ooh, can I do a donkey?’ someone asked. ‘I’m good at donkeys, listen...’ She then demonstrated her very loud, eerily accurate bray.

‘Sshhhh!’ various other children said anxiously – presumably those who had been here before, and knew the Library Lady did not make idle threats.

‘In case I wasn’t clear,’ Irene huffed, after a second toot. ‘You may produce the correct animal noise when I mention that specific animal in the story. If you make any other sound at any time, you must leave. Does anybody not understand?’

If they did, they weren’t admitting it.

‘Will you help us if we don’t know the right sound?’ a delicate-looking boy of about five asked. ‘I’m scared I won’t know and then I’ll have to go home.’

‘You could just keep quiet and make no sound instead,’ Irene replied.

‘But I want to make a sound. It’s more funner!’

‘It is more fun.’

‘Yes! So will you help me?’

Irene sighed as if already exhausted. ‘Yes. Now, if you are all quite finished, can we please get started?’

I left the Library Lady to it, unable to resist making a few animal noises as I left.

Saturday, I left Nesbit with Joan and drove into Nottingham to an outdoor shop. Drew had offered to lend me his camping gear, but I needed to carry everything on my back, so politely declined his offer of a three-man tent with porch awning, four-ring stove and gas fridge. Instead, he helped me pick out a pop-up festival tent, sleeping bag and a spongy bed roll. I also splashed out on a tiny, lightweight gas stove and a torch.

That evening, I had a practice pitch in the garden. The tent didn't quite pop up in the promised seconds, but it only took a few minutes, so I was happy, and a shortish woman and a dog who was growing bigger every day could just about squeeze in. I made mugs of hot chocolate for myself, Joan and Leanne, who, having accepted my denial of any involvement with children's services, had just borrowed my shower and oven again.

'Can I come?' Joan asked, eagerly peering inside the tent's light-proof interior.

'I'm not sure there'd be room,' I said, completely sure that there wouldn't.

'That's okay, I could sleep outside!' She quickly lay down on the grass beside the tent. 'I'm not scared. It'd be like Frodo and Sam.'

They didn't need a tent.'

'They weren't in England,' Leanne replied. 'It'll be far too cold to sleep outside on the ground. What if it rains?'

'I'll bring a warm sleeping bag and tuck myself right in. Frodo didn't care if it was cold or wet.'

'Frodo was on a mission to save Middle Earth; he didn't have any choice in the matter. He also didn't have a mum to stop him doing anything dangerous or stupid.' Leanne looked at me. 'Not that I think your idea is dangerous or stupid. Much.'

'People go camping all the time!' Joan huffed.

'Yes, in campsites with proper facilities and other people around and health and safety measures. What are you going to do without a toilet?'

'Frodo and Sam didn't have a toilet!'

'Frodo and Sam aren't real!'

Joan thought about that for a minute, still lolling on the grass. 'What if I got a tent? Ollie will look after me. Not that I need it.'

'Ollie spends enough time looking after you as it is.'

'Which I really enjoy doing!' I interjected. 'But this is a solo project. I'm nowhere near as brave or resourceful as you, Joan, and I'm setting myself some challenges to try to get better at doing things on my own. If you came, it wouldn't count.'

Joan sat up and wrapped her hands around her knees, face drooping. 'Okay.'

'Maybe later on in the summer all three of us could go to a proper campsite for a few days?'

'Not likely,' Joan said. 'Mum can't take a few days off work. I have to go to the holiday club again, which is boring and stupid and you have to join in all the games and activities. Even if you bring your own book. They don't even let you go for a walk.'

‘Well, this year will be different,’ Leanne said, getting up to give her daughter a hug. ‘I’ll book some time off, and we can look for somewhere nice to go on holiday.’

‘We don’t have enough money to go on holiday,’ Joan mumbled into Leanne’s arm.

‘Don’t worry about that, I’ll work something out. If it comes down to it, we’ll just have to rough it like Ollie.’

‘You roughing it is about as likely to happen as you taking time off.’

‘Hey, I’ve done enough camping in my time!’

‘Really, when?’ Joan pulled back so she could look at her mum.

Leanne instantly stiffened, looking away as she shrugged off the question. ‘As a kid.’

‘With your parents? My grandparents? Did they like camping?’

‘Yes. Now, look at the time. If you want to finish another chapter this evening, best get yourself into bed.’

‘But—’

‘Go on, bedtime.’

I might have dared to ask Leanne more about that – why a woman would choose to run to the middle of nowhere, where she had no home, no support network, nothing, rather than reaching out to her parents for help. Did they know where Leanne was? Did they even know they had a grandchild? Maybe they didn’t deserve to know, or perhaps for one reason or another, they didn’t care. They might have died, leaving Leanne no option but to press on without them.

Or were they somewhere hoping, praying that one day their daughter would come home?

* * *

Sunday morning:

Pitching a tent will do even more damage to the grass than your dog using it as a toilet.

Ebenezer had stapled a list of local campsites printed off the internet to the note. He'd circled a couple and written *dog-friendly* next to them. After a twenty-minute wrestling match trying to fold the tent back down, I'd decided that leaving it up all night would be a good test of its durability, and whether my pitching skills were adequate.

It was now zipped back in its bag and sitting perfectly positioned on my kitchen doorstep. I was itching to take the ten steps to Ebenezer's back door. Maybe it was only when people knocked at the front that he was so rude? But I had nothing more to say other than 'Hello', and 'I'm sorry for continually sabotaging your incredible gardening,' and 'Are you some sort of wizard because how else could you manage to string washing lines and build wooden shelters and keep this garden immaculate while remaining *completely invisible?*'

If a reasonable excuse for reintroducing myself didn't present itself soon, I might have to make one up. But for now, all my courage and imagination was focused on Dream List item seven. My strange next-door neighbour was a challenge for another day.

* * *

Joan was at her holiday club the following week, so I could spend every spare moment obsessing over the camping trip.

After much internal debate, I settled on a six-mile hike that took in most of the forest park, as well as a stretch along a nearby river that led to the type of pub that would make a lovely spot for a lunch date with Dream Man. I'd also pack a fancy picnic to enjoy in the evening, allowing me to tick off another item on the Dream List. I dug out my warmest clothes to sleep in, packed minimal else and all that was left to do was spend several hours watching videos on survival techniques like how to build a campfire and survive a bear attack.

* * *

Saturday morning, Nesbit and I woke to wide-open blue skies. After a fortifying breakfast of eggs and beefy kibble, we set off out the back gate, the sun a hazy ball of butter ahead of us. Joan waved us off – 'Whatever you do, don't stray off the track!' – and I couldn't help feeling a little hobbit-like as I adjusted the pack on my back, water bottle bouncing against my hip.

It was a perfect day for ambling between the oaks and pines, hopping over tinkling brooks and in and out of splotches of sunshine, wildflowers spread like a fragrant carpet and the birds cheeping us on our way. Every so often we'd stop to consult the map, have a drink or simply soak up the loveliness. There was far too much life going on to feel lonely. If Steph had been with me, we'd have been too busy talking to notice much of the surroundings. If Mum had come on a hike, she'd have spent the whole time moaning about the dirt, the flies and the heat.

Dream Man? Now if he'd been here, we'd have walked in companionable silence, except for pointing out the pale blue butterflies dancing in a sunbeam, or the tree stump that looked like an owl.

So, I simply enjoyed these delights on my own, kept a close eye on my dog and savoured being the kind of woman who goes on solo hikes on a Saturday, instead of trailing her mum around Home Bargains because she doesn't have the courage to say that she doesn't care about place mats.

By the time we found the turn that led out of the forest and along the river, I was ready for a change of scenery, and Nesbit had walked far enough for a seven-month-old puppy. I slipped him into the dog sling that I'd borrowed from Yasmin, grateful that the cows who lived in the fields had congregated far enough away that he didn't spend the whole time trying to wriggle out and introduce himself. We reached the pub only an hour or so behind schedule, and, in keeping with Joan's warning, hadn't once needed to leave the track.

Is there anything better than sitting in a pretty pub garden beside a river on a warm summer's day, sipping on a glass of cider, trusty canine snoozing at your feet, watching the boats glide by as you wait for your chicken and leek pie?

Right then, I couldn't think of it.

An older couple stopped to chat for a few minutes when their Labrador said hello to Nesbit, and I couldn't help noticing that a group of men at another table had definitely noticed me, but instead of feeling self-conscious, sitting here alone on a Saturday lunchtime, I felt proud of myself. Proud, confident and maybe the teeniest bit tipsy, once I'd decided to treat myself to a second cider.

It *may* have been the cider that resulted in the afternoon route proving, shall we say, a little more complicated. Maybe it was simply down to being in unfamiliar countryside. Either way, I have to confess that a hot, tired Nesbit and I, while keeping on some sort of track, definitely abandoned the one I'd planned for us to walk on,

until I had no idea where we were or where we were meant to be going.

I might have retraced my steps back to the pub, except that it felt like an age since lunchtime, and I had no clue how to get back there. I'd lost phone signal three wrong turns ago, and on this current route, in a dip between two hillsides, there wasn't another person or potential dwelling place to be seen.

My back was aching from the puppy sling. There was the beginning of a blister on one heel and I really, really wanted a cup of tea.

'What do you think?' I asked Nesbit, who I'd removed from the sling while we sized up the options. 'Turn back, or keep pressing on?'

Nesbit cocked his head to one side.

'Try that footpath up there? I hadn't even *seen* that one. Now you've made things even more complicated.'

I tried not to wish that I wasn't here alone, that I could hand control to someone else to decide for me. That Dream Man would be so good at reading a map, he'd have us on the right path in no time. Either that or we'd stumble upon a perfect, fairy-tale place to pitch the tent around the next corner, including a pool with a waterfall and a rock for sunbathing, a patch of wild strawberries to replace the squashed box in my pack. Oh, and a miraculously clean public toilet.

I hefted my rucksack onto the grass and sat down, trying to ignore the prickle of tears behind my eyes, the scornful thoughts that assured me that this was bound to happen, of course I was lost and scared. What a stupid, ridiculous idea, thinking that a sleeping bag and a mini-stove could turn me into an adventurer.

No psychology degree needed to figure out why those thoughts adopted my mother's voice.

‘It’s hardly a disaster!’ I announced, mostly to myself. ‘We may be completely lost, tired and fed up, but we aren’t injured, it isn’t raining, and Nesbit has behaved like a very good boy. All I need is to come up with some sort of plan to figure out where we are.’

I thought about Joan, and her warning, and in remembering *The Hobbit*, I came up with an idea.

‘We should get up high, and look for the forest!’ I said, jumping up and shrugging back into my pack. ‘It’s a thousand acres. Surely we can’t miss it?’

‘Woof!’ Nesbit agreed, tail wagging furiously.

‘And if we can’t see the forest, we’ll be able to see something that will help.’

Endless long, sweaty minutes later, I finally scrambled to the top of the highest hill that I could see from the hollow. Twice, I’d thought we’d reached it only to find another peak mocking me over the crest of the false summit.

We stood there, my ankle throbbing from where I’d twisted it in an animal hole, slowly spinning around in search of Bigley Forest Park, or at least some sign of life. The dark clouds that I had failed to notice rolling in due to keeping my eyes lowered to avoid another ankle twist suddenly erupted with the intensity unique to summer storms as an almighty clap of thunder exploded above our heads.

Nesbit squealed in fright, scrabbling to climb up my leg so that a spurt of nervous wee landed right on my brand new walking boots, which turned out not to be one hundred per cent waterproof, as promised in the guarantee.

‘Okay. Great. Well. At least we’ve found the forest,’ I said, muttering words of meaningless reassurance as I rummaged for the raincoat in the bottom of my bag and, once Nesbit was back in the

sling, slipped it on and zipped it up so he was safely inside, just the brown tip of a nose poking out.

It was relatively easy once I'd spotted the river to follow it up to the vast blob of dark green that had to be Bigley Forest Park. The problem was, I had a huge stretch of lighter green, brown and yellow fields to cross before I reached it, and I wasn't sure which part of the darker green I needed to aim for to get back on the right path. Plus, reading a sopping wet map with the rain dripping in my eyes and somehow up my nose, a dog shivering in terror against my chest while trying to avoid being struck by lightning was not an easy task.

In the end, I decided that getting under the shelter of the trees was more pressing than working out which trees I needed to be under. I took a deep breath, straightened my rucksack and gritted my teeth. So things hadn't all been sunshine and a smooth road. What kind of a challenge would that be? There was no way I was quitting now. Or crying. Or finding a bush to crawl under.

We were marching on to the end.

I might eat my emergency chocolate flapjack while I marched, though.

A cold, wet, limping hour later, I reached the treeline, beyond thankful that no farmer had accosted me with his gun when I'd been forced to abandon the footpath yet again and trudge guiltily along what I feared must be private land.

The rain had stopped after only twenty minutes or so, although my shivering bones couldn't tell. I realised now why all the kit lists said to bring a woolly hat, even if it was twenty-one degrees when we'd set off. I was also bursting for a wee, thanks to the idiotic second bottle of cider. That proved to be a whole different side of adventuring – squatting behind a dripping wet tree, non-twisted ankle sinking into the mud as I tried to avoid bearing weight on the other one, gripping a slippery dog lead as the last thing I needed was for Nesbit to make a break for freedom while my knickers hung around my knees.

I had a glimmer of phone signal now the storm had cleared, so was able to locate my position. Forgetting the path now that we were in the park boundary, I simply headed in the direction of the place I'd chosen for my idyllic overnight camp, and hobbled on.

After another thirty minutes, I remembered that the whole point of passing the park visitor centre on my final stretch was to use the

bathroom, fill up my water bottles and grab a drink if the café was still open (it wouldn't be; it was nearly six). Cursing, close to tears again, I readjusted course and soon hit one of the main paths that would take me to the visitor centre.

Another hour of what can only be described as sheer torture later (interrupted by a short stop in the visitor centre toilets, and a longing gaze through the café window) I reached the designated clearing.

As soon as the tent was up on a reasonably flat spot, I dumped my pack on the grass and stripped off my coat, leggings, shoes and socks to reveal thighs chafed red from walking miles in damp trousers and blisters so huge it looked as though I had six toes. My ankle was slightly swollen, and still tender to the touch, but I hoped that a decent night's sleep would be enough to remedy it.

My T-shirt had dried due to my body heat, but it stank of sweaty panic, so after tugging my hair out of its ponytail I also ditched that, enjoying the soft breeze against my skin, sucking in a deep breath of the zingy air that always follows a summer storm as I held out my arms, closed my eyes and embraced the overwhelming relief that I had made it.

I couldn't wait to light a campfire, brew some tea, open up my tub of cheese and crackers, sit back and bask in my success, along with the lingering evening warmth.

The original plan had been to try to start a fire the wild way, with tinder and friction. That was now clearly not going to happen – especially as I had to wade deep into the undergrowth to find wood that had escaped the rain. I cleared an area of bare earth to ensure no risk of vegetation catching alight and made a pile of sticks, as seen on the survival videos. I then added some cotton balls rolled in Vaseline, struck a couple of matches and hey presto, only a few more tries and I had a roaring fire.

The original plan had also included getting dressed in a jumper and clean leggings, but it was still hot, I was fully embracing the back-to-nature vibes, and it suited my triumphant, unfettered mood to spread out my coat and sit back in my bra and knickers while I waited for the tea to boil, and for my skin to thoroughly dry out.

It was in this filthy, sweaty, semi-wild state, scarfing a wedge of extra-strong Cheddar while I waited for the tea to cool, the deepening dusk casting shadows from the fire that twisted and danced across the clearing, that a face appeared in the treeline opposite me.

Scrabbling backwards in shock, I knocked over my mug of tea, one foot becoming entangled in a guy rope as I backed up against the tent, my heart fighting to get out of my chest. This of course woke up Nesbit, who shot up, barking and spinning in frenzied circles as he hunted down whatever beast had caused his mistress to shriek like a banshee.

When his eyes – or possibly nose – locked on the face, who had now emerged to become a full body, he hurtled towards the man. While Nesbit was not likely to do any serious damage to the intruder, I hoped he might scare him away, or at least buy me some time to find a suitable weapon.

But no – I looked on in horror as my supposedly faithful companion leapt up at the man's knees, tail wagging like a helicopter rotor, nose sniffing and whuffling in delight, not a hint of bared teeth or warning growls.

'Well, hello!' The man burst out laughing, bending to pat Nesbit's head as he glanced up at me, and my heart didn't know whether to soar with relief or plummet in shame.

I knew that voice.

Now he'd taken another few steps into the firelight, I knew that easy grin. Those broad shoulders. The warm, friendly eyes.

Dammit.

I mean, who else was it going to be, out here in the depths of the forest, at this time of night?

If my sprained ankle wasn't currently twisted up in a rope, I might have tried to sneak behind the tent, wiggle my way in from the back and put on some clothes, then swear blind I'd been inside the tent all along.

As it was, I had to be content with folding myself into as small a ball as possible, deftly flicking my hair over my grubby bra and pretending that I camped semi-naked in the woods all the time. Just an ordinary Saturday night for a wild girl like me.

Just in case Sam hadn't spotted me shrivelled up in the shadows, Nesbit helpfully ran from his leg over to me, did a happy bark, and then ran back to Sam again.

'As lovely as it is bumping into you like this, I'm hoping you've brought some clothes with you?' Sam said, his voice quivering with laughter as he spun around to preserve my dignity. 'It gets pretty cold out here once the sun's gone down.'

'Well, of course!' I did my best to free my leg so I could disappear into the tent and never come out again, but my hands wouldn't stop trembling, my ankle was really sore and the rope was getting more and more knotted up the more frantically I tried to untangle it.

'Dammit!' I swore, out loud this time, causing Sam to jerk in surprise.

'Are you okay?'

'I was until you showed up. A thousand acres of forest and you happen to stumble upon my camp!' I let out another grunt of frustration before finally admitting defeat. Taking a composing

breath, I squared my shoulders and tried to chalk it all down to being part of the adventure. And for goodness' sake, as mortified as I was that it was Sam, I shuddered to imagine how much worse it would be if it *wasn't* him, and some other forest ranger had popped up.

'I'm tangled up in the guy rope...' I said, in as dignified a voice as I could muster.

'Oh. Right,' Sam replied, still facing away.

There was a potent pause.

'Do you want some help?' he eventually offered, his voice sounding strained.

'Yes. Please.'

'Are you absolutely sure, can we be completely clear, because I'm on duty right now and I do not want this to be potentially misconstrued by anyone. You want me to turn around, approach you, and untangle you from the guy rope. Myself. With my own hands.'

I swallowed back a flood of I don't know what. Hormones, probably.

'Well, there's a penknife in my rucksack. If you pass me that I could hack myself free.'

'And ruin your tent?'

'Okay then. Yes please, I am asking you to please do whatever it was you just said so that I can go inside my tent and get dressed as soon as possible.'

In three ranger-length strides, Sam was crouching by my side, his breath slow and controlled as he deftly worked at the knots, eyes firmly fixed on my ankle, hair dangling over his forehead.

I closed my eyes to avoid seeing his gorgeous face close up, and tried to focus on something other than his fingers brushing my bare skin and the faint warmth of his body heat, despite only wearing a

green T-shirt. I caught a hint of his scent, like the depths of the forest spiked with male perspiration, and the breath caught in my throat in response.

Every nerve in my body was taut. It was disturbingly and wonderfully intimate all at the same time, and I wanted him to take forever to get the knots undone, even as I couldn't bear for the intensity to last another second.

I felt as much as heard him sit back, a sudden emptiness in the atmosphere, as though a huge weight had been lifted.

Sam paused to clear his throat. I opened my eyes to find him a couple of metres away, looking intently at the scrubby grass by his feet. 'All sorted.'

'Thanks,' I mumbled, reverse-scrabbling into the tent because turning around so that he had a full view of my barely-covered backside felt even more exposing. I took a few seconds to choke on the utter horror of what just happened, got dressed and spent another long moment with my hands pressed over my face, shaking my head and wishing I was anyone but me, before shuffling back out again.

'Hi,' Sam said, with a quirky smile, hands in his shorts pockets as he rocked back on the heels of his walking boots.

'Hi. And thank you. Who knows how long I'd have been trapped there if you hadn't stepped up. Although, if you hadn't snuck up on me, I wouldn't have got caught up in the first place, so... maybe instead of thanking you I should be asking what you're doing creeping about my clearing?'

'I wasn't creeping! I entered the clearing in a perfectly relaxed manner.'

'Okay, but back to the thousand acres of forest, and why you happened to be in this one?'

Sam glanced over his shoulder, rubbing his jaw.

‘As the ranger on call tonight, I was notified that a member of the public had pitched a tent in an unsuitable location. While the unofficial line is that we leave campers to it as long as they aren’t presenting any risk to the forest or leaving their rubbish behind, in this case I have to move you on.’

‘Why is this unsuitable?’ I asked. ‘It’s an empty spot, with a stream nearby. I made sure the fire’s a safe distance from the undergrowth. I’m not disturbing anyone.’

‘Actually, the sight of you stripping off was pretty disturbing to the guys in the shooting lodge.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘You’ve camped in direct line of fire of the rangers’ shooting lodge. See this?’ He took a couple of steps and nudged a cluster of tiny brown balls with his toe. ‘Deer droppings. They weren’t at all happy about catching a trespasser in their rifle scope until...’ Sam stopped, catching himself.

‘Until they caught her stripping off.’

He shrugged awkwardly. ‘It’s first Saturday of the hunting season. Spirits and emotions are high.’

I hung my head, the humiliation burning beneath my skin. ‘I can’t believe I thought I could do this.’

‘If it’s any consolation, you picked a great spot. That’s why the deer love it.’

‘I’m a complete joke.’

‘You looked like you were doing great to me.’

‘I mean literally. They’ll be laughing about me all over the forest.’

Sam looked at me, his eyes shadowed in the deepening darkness. ‘Not when I’m on shift.’

I shrugged. ‘It’s a big forest.’

‘With weird and embarrassing things happening all over it. Trust me, we’ve seen a lot worse. One woman drying out her walking gear is nothing compared to the group who decided to see in the summer solstice with a night of drug-fuelled naked dancing right on the edge of a thirty-foot drop. We had to call the police.’

‘Please tell me no one called the police about this!’

‘I think we can handle this one internally.’

A sudden *crack* echoed through the trees, causing Nesbit to spring to attention, ears twitching.

‘But that’s our signal to get out of the way.’ Sam pulled a wry grin. ‘Come on, I’ll show you a spot out of the action.’

He waited for me to shove my stuff back into the pack, and with a couple of flicks had the tent back in its bag. I tried to watch to see how he did it, but unfortunately blinked and so missed it.

‘Can you fetch some water for this?’ he asked, nodding at the campfire.

‘I think it’s already gone out.’ My amazing fire had not been quite as successful as I thought, having burnt out at some point after Sam’s arrival.

‘Oh, okay. Do you *think* it’s worth risking a forest fire?’

‘No, of course not. Sorry.’ I pulled my water bottle out of my pack and handed it to him. Sam had gone into ranger mode. I have to admit, I quite liked it.

‘We need a lot more than that. The stream is over there.’

‘Um...’

‘Yes?’ he asked, taking another look at the direction of the shooting lodge.

‘How do I get the water from the stream over to here?’

‘In your bucket?’

‘Um...’

He gave me a very hard look. Sam was the friendliest, most laid-back man I'd ever met, but it turned out he was deadly serious when it came to safety in his forest.

'Are you trying to pluck up the courage to tell me that you lit a campfire, in open forestland, without a fire bucket?'

I nodded, too intimidated to speak.

Sam put his hands on his hips and stared at the ground. I got the feeling he was counting to ten in his head, but his set jaw gave nothing away.

'Okay,' he said, at about the point where I'd decided to pick up my rucksack and hotfoot it out of there. 'We'll use dirt.'

Cue a messy process that included spreading the burnt sticks about, digging beneath the dry surface dirt to damper soil below, then throwing it onto the sticks before doing the whole thing two more times until Sam declared the 'fire' to be sufficiently cooled. He then proceeded to check the surrounding area for any sparks or embers.

'You really don't have to worry, my fire was not that good.'

'That's what I'm worried about,' he replied, poking at a log with a frown. 'Next time, do everyone a favour and stick to a disposable barbecue. On bricks. And bring a fire bucket.'

I really didn't think we needed to worry about a next time.

It was nearly fully dark by the time Sam was satisfied. I should have been completely frazzled, but I was still buzzing with adrenaline from his unexpected arrival and all that had happened since. Sam flicked on the torch that was strapped to his belt, which was about a hundred times more powerful than mine. Fortunately, a clear sky helped, with the moonlight shimmering between the treetops.

'This is another reason why we discourage camping,' Sam said, as we started walking back along the path into the trees, angling his

torch so that I could see, completely eclipsing my feeble light in the process. 'Dozens of people injure themselves tripping over roots or stepping in holes every year while stumbling around in the dark. Sometimes they end up lying there all night.'

'I was planning to be safely tucked up in my tent by the time it was dark.'

'Yeah, well. Things happen.'

Ain't that the truth.

'Are we going far?' I dared to ask, once the grimace on Sam's face had begun to ease. It was so dark out here that I'd totally lost all sense of direction or perspective. We could have been walking in ever decreasing circles for all I knew.

'We'll be there in five.'

'Five what? Minutes? Miles?'

He stopped, swinging the rucksack that he'd insisted on carrying for me off his shoulders as though it was full of cotton wool. 'Steps.'

He swung his mega-torch around to show me a clearing much smaller than the one I'd chosen. Maybe five metres across, twice that in length, it was wide enough for a canopy of stars above our heads, the three-quarter moon riding the treetops.

'How on earth did you find this in the dark?'

Sam grinned. 'You know me, wild man of the woods.'

'Have you camped here before?'

'Here or thereabouts.'

'Well. Thank you for rescuing me from the risk of being shot. Next time I'll ask your opinion on the best place to stay.'

'Next time?'

'You're right. There won't be a next time.' I waited for Sam to untie the tent from the rucksack, and then made the mistake of

taking a sip from my water bottle, so by the time I looked up again he was pushing in the final tent peg.

‘Maybe wait until the morning before you decide that. Although, if you genuinely want my opinion, book a proper, health and safety checked campsite – you can find “almost wild” campsites if you want the back to nature experience. Also, don’t—’

‘Don’t build a fire. I’ve got it. Lesson learnt.’ I pulled out my sleeping bag and stuffed it into the tent, throwing the rucksack in after it. ‘Right. It’s getting cold. I think I’ll try to get some sleep.’

Sam checked his watch. ‘It’s quarter to ten on a Saturday night.’

‘I’ve had an eventful day to say the least!’

‘When’s the last time you had a hot drink?’

I thought about it. ‘I made one just before you arrived but it got knocked over. Before that, it was breakfast.’

‘So I owe you a hot drink?’

‘When you put it like that...’

‘Give me ten minutes. There’s a rangers’ hut not too far away.’

‘Sam, I’m supposed to be doing this challenge by myself!’ I called after the shadow where his rapidly disappearing figure had been two seconds earlier. I mulled over the boundaries of the No-Man Mandate while I waited for him to come back, pulling on a hoodie and changing into my thick socks. Having a professional forest ranger escort me to a safe area was totally within the rules. I decided that having him bring me a hot drink to replace the one he’d caused me to spill was also fine. Inviting him to stay while we both enjoyed a drink, under the stars, wrapped in my blanket... that was definitely nudging the boundary.

Sitting on one edge of the blanket, sipping a creamy hot chocolate, Sam perched on the other and Nesbit snuggled in between us, marshmallows roasting over a portable firepit, the moon

and firelight waltzing together in his eyes as he attentively listened to the highs and lows of my day, I had to admit that this completely broke the No-Man Mandate.

It couldn't have looked more like the picture in my head when I'd created the Dream List if I'd tried, even down to me borrowing a woolly hat from a forest ranger who was starting to bear a startling resemblance to my Dream Man.

I woke up with a fuzzy head, aching bones and no idea what time of day it was due to the tent's blackout lining. Nesbit, however, repeated the bark that had startled me out of sleep, then followed it up with a barrage of nose nudges until I clambered out of the sleeping bag to let him out, and a beam of daylight in. Following him into the open, I blinked my bleary eyes and tried to shake the dregs of sleep from my brain before pausing to assess the location.

Oh, now this was *lovely*.

Pretty in the moonlight, it was *perfect* in the early morning mist.

Lush grass, speckled with daisies and other blue and purple flowers, with a wide stream that ran along one border of the clearing. A weeping willow hung low over the water, laden with catkins, and a pair of ducks were gliding upstream.

I inhaled a lungful of sweet, damp air, almost able to taste the sunlight, and stretched both arms above my head, my brain-fog swiftly clearing as my senses woke up.

Nesbit suddenly stopped sniffing about the grass and started staring past me. After a second's pause, he sprinted over to the far border of the clearing, behind the tent.

I could immediately see why. Instead of a row of trees or bushes, this side was bordered with a white picket fence lined with chicken wire.

And behind that was the rangers' hut that Sam had referred to the night before. Only this so-called hut was the house that I had spent far too much time dreaming about during the past few weeks.

Two collies stood on the other side of the fence. They both pushed their noses up to greet Nesbit, tails wagging.

No wonder Sam had been able to find this secluded clearing in the dark. It was right next to his house.

I felt a prickle of annoyance, immediately chased away by a swarm of butterflies flitting about in my stomach at the thought of him, firstly pitching my tent so close to his home, secondly quite probably being about to appear at any moment, and thirdly... well. Thirdly, the butterflies just seemed to appear at the thought of him. And that was enough to make me feel annoyed again.

While I was busy feeling annoyed and aflutter, Sam wandered out onto the decking behind his house carrying a plate and a pot of coffee, a book underneath one arm.

For reasons I would overanalyse later, I immediately ducked down behind the tent out of sight, waiting a few seconds, breath stuck in my throat, before inching my head around so that I could sneak a peek through the fence posts.

Sam was now sitting on one of his super-comfy hand-carved chairs, bare feet propped up on the decking railing as the sunlight glinted off the giant windows behind him. He wore a white T-shirt and aviator sunglasses, hair a ruffled morning mess as he sipped his coffee. There was a second mug on the table.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was my Dream Life, right there in front of me.

Sam gave a cheery wave right in my direction then pointed at the second mug.

I would one hundred per cent, absolutely have gone and had breakfast with Ranger Sam if my phone hadn't started ringing. I offered a quick wave back, as if it was perfectly normal for me to be peeking my head around the side of my tent, and went to answer it, buried in the bottom of my rucksack.

It was Steph.

'Ollie! Oh my goodness, are you okay?'

'Um, yes? Why wouldn't I be? What have you heard?'

'I've heard absolutely nothing! That's why I spent half the night lying here staring at the ceiling planning your funeral speech, trying to come up with poignant yet uplifting words about how you got eaten by a pack of wild wolves.'

'There aren't any wild wolves in the UK.'

'That's not the point! I was worried sick!' Frustration hummed down the airwaves. 'Have you checked your phone at all in the past twenty-four hours?'

'I've not really had any signal.'

'You've clearly got signal now!'

I checked my phone. Steph had started sending me texts at lunchtime yesterday, and these had increased in frequency and frenzy until midnight. I also had six missed calls.

'Sorry. If any of these came through I didn't hear them ring.'

'How could you not hear them, alone in a forest at night? What else is there to hear? I presume you *are* in the forest, as planned?'

I flashed back to last night, the laughter, the stories, the animated conversation. My phone had been in my rucksack; there's no way I'd have heard it.

‘Steph, you know how long my life was controlled by the phone ringing every time I was out by myself. You can’t blame me for turning it to silent.’

‘I’m not your mum, Ollie,’ she huffed. ‘I’m your best friend, sensibly checking in considering you were spending the night alone in the middle of nowhere.’

‘I know. I’m sorry you were worried, but I’m fine. Everything’s fine. Better than fine, actually. If you’re free this evening I’ll tell you about it, but for now I really need to boil some water and find somewhere to do a wee.’

‘So you *were* alone?’

‘Um, what?’

That woman. She hadn’t raised three headstrong brothers and survived social work for eight years without developing some skills.

‘Again, as your best friend, I’m checking that as well as being alive and well, you’ve not slipped off the No-Man wagon and ended up, I don’t know, camping in Mr May’s garden or something.’

I held the phone away from my ear until I was sure I’d got my voice under control. ‘I can promise you I slept out in the forest, as planned.’

‘Alone?’

‘No, actually, I wasn’t alone. I spent the whole night snuggling a handsome male.’

I could almost hear Steph rolling her eyes. ‘You’re talking about Nesbit, aren’t you?’

Reassured that I was safe, well and sticking to the plan, Steph let me get on with my day on the condition that I called her once I was home. While my stove was heating up water for my tea, I brushed my hair and teeth, then braved another peek at Sam’s decking, where he now appeared lost in his book. Feeling it would be rude to

simply pack up and leave, but reluctant to stray towards temptation, I stood at the edge of the fence and called hello.

He immediately came strolling over. 'Are you joining me for breakfast?'

'As appealing as that sounds, you know it's against the rules.'

'Even though you've completed a night alone in the woods?'

'Was I alone?' I asked, squinting at him. 'Or were you camped just the other side of the fence, making sure I didn't burn down the forest or cause any other incidents?'

He laughed. 'I was safely tucked up in bed. Scout and Willow would have let me know if anything untoward was happening.'

'Barked it out in Morse code? Doggy sign language?'

'Or tapped out a text with their nose. Anyway, my question was, what time is the solo challenge over, and you can hang out with humans again?'

'Not until I've walked home.'

'Okay.' Was that a brief flicker of disappointment on Sam's face, or merely my imagination? 'I'll leave you to it, then. Oh, and congratulations! You should be proud of yourself. It's a big deal, camping in the woods by yourself.'

'Thanks.' As Sam walked away, I took a moment to do precisely that – it was a big deal, for me at least. He stopped a few feet from his decking, turning back to call out, 'Oh – and if you follow the path on the other side of the stream towards the pine trees, there's some toilets about fifteen minutes away. I presume using my bathroom is also against the rules.'

I wasn't sure that it was, but I was hardly going to ask him now. I was sure that I wasn't going to risk relieving myself behind a nearby bush, as originally planned, with Sam's enormous windows

overlooking the forest for miles. Grateful for the information, I drank my tea, packed up and headed for home.

* * *

Steph decided that a phone call wasn't enough. I'd showered, eaten, thrown my clothes in the wash and was enjoying a well-earned Sunday afternoon nap when she arrived.

We sat in the living room and chatted for a while about her continuing family problems. Simeon had arranged to meet up with his dad for lunch. The father he'd not seen in nearly ten years stumbled into the café an hour late, with a black eye and reeking of cheap whisky.

'Instead of taking it as a sign that Eli was nothing but trouble, Simeon's decided that he needs help.' Steph had stopped calling Eli 'Dad' a long time ago, for obvious reasons. She gnawed furiously on a peanut butter cookie. 'Of course he needs help. What Simeon has to realise is that until he *wants* help, it's all a heartbreaking waste of time and tears.'

'What are you going to do?'

She shook her head in frustration. 'You know how happy I would be never to have anything to do with that man again. Not unless he turns up sober, with proof of a decent address and a job. Even the thought of hearing his whining voice, seeing that look on his face, makes me want to vomit.'

'But you're worried about Simeon.' I topped up her glass of iced tea.

'I can't sleep at night knowing what he'll be getting dragged into. It's like I can already feel the sticky tendrils creeping closer. If I offer to get Eli an appointment with some organisations that can help,

then Simeon will see that he doesn't want a new start, or to change, as he keeps saying. He wants money and an occasional place to lie low.'

'So you'll help?'

She grimaced. 'I'm thinking about it. Drew doesn't want me to. He knows where this leads, and thinks Simeon is a grown man who has to learn the hard way if he insists on ignoring my warnings. But, you know... it's Simeon.'

Her brother. Whose nappies she'd changed and school uniform she'd ironed and who she'd protected with her fierce embrace for countless long, scary nights. Steph had grown up sacrificing her happiness for the love of her baby brothers. That was a tough habit to break, no matter what your age.

'At least Mum seems a bit better. I took Nicky round to see her yesterday, and she was able to chat to him and make us a sandwich. The flat wasn't great, but it looked as though she's the only person living there, which is something.'

'And how's Jordan?'

Steph's faced transformed instantly. 'He's dating a pharmacist. Here.' She pulled out her phone and leant across the sofa to show me a photograph of a smiling woman who looked like Halle Berry when she had short hair.

'Wow.'

'We're going out for brunch next weekend.' She gave a smug smirk. 'She asked if she could meet Nicky, too.'

Jordan's last-but-one girlfriend, a fellow medical student, had dodged meeting Nicky for several months. When she did, the brief flicker of fear and distaste on her face had ensured it was the last time she met any of them, Jordan included.

'That's fantastic! Let me know how it goes.'

'I most certainly will. But that's more than enough of my never-ending soap opera. How was your adventure?'

I briefly filled her in on the day's walking, followed by my eviction from the initial camping spot. I had debated whether to mention that Sam caught me half naked, but I knew that it was precisely the kind of story she needed to hear.

'*What?*' She sat back, mouth dangling open with glee. '*Mr May* caught you in your fancy new underwear? Oh, now this is perfect! Did he manage not to drool?'

'Once he saw I'd lit a campfire he was quite scary, actually. All health and safety and forestry regulations.'

'Nice to hear he's not a total softie.'

Under her onslaught of questions, I described how he'd shown me a safe place to pitch up, and left me to it.

'So you kept to the mandate?'

'Mmhm,' I replied, plucking at a loose thread on a cushion in the kind of noncommittal way that automatically got Steph's antennae twitching.

'No kiss goodnight?'

'No!'

'Hand-holding?'

'Nope.'

'What about flirting?'

'I told you he was on call! He was literally being paid to come and move my tent.'

'You're right. Stupid question. You wouldn't have noticed even if he was.'

I summed up the following morning as quickly as possible, skimming over Sam's breakfast invitation and enquiry about hanging out. But the whole time, I was back in the moonlit forest, the firepit

now glowing embers, silver streaks shimmering off Sam's hair and the angles of his face. I'd made a silly joke about nothing much but Sam had flung his head back, teeth glinting as he guffawed, sending a flush of pleasure through me.

As our amusement faded away, it had been replaced with a weighted silence. I glanced up, expecting Sam's grin to dispel the charged atmosphere, but instead my eyes met his, and stayed there, held by the intensity in his gaze.

Woah.

He was less than a blanket away. Even with Nesbit curled up between us, it wouldn't take much to lean in until our mouths met. It felt as though there was no room inside my ribcage to breathe, my heart was so inflamed with desire and intimacy, blending together into what might have been the tiny beginnings of love.

His eyes dropped to my lips and he swallowed so hard I could almost hear it through the stillness of the night.

As if drawn in by an invisible magnetic force, my body swayed a tentative inch towards him. Sam moved closer in unspoken reply.

Oh my goodness! The thoughts whined about my brain like a mosquito. *Are you really going to do this, Ollie? If you lean another millimetre forwards then this MAN, who you are meant to be staying away from, given that he's a MAN, and you're on a NO-MAN MANDATE, is going to kiss you.*

SHUT UP! I argued back, trying and failing to come up with a split-second counterargument. *Just... shut up!*

He's not interested in a relationship, remember? the thought mosquito continued to drone. *He thinks you're some chilled out, grown-up woman who can handle a casual kiss and not turn it into something awkward that will ruin everything, making you regret it forever.*

While this was racing through my head, Sam must have seen the conflict flit across my face because he paused, very deliberately, and then slowly sat back up, twisting around to face the trees in front of us, resting his wrists on bent knees. After another potent silence, he swallowed again, coughed, ran his hands through his hair and assumed his usual easy-breezy, affable expression.

If it was meant to dispel the tension, it didn't work. Sam mumbled something about how it was late and he'd better be getting back, and he left me to burrow down into my sleeping bag and wonder what on earth just happened, and whether I was a fool to so fervently hope that it might happen again.

'Hello, Earth to Ollie?' Steph said, unnecessarily loudly, her eyebrows furrowed in suspicion.

'Sorry. Sleeping on the ground has left me shattered.'

'Hmmm.'

I hadn't fooled her for a second. But my best friend was patient; she'd form her own conclusions, confident that the evidence would prove them right soon enough.

I, on the other hand, had no clue what to think.

* * *

By the end of the week, I was still clueless. I'd spent more time replaying that night than was healthy or constructive.

Every time my mind wandered back to Sam it was like the thoughts ignited a sparkler in my stomach, sending nervous longing fizzing and whizzing through my insides. On the one hand, I admonished myself for being embarrassingly pathetic. An uncommonly kind and attractive man had been nice to me, in a

professional capacity, and my imagination had ramped up to maximum.

But then again... I wasn't a total romantic novice. Every other time I'd seen that look in a man's eyes he'd been about to kiss me.

Sam might have been about to kiss me.

As I twisted myself up in my duvet one night, hot and bothered and increasingly irritated about the whole situation, I concluded that Sam owed me a kiss.

And if the opportunity ever happened again, even if he was only interested in a one-time, casual thing, I was going to make sure I was ready for it.

I had two items left on the Dream List, and more than enough motivation to get cracking.

Only, then came a terrified knock on my kitchen door and suddenly Dream Lists and uncollected kisses were roughly shoved to the side by real life.

I'd spent most of the Saturday after the camping trip with Joan. Leanne had picked up an old oven going free on the Bigley Facebook group, so they were now able to cook, but I'd still been coming up with excuses to send a meal round as often as possible. Leanne knew what I was up to, but she swallowed her pride for her daughter's sake. They also made use of my shower two or three times a week. I had suggested that if they walked over to mine carrying a towel and a bottle of shampoo, Ebenezer might erect an outdoor shower in the garden, but Leanne replied curtly that she still had some pride left. Her stooped shoulders and air of exhaustion suggested that if she did, it was the tiniest shred.

After a ramble in the woods and a subsequent dog bath, thanks to Nesbit finding a swampy pool to investigate, I'd snuck a load of Joan's laundry into my washer and helped her do a quick tidy and clean of New Cottage.

She'd been reluctant to talk about much beyond Nesbit and her newfound obsession for Terry Pratchett novels, which she fed using my adult library card when Irene was distracted elsewhere – something that was happening more and more, thanks to the rather inexplicable popularity of the Library Lady.

By mid-afternoon I'd left her to it, planning on catching up on some of my own to-do list, and I was upstairs changing my beautiful new duvet cover when I heard the knock. Even from that distance I could sense the urgency .

Dropping the bedding, I half ran, half tumbled down the stairs and raced into the kitchen, flinging open the door to find Joan, her tear-streaked face the colour of cold ashes.

'Mum!'

Forgoing the seconds required to put on a pair of shoes, I sprinted across to New Cottage, praying that this was an emergency where speed could make a difference, rather than a tragedy where it was too late for swift action.

I found her on the bedroom floor.

For a heart-splintering moment, I thought she was dead.

Shoving aside the swirling horror, I knelt down in the mess of crumpled clothes and tried to remember the emergency first aid training I'd undertaken when Mum first fell ill.

Leaning in close to find out if she was breathing, I saw Joan appear at the bedroom door.

'Have you called an ambulance?'

She gave her head a frantic shake.

'Okay, that's fine. But can you call 999 and ask for an ambulance while I check if Mum's all right?'

Mum was clearly not all right. She was breathing, just, but when I rolled her into the recovery position it felt like manoeuvring a bag of sand. I couldn't see anything to suggest she was injured, but while Joan squeaked her answers to the emergency operator, I didn't feel a twitch or hear the tiniest murmur to give me hope that this was anything but deadly serious.

‘Come on, Leanne, stay with us,’ I muttered, leaning close as I wiped the hair off her clammy forehead and straightened her T-shirt, my fear ramping up as I felt the bones jutting through her scant flesh.

From what I had managed to take in of Joan’s conversation, Leanne had come home early from work because she’d not been well. I knew how bad she must have felt to abandon a shift.

The woman on the end of the phone asked Joan if her mum was on any medication.

‘Just headache tablets.’ Joan looked at me for reassurance. I scanned the room but found no evidence of anything but a life drowning in wretched chaos.

* * *

I’d been twenty-one, the first time I spent the night huddled in a plastic hospital chair, waiting to hear what had happened to my mother. Aunty Irene had sat beside me, holding my hand and passing me tissues and Steph had messaged me faithfully throughout those endless, anxious hours.

I now sat here with another girl waiting to be told whether her life was about to drastically change forever. Ramrod straight, as the clock on the wall crept its way towards morning, Joan sat in silence, her face a stoic mask.

She looked so much like her mother I could have cried – only resisting because I was supposed to be here supporting Joan, rather than falling apart.

The hospital staff had taken me to one side and asked if there was any other family we should call. Did I know what Leanne’s wishes might be regarding her daughter, should she need someone

to take care of her? Was I aware of any ill health, any past issues that might be useful for the doctors to know about?

Every question was like another spike jamming between my ribs.

I was so tired, so worried that it was impossible to think, to consider what the right answer should be.

That's not quite true – I knew one answer, without a shadow of a doubt. 'I'm Joan's childminder. I take care of her while Leanne's at work. Most days after school and on Saturdays. There's no one else, as far as I know, but I'll look after her. I have a spare room, she knows me, she knows my house, her dog lives at my house. We even share a garden! You can't send her to strangers; I know Leanne wouldn't want that.'

My guts ripped inside out at the thought of Joan being anywhere but with me. When they started talking about social services, I called Steph, who listened to my garbled ramblings and told me to leave it with her, to go outside, take five deep breaths and then go back and sit with Joan.

The question about past issues or illnesses – where did I start?

'I think she had an abusive partner, but she left him two, three years ago. She's been unwell for a few weeks, with headaches and feeling sick and exhausted, but I don't know any more than that.'

A while later, a doctor again took me to one side. 'Are you aware of any history of drug use?'

My stomach took a nosedive. 'She mentioned drugs, once, in reference to her ex-partner. She said she hasn't drunk any alcohol since she left him.'

The clock ticked on. The shadows crept across the grey floor tiles. We sat in a semi-private waiting area, cocooned in the muffled background hum of a hospital: feet tapping along the corridors, the

rustle of a nurse's uniform, faint beeps and buzzes and hushed conversations. A sudden groan of agony.

It was two in the morning when the doctor told us that Leanne was stable, and settled for the night. They had more tests to do, and should be able to tell us more the following day.

'I want to see her,' Joan said, her voice cracking with fatigue.

'Visitors aren't allowed on the wards at night, in case it disturbs the other patients,' a nurse explained gently.

'I won't disturb anyone! I won't say anything. I just want to see her!'

'She's resting now, as should you be—'

'Don't tell me I should be resting when my mum is in a bed somewhere and I don't even know what's going to happen to her or what's wrong or if she's going to die!' Finally, the dam broke, hot tears streaming down her pale cheeks.

'Your mum isn't going to die any time soon. Stable and settled means that although she is quite poorly, she's not getting any worse at the moment, so we have time to figure out what's wrong and treat it properly. I've worked in this hospital for thirty-two years, and I can promise you that the best thing you can do for Mum is make sure she knows that you're okay, so she can concentrate on getting better. If you turn up looking like you've not slept all night, it won't help.'

'Concentrating can't make people better! If that was true we wouldn't need hospitals!'

The nurse worked valiantly to hide her smile. 'No, but not worrying and keeping calm is medically proven to lower blood pressure and boost the immune system along with all sorts of other benefits that can genuinely help someone recover. Okay?'

Joan swiped at one tear. 'Okay.' Then she narrowed her eyes, looking from the nurse to the doctor and the other person standing with us, who had yet to introduce herself. 'I'm only going if I can stay with Ollie, though!'

* * *

Joan stayed with me. By the time we got home there was barely any of the night left, and the doctor was hopeful that soon Leanne could be consulted about her daughter's care. After mugs of hot chocolate left to go cold, and two pieces of toast that went stiff on the plate, I made up the sofa bed in my office, scooting around to Joan's cottage to fetch her own duvet and pillow in the hope that the familiarity would help her sleep. I would have tucked her up in her own bed and slept on the sofa, if it wasn't for a broken shower and piles of mess and my genuine concern that the mould could have caused Leanne's illness.

I lay in bed, watching the sunrise beyond my open window, and thought about how life can flip inside out in one faltering heartbeat.

Joan looked about as awful as I felt when she shuffled downstairs later that morning. But we gamely attempted more toast and hot tea, and put on our bravest, most optimistic masks when we drove back to the hospital for afternoon visiting hours.

Leanne was awake, despite looking as though she shouldn't be. With sallow skin stretched taut across her face, her eyes were flat and bleak, hair stringy, colourless tangles. She managed a two-second smile when Joan walked up to the bed, before being drained from the effort. When Joan fell onto Leanne's chest, it was all she could do to lift one bony hand and rest it on her daughter's head, leaving her silent tears to trickle freely down her cheeks.

'Hey. I'd ask how you're feeling, but you look even worse than me,' I said, offering the warmest smile I could muster.

'Thank you,' Leanne croaked, her eyes telling me that she wasn't referring to the greeting.

'You're welcome.'

After a few minutes of muted, laborious chat, a doctor arrived for her afternoon rounds. Leanne asked if I could stay while she provided an update.

After doing a full screen of blood and other tests, they had a diagnosis. Leanne had hepatitis C. Her liver was a wreck. They would need to do more tests to establish to what extent. The social worker appeared and took Joan to find something to eat and a 'treat for Mummy' while the doctor checked whether Leanne was sure she wanted me present for the next part of the conversation.

'I've got nothing to hide from Ollie,' she said, fumbling across the bed for my hand. 'If anything happens to me, someone's got to explain it to Diamanté Butterfly one day.'

The doctor glanced at me, puzzled.

'Joan.'

'I named her that because I wanted her to be different to me. To shine. To fly.' Leanne sniffed, wiping her hand across her face.

The conversation that followed was gut-wrenching. I knew that Leanne didn't want my pity, but boy she had my sympathy.

She'd been lured away from home at sixteen, in a process that today would be recognised as grooming, but fifteen years ago was put down to a wild, uncontrollable teenager with no morals or self-respect. The thirty-four-year-old monster who stole her heart along with her innocence introduced her to heroin, as a reward for being passed around strange men like a joint of weed.

For the next two years she stumbled through a living hell, lost in a haze of drugs and abuse.

'I was nothing. Worthless trash. That's how they treated me, so that's what I became,' she said, her accent thickening as she voyaged deeper into the memories.

And then, when she realised she was pregnant, everything changed.

'I'd made a sort of friend. Betty. She lived in the flat downstairs. She looked at me different. Like, she saw me as a person, not a thing to be used. She was a bit dodderly on her feet, so I started helping with her shopping, stuff like that. And then, one day, she offered to cut my hair.' Leanne stopped to catch her breath.

'I'd forgotten what it was like to be touched like that. Gentle. With kindness. So, when I found out about the baby, I told Betty. She helped me make a plan to get away. We found this house for women like me, out in the countryside.'

Another pause. Leanne's face had set like concrete, although her hands twisted and plucked at the bed sheet. 'But then... I wasn't pregnant any more. Back to business as usual.'

It was all I could do not to turn away, close my eyes. But I was not going to be yet another person who dismissed her story or backed away from her pain.

'I decided, though. That was never going to happen again. So, I left. I spent nearly a year in the house, getting clean, and getting strong. Well, stronger than before, which isn't saying much. I got pregnant with Joan a few months later.'

'And have you taken anything since?'

'Drugs, you mean?' She lifted her chin. 'I've not injected. See, no fresh tracks, here, Doctor.' She held out her arms as evidence.

'Some weed. A lot of booze. But I've been sober for three years. Still have a ciggie now and then, to chase away the nightmares.'

'Well, Leanne, it sounds like you've done astonishingly well. You are one brave warrior of a woman. We've also completed a full tox screen, which with your permission I'll pass to social services once the results come back. Now, if you're ready we can talk about what happens next. Alternatively, I'm happy to wait until another day. Today's been a lot.'

'You think my girl is going to wait another day to find out what's going on here?' Leanne twitched the corner of her cracked lips.

The news was a mixture of terrible, then maybe not so bad, then potentially even worse. Leanne had been incubating the virus inside her for a long time. While hepatitis C was generally treatable with medication, over a decade of the virus combined with years of heavy alcohol use was more complicated. Livers were wonderful things, with a freakish capacity to regenerate, but they had their limits. The unanswered question was, had Leanne's reached hers?

If so, then the best she could hope for was treatment to prevent things from deteriorating any further.

The worst? Cirrhosis, liver failure, cancer.

The moment that Leanne broke was when the doctor told her that they would have to test Joan.

Once the doctor had moved on to the next patient, Joan returned, and we explained what we could, as gently as possible. I went to find a coffee and some comfort food, leaving an eleven-year-old girl curled up in the arms of her brave mother.

We arrived home from hospital in the early evening. I went to let Nesbit out into the back and found a bouquet of wild flowers on my doorstep. The giant daisies, yarrow and purple teasels that were sprinkled throughout the forest and meadows beyond our hedge, tied with gardening twine.

Please pass on my good wishes to Ms Brown. Being without one's mother can be difficult. Having something pretty to look at may in some small way help.

Right. This ridiculousness had gone on long enough. I took the ten steps over to Middle Cottage and rapped on the door, transferring some of my sadness and anger into the forcefulness of the knock.

I waited for the customary two minutes, then knocked again. And again.

Eventually, after cupping my hands against the door and yelling that I wasn't going away until he opened it, the back door creaked open and Ebenezer stood there, glowering.

Today, his T-shirt said, *Does my head look bald in this?*

'I came to say thank you for the flowers, but if I'm going to pass on your good wishes, I need to know your name.'

He stood there, his eyebrows so long that I could barely see if there were any eyes hiding beneath.

'Like I said two months ago, I'm Ollie.'

Just as I was about to crack and stomp back home, he replied.

'Ebenezer.'

'Um... what?' I felt a flush rise up my neck, before spotting the definite crease of a smirk hiding in the depths of his beard.

Both caterpillar eyebrows rose, clear body language for *yes, I do know what you call me behind my back.*

'It probably suits me. You can stick with that.'

I cleared my throat. 'I would really like to do you the courtesy of calling you by your actual name.'

'Really?' Ebenezer gave a comically slow, stiff shrug. How he managed to prune hedges and construct wooden shelters was beyond me. 'I've always considered a nickname to be a gesture of affection between friends.'

He ducked his chin. 'Ebenezer is fine.'

Then, conversation over, he closed the door.

* * *

'I've been thinking – who's going to look after Mum when you're working and I'm at holiday club and then back at school?' Joan asked while we were eating dinner.

Good question. We'd both witnessed Leanne's attempt at hauling herself out of bed to shuffle to the bathroom, and it wasn't pretty.

'When I'm working at home, I could keep an eye on her. Either at yours, or she could come here.'

Joan pushed a piece of tortellini round for a second lap of her plate. 'I don't know if I'm big enough to help her up the stairs and things. What about in the mornings and the evenings?'

'Dr Kapoor won't let her home until she's able to do things like that herself.'

'But the doctor said she might never get any better!' She looked at me, eyes wide with panic. 'Does that mean she won't be allowed to come home?'

'No!' I put down my fork. 'She will definitely come home. There's lots of different equipment they can give someone if they're struggling. You can even have people whose job it is to come in every morning to help someone get up and dressed, just while they're recovering. But I really think that in a few days your mum will be much stronger again, now she's having all that medicine.'

'Not if she has cancer.'

I took a deep breath. 'Maybe not, then. Depending on where it is and what they can do to treat it.'

Joan slowly chewed another mouthful. 'I need to find my grandparents.'

'Oh! Wow. That's an interesting idea.' *Or a really terrible one.*

'I don't know anything about them, but sometimes Mum forgets she's pretending they don't exist and lets something slip like what they did on Christmas Day or how they sang silly songs in the car.' She looked at me, forehead wrinkled in thought. 'They sound like nice people. Not like the people we ran away from, Archer or the other men. I think they might really miss Mum and want to help.'

I nodded. 'I agree. Although *might* is an important word, here. They might have had a terrible fight that means they've been trying to pretend she doesn't exist, too. Your mum talks about the odd good thing, but there might have been lots of bad things that happened

growing up as well, and that's why she never wants to talk about them.'

Joan nodded. 'I know that. I know how horrible people can be, Ollie. I'm not getting my hopes up that this is going to be like some film where there's a big, happy reunion and everything is perfect. I probably won't even find them, and if I do I might wish I hadn't. But it has to be worth a try.'

'I agree. We could maybe speak to the social worker about it?'

Joan shuddered. 'No, thank you. She talks to me like I'm only ten or something. I'm going to find them myself. Although you can help if you want to.'

I did want to. Joan's calm, wise answers were one thing in theory – I knew how complicated family ties could be in practice, and there was no way I was letting her go down this road without me.

'Are you going to tell your mum?'

She pulled her head back and squinted at me as though I'd asked if she was going to start the grandparent search on the moon. 'Er, didn't you hear the doctor say that Mum needed to stay calm and not worry?'

'Fair enough. After dinner, we can pack up those things she asked us to bring to the hospital, and I need to figure out the logistics for tomorrow. Before we go and see Mum I have two ReadUp coaching sessions in the library; if you don't mind coming along, you can make the most of my library card.'

'Excellent! A perfect opportunity to start my research!'

* * *

I waited until Joan was snuggled up in bed before allowing the thought that had been simmering in the back of my brain to boil over.

Ebenezer had summed it up in his note: *Being without one's mother can be difficult.*

Leanne had gone years without speaking to her parents. Was that a deliberate decision from the outset – had she walked away, intending it to be the last time? Or had she hoped to make them stew for a bit before the inevitable reconciliation, only things happened and time slipped past and then one day the distance had grown too vast to find her way back?

How would I feel if Karina or Aunty Linda called to tell me that Mum was ill, in hospital, and she might never recover?

Would I regret every week, every day I'd missed the chance to speak to her, to let her in on my new life?

Or would the lessons I'd learnt without her ensure that we could then move forwards in a way that was so much better, we'd both be grateful for the time apart?

I did know that if she got hit by a bus tomorrow, and her last words to me had been begging me not to leave, I would probably never forgive myself.

I picked up my phone, put it down again. Picked it up, unblocked her number, then hurriedly blocked it again as though her mum powers would be able to detect my actions from several miles away. In the end, realising that calling her while unable to stop crying was probably not the best idea, I sent a text to Karina asking how things were. Five minutes later, a reply:

All good! We're at the theatre watching Jeeves and Wooster! How are you?

How am I? Lost, lonely, heartsick for the little girl asleep upstairs and my friend, who can't even get to the toilet without help.

Wondering what on earth I'm doing, and how I can possibly help.

And then I thought again, and sent Karina an answer that was equally as true:

I'm doing okay, thanks. Getting better every day.

I would call Mum one day, when I was strong enough, secure enough to handle it.

One day.

* * *

Steph was not happy. She'd left multiple messages by the time I found a spare minute to call her.

'What's the plan, Ollie?'

'They aren't sure yet. The results have come back mixed. Leanne's all clear for cancer, thank goodness, but her liver is not great. She can probably come home in the next few days, but it depends how well she responds to the medication.'

Steph interrupted with a snap. 'Diane at children's services said Joan is living with you.'

'She is.'

'And that you'd be happy to provide support to her mother for as long as she needed it.'

'Yes.'

'Which, from what I can tell, is currently indefinitely.'

'Well, obviously we're hoping that things will get a lot better...'

'Remind me again, caring for a sick woman and child is what number on the Dream List?'

I sucked in a sharp breath. 'Why would you even ask that?'

Having a friend to stay: item ten.

‘Because you need to see what’s happening here. You made a momentous change so that you could stop continuously prioritising someone else over your own dreams and happiness.’

‘What?’ I was utterly blindsided, my eyes stinging as they held back tears of hurt and humiliation.

‘You’ve severed one highly dysfunctional relationship and almost immediately reattached yourself to someone else who needs taking care of. This need to be needed is precisely why you decided to follow the No-Man Mandate and have the Dream List rules in place, to ensure this didn’t happen.’

‘I... my relationship with Joan is not dysfunctional.’ My voice was a hoarse croak. ‘I’m helping out a neighbour – a *friend* – who is very ill. I don’t *want* to be the kind of selfish person who wouldn’t do that!’

‘So what’s next on the Dream List, then?’

‘How can I think about the Dream List when three days ago I found a woman unconscious on her bedroom floor? A woman who has no one else to pack a bag and take her clean pyjamas to the hospital, or to step up and take care of her child, so she doesn’t have to go and live with strangers in foster care? I’ve not had a spare second to think, let alone plan some stupid fantasy night out.’

‘That’s my whole point,’ Steph said, sounding calmer now. ‘You’ve not had a spare second, Ollie, because you’ve taken on the responsibility of fixing this whole situation. Other neighbours would drop a meal round, take a bag to hospital or offer to watch Joan after school. They wouldn’t expect to do all of those things, along with everything else, turning their entire life upside down *indefinitely*.’

She paused, but I had nothing to say in reply.

‘I know you want to help. It’s the right thing to do. But you have two choices here. Slip back into your old negative patterns, creating

another cycle of unhealthy dependency. Or, you can use this opportunity to figure out the boundary between being a kind and decent person, and someone who is kind or decent to herself. It isn't up to you to fix this.'

'They haven't got anyone else,' I said, my voice hollow.

'That's exactly what you always said about Tina,' Steph replied gently. 'I love you like a sister, Ollie. You know that. Please, promise me you'll at least think about what I've said.'

'I have to go.' I stopped, rephrased that. 'Actually, I'm *choosing* to end this conversation.'

I didn't promise, but Steph knew I didn't have to. We had weathered too many storms together to allow a tough conversation to knock us off track. The least I owed my best friend was to think about what she'd said. Which of course I did, almost continuously, like a wire brush scrubbing away at my skull.

In the end, after two more days of relentlessly churning it over while frantically racing between the hospital and work meetings, picking up Joan from her holiday club and walking Nesbit, I reached some conclusions. I would care for Joan for as long as she needed me. It was the right thing to do, and children's services would have to prise her out of my hands before they moved her away from her home or her dog. And I would help Joan find her grandparents, as soon as possible.

I would be a friend to Leanne, but not a carer. She would have to source that help from elsewhere.

And I would make sure I found time in all this to complete the last item on the Dream List, if for no other reason than to prove Steph wrong.

I had been rescheduling my ReadUp sessions to fit around Joan's holiday club, ending up with back-to-back coaching on Friday with my three favourite clients. Yasmin was first, marching through the door on a mission.

'Here, I've completed the second workbook.' She handed me the book.

'Wow! Well done. You're really going for this.'

'Yes, because today I need you to help me make a Facebook page and flyers.' She stopped then, as if noticing me for the first time. 'Ollie, you look terrible.'

'I know.' When I'd seen my face in the mirror that morning, I'd wondered if there'd been a mix-up, and I was the one who should have collapsed on the bedroom floor.

'When did you last wash your hair?' Yasmin peered closer. 'When was the last time you *brushed* your hair?'

I shrugged.

'That top was already dirty when I saw you at the dog park on Wednesday.'

'I've been busy.'

‘Ollie.’ Yasmin sounded even more serious than usual. ‘There are some extreme situations when a woman can’t brush her hair or wash her clothes.’ She wrinkled her nose. ‘Or shower. Places where it is impossible to find shampoo or running water. There is *no excuse* for a woman living in Bigley Bottom, with a job and a house and the freedom to do what she wants, to treat herself like this. What is happening?’

I tried tucking my greasy, ratty hair neatly behind my ears. It immediately popped back out again. ‘Like I said, it’s been a really busy week.’

It had been the most physically and mentally exhausting week of my life. Worse than the week I moved. Worse than the week Mum decided she had suffered a stroke. Yasmin pulled a face to show what she thought about my busy week.

‘I want to cancel this session so that you can go home and sort yourself out, but there are dogs out there who need my help. I’m very conflicted.’

‘I’ve got sessions straight after this, anyway. I promise I’ll wash my hair this evening.’

Yasmin thought about it for a few seconds. ‘And find some clean clothes?’ She smoothed down her patterned tunic.

‘I presume the flyers you want to make are for dog training?’

‘Yes!’ She sank down into the empty chair, dilemma forgotten. ‘I can’t bear it any longer. Every time I take Mr Howard’s dogs out, I see more animals having to put up with owners who don’t know what they are doing. It should be illegal to buy a dog without taking some sort of examination. You aren’t allowed a car without a licence. A car has no feelings, no brain! Yet anyone can take responsibility for another living creature.’ She groaned, shaking her head in despair. ‘I am doing my best, Ollie, to help these stupid people, but they just

aren't interested! Yesterday, when I told a man at the park that it was his fault his dog knocked over a small child, he was very rude. When I explained that even a bad dog owner like him could easily learn to control his dog, he got more angry. I learnt three new swear words.'

'You told him he was a bad owner?'

'I wanted to encourage him, that even he could learn how to do it, no problem.'

'Yasmin, he probably didn't appreciate being called bad.'

'Well, his Yorkshire terrier probably doesn't appreciate being called Big Dog. Or having an owner who cannot be bothered to learn how to look after him. Now, can you look at my flyer ideas because even thinking about this is making me upset.'

After a quick look at the flyers – *Let the Dog Mother train you how to stop being a bad dog owner* – I decided that having a look at other dog trainers' websites would be an excellent way to develop Yasmin's reading comprehension skills. After the fourth website, it finally clicked that a more positive, supportive approach might work better, and I suggested we take a look at professional dog-training courses to see if there were any she could sign up for.

When Trev arrived, ten minutes early, she was just getting started.

'Don't mind me.' He blushed. 'I'm happy to keep myself busy until it's time to switch over.'

Yasmin looked up and gave a brief smile, before reabsorbing herself in the computer screen.

'I'm going to get a drink. Would anybody else like one? Ollie, you look like you could do with a strong coffee. Yasmin?'

'I would *love* a coffee but the machine is still broken,' Yasmin replied.

‘Oh? I might be able to do something about that. I think I’ve got... yes... here it is.’ Trev rummaged around in his rucksack before taking out a screwdriver. He took off his cap and went over to where the coffee machine still bore a sign declaring that it was out of order. He turned it around, pulled open the moveable compartments and poked about inside before picking it up to inspect the underside.

‘Excuse me, what do you think you’re doing?’ Irene huffed, clomping over. ‘Can’t you read?’

Yasmin’s head snapped up as I sprang to my feet. I hoped that Irene had simply made an insensitive mistake, but then – this was Irene.

‘Not very well, no.’

Irene’s lips twisted in horror as Trev pointed the screwdriver at her to emphasise his point, then turned to prise open the back of the machine.

‘You can’t just come in here and start vandalising library property. Stop it at once!’

Ignoring her, Trev carried on prodding about in the machine while Irene huffed and puffed.

‘I said stop it!’ She turned to me, eyes bulging. ‘Are you going to do something, or will I have to call the police?’

Before I could answer, Trev relicked the back into place. ‘Not unless you want to offer them a cup of coffee.’ He gave a grin that I think he fully intended to be a tiny bit menacing. ‘Stick the power back on, would you, love?’

Irene gaped at him. Shaking his head, Trev bent under the table, flicked on the socket, pressed the machine’s ‘on’ button and then selected a black coffee, deftly slipping a cup under the spout as the hot liquid started spurting out.

'It's broken!' Irene said, bobbing from one foot to the other. 'It's going to start spilling everywhere!'

At a perfect centimetre from the top of the paper cup, the machine gurgled to a stop.

'Any sugar?' Trev asked, glancing at Yasmin.

'Yes, please.'

He ripped open a sugar sachet with a flourish, poured it in and gave it a vigorous stir with a wooden stick before placing it next to Yasmin. 'Here you go. Sorry about the wait.'

'Thank you,' Yasmin replied, watching Irene over the rim of the cup as she took a tentative sip.

'Oh,' Irene said weakly, her hand still clutching at her heart.

'You got a recycling bin for paper?' Trev asked her, holding up the *Out of Order* sign.

'Um, yes. I'll take it.' She opened her mouth and closed it a couple of times while Trev waited. 'Thank you. And, um... I need to go and cancel the repair man. Excuse me.'

Watching her scurry off, Trev made two more coffees and brought them over.

'Too much to ask for an apology,' Yasmin said, frowning.

'I got a thank you.' He shrugged one shoulder, slipping his cap back on.

'Still.' Yasmin pursed her lips. 'She threatened to call the police!'

'I know what people think when they first see me. It's my own daft fault. I was trying to look scary and intimidating, so I can hardly complain when it works.'

'Not all people,' Yasmin said softly, still scrolling down the computer screen as she sipped her coffee.

'Pardon?'

‘Not all people think that about you.’ She flicked her eyes over to him for a split second. ‘Some of us have seen enough to not make that kind of judgement.’

Trev’s whole face went slack in surprise.

‘Personally, I think that eyes are the window to a man’s soul.’ She squinted at the screen. ‘You have kind eyes.’

It wasn’t Trev’s most productive session. He spent the hour alternating between trying his best for a minute or so, before inevitably his attention drifted back over to where Yasmin was still working her way through the online information about dog-training courses.

When Jaxx arrived bearing yet more samples of Nomato sauce, Trev was more than happy to hang around for a taste test.

‘Jaxx, are you sure this meets all the British food standards?’ I asked, reluctantly accepting a cracker bearing a blob of bright orange sauce.

‘I’ve been eating tons of the stuff, and look at me.’ He grinned.

Yasmin narrowed one eye. ‘That’s not as reassuring as I think you meant it to be.’

‘Can’t be worse than the crap they dished up in... where I used to live,’ Trev said, sniffing a cracker, before reeling back again. ‘Then again...’

‘This is definitely better than what I ate in prison,’ Yasmin said, rubbing at her wrist. ‘No food standards in that cursed pit of hell.’

Trev choked on the tiny nibble he’d just taken.

‘Intense, innit?’ Jaxx offered him a water bottle.

‘What is this?’ To my huge relief, Irene reappeared before I was forced to take a bite.

‘Taste testing, Irene.’ Jaxx offered her the plastic tub of samples. ‘Here. Sorry to have missed you out!’

Irene pulled a taut smile. It looked as though the papery skin on her cheeks might crack. ‘Ollie, please point out the sign to your clients.’

‘We aren’t supposed to eat our own food in the library,’ I said. ‘No drinks except for those available at the refreshment table.’

‘What?’ Jaxx’s huge, puppy-dog eyes gazed at Irene from under his tracksuit hood. ‘How am I supposed to conduct my market research, then? It’s hard enough getting started, with all this bureaucracy like customs, licences and permits to deal with. Bureau-crap-cy, I call it! I never dreamt that *you* of all people would be one to crush the entrepreneurial spirit, Irene. Surely you can make an exception for a mate?’

‘A what?’ Irene appeared bamboozled.

‘Go on, you know you want to!’

To everyone’s amazement but Jaxx’s, Irene abruptly picked up a cracker and took a sharp bite. Face contorting through a range of emotions, she chewed, swallowed and then downed a cupful of water.

‘Even if food were allowed in this library, I wouldn’t allow that. I recommend you reconsider your investigations into a career as a paramedic. We’ll be needing a lot more of them if Nomato starts selling.’

‘Woah. That’s harsh!’ Jaxx’s face plummeted.

‘It’s called market research. Clear this up right away, please.’

‘I can’t believe she said “please”!’ Yasmin exclaimed once Irene had clomped back to the help desk. ‘She must really like you!’

Jaxx winked. ‘Everyone does, Yasmin. I’m a very likeable person.’

‘What are you going to do about all this, then?’ Trev asked, once we’d tidied up. ‘Didn’t go too well here, lad.’

Jaxx frowned as he thought about it. 'I dunno, to be honest. I, like, totally believe in my product and everything. But I suppose the taste could be better.'

'And the smell,' Yasmin added. 'And the colour and texture.'

'It's not easy, all this business malarkey, is it?'

'It's not,' Yasmin said. 'There's so much to think about, all these decisions and things that you need to know and do so that you aren't breaking the law or offending your customers.'

'True story!' Jaxx nodded vigorously. 'Like, did you know that you aren't allowed to start a business without telling the government? And then they want to take a load of the money you make? There's all these forms to fill in and crap like that.'

'Did you know that you need insurance in case one of the dogs you are working with bites somebody – as if that would happen to a dog I was training! – or, I don't know, someone has an allergic reaction to your Nomato because you forgot to say that it contains shellfish?'

'You think I need to mention that?'

'Well, only if it contains it...'

Jaxx made a note on his phone.

'Man. If only there was, like, some club or a group or something like this, where serious business people like us could get together and find all this stuff out,' he mused. 'We could share ideas and try out each other's products. Tell them their website's boring, all that.'

'That's a great idea!' Trev interjected. 'You should set one up.'

'We totally should!' Jaxx gave him a high five.

'According to the poster, there already is one,' I said, pointing to the notice board by the entrance. 'It meets... every other Friday at one.'

Trev looked at his watch. 'It's one thirty.'

‘Oy, Irene!’ Jaxx shouted across the library, causing her to flick up her head, eyes blazing. Although, when she saw who had called out, the heat dropped by several degrees. ‘What about this business group that meets on Fridays?’

Irene wrinkled up her nose. ‘They disbanded.’

‘Why?’

She hesitated. ‘Something to do with a disagreement about biscuits and a guest speaker.’

‘Was the disagreement with you?’ Yasmin asked, smiling sweetly.

Irene became engrossed in straightening the papers on her desk.

‘Well, there can be no objections to the group restarting, then, can there?’ Trev said.

‘The group won’t want to restart,’ Irene snapped. ‘They said they would never set foot in the library again. Which is fine by me, because the Friday Business Hub is barred.’

‘Well, how about the Wednesday Business Builders?’ Jaxx asked. ‘No biscuits, unless we offer you some, Irene. See.’ He winked at Yasmin. ‘That’s the kind of quick thinking means I’m going to be a millionaire one day.’

After a lot more wrangling, finished off by me offering to speak to the director of Notts libraries, who loved ReadUp, Irene agreed to a small meeting, once a fortnight, for business support. The terms included no presentations, or activities that might disturb the other library users. Biscuits were allowed, in return for a small donation.

Trev asked if he could join them.

‘Of course, mate, the more the merrier. What’s your business idea?’ Jaxx asked.

I strongly suspected that any ideas Trev had were nothing to do with business.

‘Reckon I can come up with something.’

When there was a knock on Saturday morning, I was surprised to find Pia, Sam's mum, wringing her hands on my doorstep.

'I'm so sorry it's taken me a whole week to call in!' she exclaimed, leaning past Nesbit's enthusiastic greeting to give me a suffocating squeeze. 'We were away last weekend, and then I've had my grandchildren to stay.'

'Um, okay.' I stepped back automatically, directing her towards the garden. It was a gloomy day for August, with a distinct nip in the air, but the living room and kitchen were still a complete mess, due to me choosing to keep my promise to Yasmin and spend Friday evening tidying up myself and my wardrobe before collapsing into fretful sleep, ignoring the disgusting state of the cottage. I tried to wrack my brains to find a reason why Pia should have called around. I'd not seen her since the outdoor theatre a few weeks ago, and couldn't recall anything being said then or since about her coming over.

'Would you like a tea or coffee?' I asked, once we were safely seated at the table.

'Goodness, no! You sit down and stay put. I should be the one making *you* a drink!'

‘Um, the kitchen’s in a bit of a state.’

She looked at me askance, adding, ‘Well, of course it is!’ before going back inside.

A few awkward minutes later, she came out of the kitchen with two mugs of tea.

‘My dear, I am so, so sorry,’ she said, once she’d sat down, and then promptly burst into tears. Wow. I didn’t realise the kitchen was quite *that* bad.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said a few more times while blowing her nose and dabbing at perfectly made-up eyes. ‘I know I have no right to be the one crying. I just feel so guilty. When I heard what happened, I couldn’t believe it.’

‘Um, I don’t really know—’

‘In *hospital!*’ she cried. ‘Ginger said that Joan found her – collapsed! Oh, that poor, poor girl. Those poor, poor girls.’

‘Leanne.’

‘Well, of course. Why else would I be here?’

‘I didn’t, um, know that you knew her. Why would you feel guilty?’

‘She’s cleaned for me for nearly two years. Always done a stellar job. I recommended her to three of my friends. Fantastic attitude, works until she’s dripping with sweat... so I should have... I couldn’t have...’

While Pia started weeping again, I mentally went back over the list of cleaning clients that Leanne had provided so I could let them know she was in hospital. She visited nine houses from Monday to Friday with varying frequency, as well as Hatherstone Hall. There had been a mixed response, from disinterest to annoyance to Ginger, who ran the hall, expressing a gush of relief that the recent drop in standards wasn’t down to Leanne growing sloppy or lazy.

‘You weren’t on the list Leanne gave me. Otherwise I’d have called to let you know.’

Pia lowered her tissue, taking in a shuddery breath. ‘That’s because I let her go.’

‘Ah.’

‘She’s always been brilliant, like I said. Over the past few months I noticed she was taking longer to complete the work, and then things started not getting done. One day I arrived home early and found her sprawled on the spare bed! When I asked what was going on, she denied any problem, slurring her speech and swaying all over the place. I assumed she’d been drinking. And, given the quality of her work, that it wasn’t the first time. It was one in the afternoon!’

I took a slow, deep breath. ‘Did you call children’s services?’

My heart had time for several painful, pounding thumps before she replied. ‘I was worried for Joan. I knew she didn’t have anyone else.’

‘You had no proof that she was drunk.’

‘Well, something was clearly not right.’

‘But still – as if Leanne didn’t have enough problems! She was terrified that her daughter might be taken from her. You have children; can you possibly imagine what that was like?’

‘My dear, I’ve worked as a family solicitor since before you were born. I don’t have to imagine. I also know all too well what it could have been like for Joan, with no one to help her.’

‘You could have asked me.’ A bubble of hot rage began expanding in my stomach, squeezing up against my diaphragm. ‘I’ve been looking after Joan most evenings after school and on Saturdays.’

‘And you were sure that nothing was wrong? That Leanne was a capable mother, there was nothing of concern going on?’

The bubble popped.

Pia studied my sudden deflation, before pulling out a hardbacked notebook and pen.

‘Shall we sort some rotas?’

‘Rotas?’

‘I’ve made a start with meals, taking Joan to visit her mother – trusted, DBS-checked people only, but hopefully we won’t need that one for long. Cleaning, washing, shopping. Is there anything else you need? Would it be useful to have some people walk Nesbit?’

‘I don’t... I’m not sure what... are you making rotas for people to help me?’

‘Well, of course. You’re the one doing all the work.’

‘Listen, that’s very kind of you, and I do appreciate it, but I really don’t need any help. *I’m* the one helping Leanne. Once she’s discharged, I suppose someone else could chip in with some meals for her, but I’m fine.’

Pia actually laughed. She tried to hide it, but her face was like a pane of glass. ‘My dear, *everyone* needs help. That’s how life works.’

‘I’m actually kind of trying to manage without, at the moment. It’s complicated – family history, past issues, that sort of thing, but it’s important that I see this through on my own.’

‘Ollie, I have just been inside your kitchen. I’ve never drunk black tea in my life, but when I tried to add milk it plopped out in a perfect cube. Your trousers are on inside out. I’m pretty sure your dog has eaten a packet of crackers and vomited it back up again. You need help. We all need help, all the time. That’s why I pay for a cleaner and have just spent the week driving my grandchildren about. But sometimes, we need more help than others. This is one of those times.’

I shook my head. I had spent too many years being organised and bossed about and told that I couldn't manage on my own, and all those memories were on red alert, determined not to let this pushy woman push her way into my home and my life and start controlling it.

Pia narrowed one eye. 'I heard that social services are assessing the best options for Joan. Do you think you can convince them that you can provide her with the best possible care, like this? Insisting that you do it on your own?'

Ooof!

She might as well have punched me in the face.

I took a moment to recover, my conversation with Steph echoing amongst the frustration and anxiety. I glanced down at my trousers, which were indeed inside out.

'Some meals would be very helpful. Just for the next week or so while we find our feet. Leanne is hoping to be home in the next few days, but if someone could take Joan to hospital on one or two of those, that would also be great. Once we've walked Nesbit, we're going to have a big tidy up and a clean. Sunday we'll do a food shop on the way back from the hospital. Thank you for telling me about my trousers. I was half asleep when you knocked and pulled them on in a hurry.'

'Excellent. How about we swap numbers, and I'll let you know who and what to expect when. And no problem about your trousers, but my son said he might have those chairs ready for you today. I didn't want you to end up caught with your crotch hem on show.'

Before she left, Pia unloaded three shopping bags full of essentials like bread, milk and cake, along with a giant lasagne.

'It's not quite your standard, but better than a microwave meal.'

'Thank you.'

Her face creased up again. 'It's the least I can do. If you don't mind, I'll take Joan to visit her mother when it's next convenient. I feel I must speak to her in person.'

'We were going to head over this afternoon. If you take Joan, I could stay and get the house straight.'

'Or, I could take Joan and you could read a book, or have a long bath and a sleep?' She winked at me. 'We'll take our time, give you long enough to do both.'

* * *

I was scrubbing the shower when there was another knock on the door. And yes, I might have brushed my hair and put on a discreet swipe of mascara and lip gloss. I knew there was nothing ever going to happen between Sam and I, but my foolish heart was finding it harder to accept.

I opened the door to find him sitting in an oak chair on my doorstep, adopting a clichéd model pose. It would have been funnier if he didn't look like a model.

'I heard you've had a busy week. Thought a comfy chair might help,' he said, standing up and picking up the solid chair like it was made of polystyrene.

'Just one?' I asked, peering behind him to see if there was another one for me to carry.

'Then where would I sit?' he replied, as if confounded by the very thought. 'They're heavy, though. Why don't you open a beer or put the kettle on or something? Mum'll kill me if she finds out I've had you hefting furniture.'

I opted for beer, given that the sun was starting to probe through the murk. I was tipping one of the giant bags of crisps that Pia had

left in my cupboard into a bowl when Sam found me.

‘How are you holding up?’ he asked, brow furrowed with concern. His voice was so kind and gentle that all my determination to appear competent melted into a sudden rush of tears that, once they’d started, wouldn’t seem to stop.

‘Come here,’ he muttered, pulling me up against him and enfolding me in his solid arms. He was wearing a soft grey T-shirt, and my face ended up pressed against the bare skin above his collar. It was warm and smooth and smelt like sawdust and summertime.

I kept my arms awkwardly against my sides, but honestly, I could have fallen asleep inside that hug, I felt so safe and comfortable. Well, apart from the electricity crackling beneath my skin.

‘I’m sorry,’ I sniffled, eventually pulling back and wiping my face on the sleeve of my own T-shirt, until Sam handed me a tissue. ‘I always get overemotional when I’m tired.’

He frowned. ‘I think, all things considered, that this was probably the right amount of emotion.’

That made me smile, which brought out his dazzling grin again, instantly pushing back the shadows.

Sam listened while I went over the past week, grimacing in sympathy when I described finding Leanne unconscious, raising his eyebrows when I explained how I was determined to continue caring for Joan until Leanne was well enough to.

‘That’s a huge commitment for someone you’ve only known a couple of months.’

I took a sip of beer. ‘I know. But I’ve seen her six days a week for most of that. Cooked her meals, helped with homework projects.’ I paused, shrugged. ‘I love her like a niece, if I had one. Which I won’t, being an only child. Maybe sometimes families are made, not born.’

Leanne and Joan need a family. It doesn't feel like a burden to be that for them. It feels like the most natural thing I could do.'

'So is the Dream List on hold?' Sam asked, one corner of his mouth creasing up.

'It's not. My dear best friend has helped me realise that if this is going to work, I need to find a way to balance being a stand-in parent with my own plans.'

'So what's next?' Sam leant forwards, interested.

'The biggest and scariest thing on the list.'

'Bigger and scarier than camping alone in the forest?' Sam looked impressed.

'Yes.' I took another swig of beer. 'A party.'

'Ah, I see.' He nodded, eyes dancing. 'I'm guessing you've never organised a party before?'

I shook my head. 'I've hardly *been* to a party before. I don't even know where to start.'

'Start with what you imagined when you wrote the list. That's the whole point, isn't it?'

'I'm not sure vodka jelly, a McFly CD and Harry Potter-themed fancy dress has really stood the test of time.'

'Throw in some bacon Frazzles and I'm in.'

I eyed Sam over the top of my drink. 'Who said you were invited?'

He gave me a pointed look in return, but his eyes were still sparkling. 'At the risk of hurting your feelings, I'm not sure you're in a position to be choosy.'

I screwed up my face. 'You're right. It'll be ages before I know enough people to have a decent gathering. Which means the Dream List will just keep dragging on.'

Meaning that the No-Man Mandate would keep dragging on, too, of course.

‘That’s not true – I was making a stupid joke so you felt compelled to let me come.’ He adjusted position in the chair, face serious now. ‘Let’s make a list. You’ve got Leanne, and Joan. Me. What’s your best friend’s name?’

‘Steph, and she’ll bring her husband, Drew, and at least one of her brothers.’

Before we knew it, we’d scraped together enough names to definitely constitute a party. It wouldn’t be an epic bash, but there would be enough to fill the cottage nicely.

‘So, what else will you need? Any food or entertainment?’

I pointed my empty bottle at him. ‘Any other plans will be decided and arranged by me, alone, in accordance with the Dream List remit.’

‘Fair enough. If you did need any help, though, given everything else that’s going on...’

‘If I did need any help organising a small gathering, then I’m a failure at being in the big wide world on my own.’

Sam went completely still. He locked eyes with me across the table. ‘Look at you, Ollie. Look at all that you’re doing. Building an amazing charity. Taking in stray dogs and training them up into very good boys. Looking after a child while she goes through the toughest time. Going for fancy meals and to the theatre on your own. You are kicking the big wide world’s butt.’ The corner of his mouth tweaked up, and it was so gorgeous it was all I could do not to topple forwards into his lap. ‘The last time I organised a gathering, a random dog stole the chicken.’

We both started laughing, at precisely the moment the sun came out and Nesbit wandered over for a pet and in that moment, I could almost believe that what Sam said was true.

* * *

Joan and Pia arrived back a short while later.

‘Sam!’ Pia smirked. ‘How lovely to find you here.’

‘How was Mum?’ I asked Joan, but she had other things on her mind.

‘Who’s this man?’ she asked, face creased with suspicion. ‘Is he your boyfriend?’

‘Ooh, I hope so!’ Pia chirped.

‘No!’ I said immediately afterwards, loud enough to make Joan jump. ‘Sam made us these chairs.’

‘That doesn’t mean he’s not your boyfriend.’

‘Well, no, I suppose not. But me saying “no” does mean that.’

‘Then why have you gone all red and why is he smiling like a creepy clown?’ Joan fixed her steely gaze on Sam. ‘Do you want to be Ollie’s boyfriend? Is that why you made her the chairs?’

‘Joan!’ I couldn’t bear to look at him. ‘Sam is just a friend, so please drop it.’

‘Why don’t we let Sam answer the question?’ Pia said.

‘But I just want to know why he’s here and why he made you chairs. You don’t know what men are like, Ollie. They want to move in so they buy you things and act all nice and then once they’re there they start shouting and taking your money and making you cry.’

‘Oh, Joan, no!’ I got out of my chair and went to crouch next to her, holding her hands and looking her right in the eyes so she could see that I meant it. ‘Sam doesn’t want a girlfriend and I don’t want a boyfriend; we both like living on our own. Apart from you and Nesbit, of course. It makes us a perfect match to be friends.’ I ignored my heart’s squeak of protest. ‘I would never have a man come and stay

while you're here, unless you know and trust him. I'm not going to be fooled by someone like Archer, I promise.'

'So he gave you the chairs as a friend?' Joan wasn't convinced.

'Yes. Can you remember when Nesbit stole the chicken? That was Sam's house. He showed me some chairs he made that were super-comfy, and offered to make me some.'

'In return for what?'

'Um...'

'A fantastic meal and some beers,' Sam chipped in. 'But really, I love making the chairs; I don't need anything in return. Oh – and Ollie is inviting me to her party.'

'Is he a carpenter?' Joan asked, still ignoring Sam.

'He's a ranger.'

Joan's eyes went round as circles as she flipped to face him. 'A Ranger? Like Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*?'

Sam's grin was impossible to resist. 'Almost. A forest ranger. I fight things like pollution and overgrown paths and fires, not orcs or goblins.'

Joan pulled her hands free and folded her arms. 'Okay. You can be his friend. No kissing, though!'

'Understood. No kissing.' Sam nodded gravely.

'*Definitely* no kissing,' I agreed.

* * *

'So, if you're a ranger, will you help me find my grandparents?' Joan asked, once Pia had left a few minutes later.

Sam glanced at me, as if checking whether it was okay to follow this line of conversation. I gave a small nod.

'Are they lost in the forest?'

‘No!’ Joan squealed, laughing. ‘I don’t know where they are. Mum tries to pretend they don’t exist. But now she’s ill, I think she might need them.’

Sam looked thoughtful. ‘That’s not really something a forest ranger could do, but in my job before that I was a lawyer and sometimes had to find people, so yes, I will help, if Ollie says it’s okay.’

‘It is okay, as long as we start another day. You’ve had an exhausting week, Joan, and it’s already well past dinner time. Let’s arrange another time to speak to Sam about it, and tomorrow we can get all the information you have so far ready for him.’

‘I can come back tomorrow,’ Sam offered.

‘Really?’ I asked, surprised. ‘You don’t have to. We can wait a few days.’

‘It’s fine, I’d like to.’

‘Yes please!’ Joan looked thrilled.

We arranged for Sam to come in between lunchtime and the hospital visit, and he left us to a late dinner and early night. Not that either of us slept much, I suspected, given how much we were anticipating tomorrow’s detective session. I only hoped that neither of us would end up broken-hearted.

Sunday lunchtime, I opened the door to find Megan, Sam's sister-in-law, and a cool bag that she unzipped to release the most heavenly smells.

'Sunday dinner. Wheat-free, as requested.'

'Megan, this is fabulous!' I unloaded foil tubs containing slices of roast beef, still warm and slightly pink in the middle, roast potatoes, Yorkshire puddings and three different vegetables, along with a pot of gravy.

'Well, I figured you could probably do with something hearty and homemade. I know what it's like when you've got to trail back and forth to hospital every day.'

I was torn between embarrassment and wanting to load it onto plates while it was still hot. She was right – this was exactly what I needed. I had to blink back tears as I thanked her.

Once Megan had left, I transferred one portion of everything onto a plate and then covered it in foil. I hadn't asked for wheat-free meals for nothing. I suspected there would be more than enough food to spare, which there was, and I was going to put it to good use as bait, hopefully luring a grumpy old man out of his lair.

Today, I would bring dinner to him. My longer-term goal was him coming to dinner. I didn't know anything about Ebenezer apart from that he was a brilliant gardener and handyman, but he'd almost implied that we could be friends last time we'd spoken, and I was like Nesbit with a dirty sock – once I'd grabbed hold of that idea, I wasn't letting go without a fight.

I called Joan back from the den she was constructing in a nearby section of forest and scooted around to Middle Cottage. The door was answered after two knocks. My hopes were high.

'What?'

'Some people in the village are bringing us meals while Leanne's in hospital. There's far too much, so I hoped you might help us finish it.'

His forehead furrowed in a scowl. 'I can cook my own dinners.'

'I'm sure. So can I.'

'Take it to Leanne. She's the one having to eat hospital food.'

'It's a roast dinner. There's nowhere to heat it up in hospital.' I peeled back the foil, releasing a waft of delicious smell. 'It's wheat-free.'

His beard twitched in response, and I knew that I almost had him. 'Ebenezer, you have mown, pruned and weeded my garden for the past two months. You put up a washing line and a canopy so I didn't get wet when Nesbit was being house-trained. This is just one dinner that I didn't even cook myself.'

I held out the plate until it bumped into his *It took 80 years to look this good!* T-shirt.

Shaking his head in irritation, he took it.

'Enjoy!'

One way or another, I was going to get my neighbour along to my party. Forget the inevitable note of complaint if he had to hear it

through the wall; I wanted him to boost the numbers. I also suspected that somewhere underneath the scowl and the beard, Ebenezer might be quite good fun.

* * *

Sam arrived just after two. I'd messaged to let him know that Joan and I were at her house, trawling through boxes and piles of clutter in search of clues that might lead to the whereabouts of her family.

The priority was, of course, names. With a surname like Brown we were hoping for first names as unusual as Diamanté Butterfly, but even if they were John and Jane, until we knew, there was little progress to be made. We had found Joan's birth certificate, and various other documents relating to the past two years, but so far nothing else from before her arrival in Bigley. Given the manner in which Leanne had fled from her previous address, I didn't hold out much hope.

Sam had some other suggestions. 'Have you tried the internet?'

'Well, duh!' Joan said, rolling her eyes. 'I've looked and looked using Mum's name, but she's nowhere on there.'

'Maybe she had a different name, before?' I said. 'If she was running from Archer, she might have changed it?'

'That's possible,' Sam mused. 'But I think we need to find out what we can using Leanne Brown before we start down that track. Does she have a middle name?'

'I don't think so,' Joan replied.

'Okay, let's see if we can find a birth certificate.'

I made us a drink while Sam tapped away on his laptop, but without a birthplace he didn't get very far.

'No idea where your mum was born?'

‘Could we try Liverpool, or Merseyside?’ I suggested. ‘That fits her accent.’

That helped to narrow things down but it wasn’t straightforward to obtain a birth certificate without knowing the exact registry office, and most options were going to take time and cost money, so we really needed to know which Leanne Brown was the right one. For all we knew she was born in Australia.

‘I’m going to keep tugging on some threads,’ Sam said eventually. ‘But I think you should carry on searching here as well.’

Joan was more than happy to keep ploughing her way through the junk piles until it was time to leave for the hospital. I did wonder, as I helped her inspect tatty envelopes and poke about in old bags, if there was a much easier way to find all this out. But if we asked Leanne directly, that gave her the opportunity to tell us to stop looking. She might even ask us to promise to abandon the search, and that was a promise I didn’t think Joan could bear to keep.

* * *

Leanne’s haggard face was tight with worry. She tried her best to hide it from her daughter with bright chatter, but I could see that the news wasn’t good. When Joan asked when she could come home, her whole body tensed up.

‘Not yet, sweetheart. There’s still one or two things they need to keep an eye on so that I’m definitely ready. I know it’s hard, but they want to make sure I can look after myself, so I can then take care of you, as soon as possible.’ She took Joan’s hand. ‘You’re all right with Ollie and Nesbit for a few more days, though, aren’t you?’

Joan bared her teeth in what I think was supposed to be a reassuring smile. ‘Yes! I *love* it! Not more than living with you, of

course,' she added hastily. 'But it's fine. I think you should definitely stay in hospital for a few more days.' She paused, pressing one hand to her chest and switching to a sombre frown. 'I would worry if you came home. I know the nurses will keep you safe here.'

'Well, I won't be in here forever,' Leanne said, looking a little disconcerted.

'I know that. I really want you back home, just not before you're ready. Your eyes are still horrible and yellow.'

'And we need to get the cottage ready,' I added, before Joan insulted her mother any further. 'You need a working shower at the very least, and if you don't mind I'll speak to the landlord about the mould, see what he can do. All those spores can't be good for your health.'

'Well, that is one bonus of being in here.' Leanne pulled a wry face. 'A decent shower. You have my full permission to sort whatever you can. Goodness knows I'm not going to have the energy for it. I've paid a bit of the overdue rent, so that might help.'

'Oh?'

'Pia insisted on paying for the weeks since she fired me. She also got that cow who refused to pay for my supposedly shoddy cleaning to backdate me, as well. Another bonus of Hotel NHS is that apart from the odd treat from the snack trolley, I'm not spending a penny. Not even on ciggies since they're banned from now on. I've no idea what the hell we're going to do if I'm not back on my feet soon, but I'll worry about that another day. I've dealt with worse.'

'You're amazing.' I gave her hand a squeeze.

Leanne laughed, but I could sense the tears hovering close by. 'Yeah, look at me. Wonder Woman eat your heart out.'

* * *

'Ugh, a few more days!' Joan said, once we were driving home.

'I know, it's really hard. But you understand why the doctors think it's best to keep her in a bit longer.'

'No, you don't understand! I *want* her to stay in longer.' Joan shook her head in exasperation. 'A few days might not be long enough for Sam to find Nana and Grandad!'

'It will probably take quite a bit longer than that. And you know that we might not be able to find them at all. Or what will happen when we do.'

Nana and Grandad? That was new.

'Yes, yes, I know they might hate Mum or be horrible or whatever. I know all of that but I don't think they will; I think they've spent years and years missing her and praying that she'll come home one day. I just feel it.'

I waited a moment before answering, thinking about the 'research' Joan had conducted in the library while I was coaching. This consisted mainly of reading books where solving the mystery and reaching the happy ending was the only outcome. 'Well, let's hope we can find them soon.'

Joan twisted towards the window, sinking into her hoodie. 'I don't have to hope because I know that we will,' she muttered.

* * *

Once I'd left Joan reading while Nesbit curled up at the foot of the sofa bed, I poured myself a glass of wine and pulled out my phone, clicking to open the internet. The Buttonhole website was advertising a new quilting course. There were pictures on the Facebook page showing a recent Knit and Natter Night, and Mum was in at least half of them, face glowing and wearing a patterned tea-dress that I knew

she'd have sewn herself. To my shock, her name had been tagged. Mum had never taken any interest in social media, but clicking on the link, it took me to her profile. She had set it to private, so all I could see was a profile picture and basic information – but it was enough to send my head spinning. Mum, sitting in a pub garden in the sunshine, lifting up a huge gin and tonic and smiling as though she hadn't a care in the world.

I knew that profile pictures lied.

I knew that even if she was as happy as this snapshot implied, that was okay.

It was better than okay – I *wanted* her to be happy. In a way, it proved that instead of being completely selfish, my decision had been the right one for her as well as me, because she'd certainly never looked this happy before.

It made me think that maybe we would be able to start again.

But at the same time, Joan's words about her grandparents reverberated inside my head.

Why wasn't my mum missing me, grieving her only child?

Had her behaviour the past few years been my fault? Had I been the one holding *her* back?

'Stop gaslighting yourself!' Steph barked, when I called her in a snotty, snuffling mess a few minutes later. 'One word: tooth-gate.'

She spent another half hour laying out the case for why this whole train of thought was preposterous.

'Of course it's a shock to see her getting on with things when for so many years she acted like her whole life depended upon you. Even if she hadn't created this suffocating, all-consuming relationship, it would be weird to be confronted with that picture when you've not had any contact in so long.'

'I think it hurt so much because I still miss her, despite everything, and I feel like a fool when she's not missing me.'

'Ollie, of course she's missing you. This is one photo. This is her coping as best she can. Karina probably took a hundred shots before finding one remotely usable. The question for you is, what do you want to do about it, if anything?'

'Set up a fake profile and become her Facebook friend?'

Steph made a sound like a quiz show buzzer. 'Incorrect. Try again.'

'I don't think I'm ready to meet this new Mum.'

'Okay, that's understandable.'

'But I want to be. I don't want to be so triggered by it; even a photo can affect me this much. I want to be able to think about her, to see her, without it meaning that I can't sleep or eat or concentrate on anything good. I want us to have the healthiest relationship possible, whether that means never seeing her again, or inviting her to my thirtieth birthday party. And I want to be strong enough to figure all this out without doubting every decision.'

'That's going to take time.'

'I hate time!'

'And probably some counselling.'

'I don't have time for counselling!'

'Maybe get through this summer, get through the Dream List, let things settle down with Joan, and then make the time.'

'So what do I do in the meantime?'

'Well, if I'm not mistaken, I think I heard someone mention a party...'

The following afternoon, Joan had her breakthrough. Tucked deep inside the pocket of a ratty rucksack that we found stuffed at the back of Leanne's wardrobe was a birth certificate for Leanne Emily Armitage-Brown, born on 12 October 1988. Parents: Carole and Peter Armitage-Brown. Place of birth: Chester.

Joan didn't have the internet on her phone so we skedaddled straight back to End Cottage and whipped open my laptop.

Carole Armitage-Brown had a Facebook account – all private, with a profile picture of a cat, so I made a friend request and moved on.

Peter Armitage-Brown came up on LinkedIn as a retired construction manager for a Cheshire building firm. He'd worked for the same company for forty-seven years. According to their website, they were doing pretty well. We scoured the blog posts and news features, but didn't find anything specific about Peter. We even tried a website that used information from electoral rolls and directory enquiries, but that came up empty.

But maybe this was enough, for a Ranger on the hunt?

I sent Sam a brief message with a photo of the birth certificate, and he sent me back a selfie of him braced in the branches of an

enormous oak tree gripping a chainsaw, with the caption:

Bit busy will call later.

‘I don’t think it’s safe to be sending messages when you’re up a tree.’ Joan frowned. ‘Especially not when you’re holding a massive saw.’

I was inclined to agree. I kept the photo anyway.

* * *

The next day – Tuesday – just before six, when I was in that now-familiar post-hospital standing-in-front-of-the-fridge-and-wondering-what-to-eat time of day, Sam arrived.

‘I was supposed to prepare you dinner, but thought Joan would prefer me to spend the time searching instead, so I got this.’

He held out one giant and one individual pizza box, which both smelt so delicious I almost swooned. That is, until Sam brushed past me in the kitchen and I caught a whiff of his freshly washed hair and what I suspected might be a hint of aftershave and I almost forgot all about the pizza.

While Joan washed her hands and collected plates and drinks, I hurried round to Middle Cottage with the individual pizza. For a brief, exhilarating moment, I thought Ebenezer would answer after my first knock, but when Joan hopped out of the back door, bursting with impatience, I gave up and rapped again. When the door swung open on my second tap, I decided that counted as one knock – and another step closer to my end goal.

‘Pizza,’ I announced. ‘Wheat-free. All the works.’

‘All the works?’ he grizzled. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘It means tons of toppings. Meat, veggies, olives, extra cheese.’

‘Sounds like a revolting mess.’

‘But tastes and smells delicious.’ I handed him the box with a grin and skipped off.

* * *

Joan sat, ignoring her slice of Pepperoni Passion until I insisted she take a bite before Sam shared what he’d found. Thankfully, he got straight to the important bit:

‘I have an address.’

Joan looked at me, her face a mixture of excitement and *I told you so!*

‘How sure are you?’ I asked, my heart careening about in my chest.

‘I’m very confident that a Carole and Peter Armitage-Brown, living in Chester, are the parents of Leanne Emily Armitage-Brown, born in Chester. I’ve had a decent search and can’t find anyone else with those names.’

‘You found them.’ A piece of pepperoni slid off the slice of Joan’s pizza as it dangled halfway between the plate and her open mouth.

‘Yes.’

‘When can we go?’ Joan asked. ‘Do you have any reading sessions tomorrow because I’m sure they won’t mind you cancelling if you explain that it’s an emergency and you can always rearrange for the day after and please can we go tomorrow, please, Ollie, you know how much this means to me!’

I waited for her to stop and take a breath.

‘Do you have a phone number?’

Sam shook his head apologetically.

‘Can we get one?’

‘Not legally, no. I’ve tried all the obvious searches.’

I had another quick check to see if Carole had accepted my friend request, but it remained unanswered.

‘I do know how much this means to you, Joan, but we need to think a few things through first.’

Her cheeks flushed pink with annoyance. ‘What things?’

‘Things like whether this is the best thing to do, when would be a good time to go if it is, whether or not you should come.’

Joan broke out in outraged splutters at that comment.

‘They might not still live there. Or they might be on holiday – it is August. They might—’

‘I know!’ she shouted, her chair scraping across the tiles as she jumped to her feet. ‘They might be dead! They might be evil criminals who shoot us for trespassing! They might be secret alien spies who planted the birth certificate so they can take over Mum’s cleaning company! If we aren’t going to go and find out, then what was the point in looking?’

‘We are going to find out,’ I replied, doing my best to pretend I wasn’t a jumbled mess of turmoil and trepidation too. ‘But like I said, we need to consider how we do it. Can you give Sam and me a chance to do that, please? Let’s make sure we do it the right way so that we have the best possible chance of it working out well.’

‘I told you it’s going to work out well, just like I told you we’d find them!’ Joan retorted, but her shoulders had stopped heaving quite so hard, and she finished the statement by sitting back down and tearing off a giant piece of pizza with her teeth.

She chewed her mouthful, eyes roving from side to side as she considered this. ‘Okay. I’ll do it your way. On one condition. I’m coming too. You know that they’re more likely to behave nicely and

say yes to coming to meet Mum if their adorable long-lost granddaughter is there.’ Joan pulled a fake-sweet face, clasping her hands in front of her chest. ‘I will melt their hearts.’

I wasn’t about to argue. She’d melted mine. ‘Okay, you can come.’

‘Promise?’

‘I promise. If you promise to wait in the car while I check out the house and make sure it looks safe before we ring the doorbell.’

‘Well, Sam can do that, can’t he?’

‘Um, I don’t think Sam’s going to trek all the way to Chester with us.’

‘Are you kidding?’ Sam asked. ‘I wouldn’t miss this for the world.’

Joan wasn’t the only one capable of melting my heart.

We sent her off to choose a film to watch – I’d not got around to buying a television, but we’d moved hers over from New Cottage the previous weekend.

‘Fine!’ she said, waving her hand breezily as she left the room. ‘You have your secret, adult-only conversation about *my* grandparents while I pretend to spend ages choosing a film. Then you can come in and tell me the PG version of your plan.’

‘What do you really think?’ I asked Sam, popping the caps off two beers.

‘About what?’

‘All of it!’

‘I think it’s genuinely them, like I said. I think that there are lots of reasons why teenagers can become estranged from their parents, but not many of them still matter fifteen years later. Has Leanne given any indication that they might be people we need to protect Joan from?’

‘No. And I think that when she shared her story, she’d have mentioned if her parents drove her away, rather than being groomed by that evil man.’ I took a drink. ‘Still, though. Is this a totally irresponsible thing to be doing? I could drop Joan off at holiday club tomorrow and just go, check it out first.’

‘And be back in time to pick her up and tell her that you broke your promise?’

‘Crap.’

Lesson learnt in basic parenting: don’t make a promise you’ll regret ten minutes later.

‘You really don’t have to come if you’d rather stay out of it. You weren’t stupid enough to promise.’

Sam looked at me steadily across the table. His eyes were like pools of caramel. Even in the midst of my anxiety, I felt that fizz of attraction that made me want to lean in and touch him.

‘While I think the safety risks are minimal, the emotional risk is another matter. You might appreciate a slightly more impartial head and steady pair of hands. I also find that people are more inclined to speak to a stranger knocking on the door if they’re a solicitor.’

‘Thank you.’ I hoped those simple words managed to convey how much it meant. The thought of Joan and I attempting this meeting by ourselves was terrifying. With Sam there, I could dare to hope it might turn out okay.

Of course, what would happen after that was a whole different story that I would try not to panic about until I needed to.

We agreed that forcing Joan to wait longer than necessary was going to drive us both bananas. Sam and I could switch some work things around and make time for a hare-brained trip the day after next, which was a Thursday.

‘Are you going to stay and watch *Another Dog’s Adventure?*’ Joan asked Sam, once we’d told her the decision. This was a big step forwards from her instinctive suspicions a few days ago.

‘Do you know what, if Ollie doesn’t mind, I might just do that. I loved the first one.’

‘A fan of *Dog Adventures?*’ I asked, not bothering to hide my amusement.

‘Obviously. What kind of monster wouldn’t be?’ Sam replied.

‘Urgh, will you two stop flirting so we can watch the film!’

We certainly could. I did need to stick my head in the fridge on the pretence of searching for snacks first, however.

* * *

It was hard to put my finger on how it felt, curled up on the sofa, Joan snuggled under a blanket, her head resting in the crook of my arm while Nesbit snoozed on my feet. Sam was sprawled sideways in the armchair, one leg dangling over an arm as the flickering screen lit up his face. Was it contentment? Too gentle perhaps for joy. And then I realised, as the doggy brothers made their way across the wilderness in search of their beloved owners.

This felt like I was home.

One of the reasons that I wanted to wait until Thursday before travelling to Chester was the inaugural meeting of the Wednesday Business Builders. Yasmin, Trev and Jaxx had booked a table at the library from twelve until two. They'd put a poster up on the library noticeboard, and Jaxx had gone all out on social media, promising a one-to-one networking opportunity with the man who'd introduced Nomato to the UK.

Irene had capped the numbers at ten, on the basis that any more would be disruptive (no one mentioned the twenty-plus children now squeezing in to hear the Library Lady every Friday afternoon).

While I had no intention of building a business, Yasmin had asked me to be around in case there were any questions about training or qualifications, and more importantly because I seemed to be able to keep Irene under control. I did point out that Jaxx was far better than me at handling the library manager, but he intended to be far too busy networking for that.

By twelve twenty, the Wednesday Business Builders had gone through the ground rules and the purpose of the group, asked if anyone had any specific topics they wanted to cover or ideas for guest speakers. None of this took very long, because the three

business builders in attendance had all discussed it at length before starting the group.

They then briefly introduced themselves, and their new businesses. This again didn't take long, especially as one of the three was still waiting for his burst of inspiration and quite happy working part-time as a pot-washer.

At twelve thirty, just as Yasmin had started working through the individual personality quirks of each of Mr Howard's dogs, a woman arrived. Carrying a large rucksack, she was probably in her fifties, with grey hair and a dress that looked like a blanket bunched at the waist with a dressing-gown cord.

'Is this the Business Builders group?' she asked, after asking Irene where we were and receiving a cross between a sniff and a snort in return.

'It is!' Yasmin said, forcefully enough to sound slightly threatening. 'Take a seat. Trev will make you a drink. Would you like a piece of flapjack? No charge!'

'Um... I'll just have water, thank you. And no flapjack. I'm a fruitarian.'

'Excuse me please?' Yasmin asked, blinking.

'Does that mean you only eat fruit?' Jaxx asked.

'Of course not!' the woman replied, flicking her bottom-length plait over her shoulder. 'That would be far too restrictive. I eat seeds and all types of nut.'

'Well, seeds are in fruit, so... ' Yasmin said.

'Did you know that tomatoes are a fruit?' Jaxx asked.

'Yes, I eat tomatoes.'

'So.' His eyes gleamed like a tiger moving in on its prey. 'How about a tomato substitute? Cheaper, healthier, better for the environment... contains virtually no meat or fish products.'

The woman reeled back in disgust. 'No. Definitely not.'

'It's ninety-one per cent natural.' Jaxx sounded like someone tempting a baby to eat their mashed carrot.

'Welcome to the group,' Trev interjected. 'This is Yasmin, Jaxx, Ollie and I'm Trev. Do have a seat.'

'Thank you but I brought my own. I'm plastic-free.' The woman unhooked from her rucksack a tiny folding stool, constructed of wood and rough material that I suspected she'd woven herself. Mum would have choked on her coffee at the terrible craftsmanship, but I supposed it was aiming for function over form.

'Oh, and I'm Kate.'

'Really?' Jaxx looked disappointed. I think he'd been expecting a name like Aurora or Rainbow.

Kate peered at him. 'Have we met before?'

Jaxx squinted back. 'Are you Tyler's mum?'

'Jack Watson?'

Jack turned a startling shade of scarlet. 'It's Jaxx, now.'

'Why?'

'Um... well... it's branding, innit...'

'Tyler just graduated from Bristol University with a second-class honours degree in engineering. He has an internship lined up with Siemens.'

'Only a second?' Jaxx asked, his composure recovered.

'Would you like to tell us about your business idea?' I asked, moving things along.

'I design and produce handcrafted, home-sourced, biodegradable fruitarian-friendly products.'

It was possibly a good thing that before anyone had a chance to respond, more potential Business Builders burst through the library door. For a second I think all of us had to check our eyes weren't

playing tricks on us, as three completely identical young men walked in perfect sync over to the table, as though striding onstage ready for a big number.

They were wearing white satin shorts (the emphasis here on *short*), bright blue running tops and matching blue socks pulled to mid-calf. Each of them had black hair, shaved at the sides and sticking straight up on top like a shoe brush. They also had a large blue tattoo of the letter K on their scrawny upper arms. Which didn't strike me as problematic until they reached the table and stood sideways on in a tight line, so that their arms were nearly touching, tattoos facing out. I mean, perhaps young people weren't as aware of the connotations of those letters together. But, well, in that case somebody needed to tell them...

'Hiiii!' they sang in unison.

Everyone offered a slightly perturbed welcome, and Trev fetched three cappuccinos with extra chocolate sprinkles, his eyes unable to stray from those arms.

'Would you like to introduce yourselves and your business idea to the group?' Yasmin asked, her voice strained.

'Of course!' one of them replied. 'We're Kyle, Kyron and Kylo.' He pointed to each one in turn, to show us which was which. Not that we would have any chance of keeping track if they happened to swap positions.

'Otherwise known as the Frea-K Three-K!' Kyron added.

'We're triplets!' Kylo finished off, looking on the brink of jazz hands.

'Wonderful,' Yasmin replied, sounding like she couldn't have meant it less. 'And your business idea?'

'We're triplets,' Kyle said.

'And you can make money from that?' Kate asked, perplexed.

'Forty thousand followers and counting,' Kyron said, snapping his fingers.

'Sweet!' Jaxx nodded, impressed.

'I'm confused. How does that make you money?' Yasmin asked.

'Before we get into that, how about we go over the aims of the group,' I tried to say, but was interrupted by Frea-K Three-K jumping to their feet and then proceeding to carry out some sort of choreographed performance that combined rap with cheerleading moves and possibly some martial arts. I have to say, it was surprisingly good. We all spontaneously applauded when they'd finished.

Of course, that was a mistake. If the rap hadn't been enough, the sound of clapping had Irene appearing faster than Nesbit when he heard me open the fridge.

'Really?' she barked, checking her watch. 'Fifty minutes into the first meeting and we've turned the library into a burlesque club?'

'Ooh, burlesque!' Kyron (or was it Kylo? I'd lost track during the performance) exclaimed, grabbing his brother's arm. 'Great idea!'

'Can I just say, your style is fabulous!' Probably-Kyle said, making a sweeping gesture from Irene's head to her square-shoed toes. 'The whole retro-nerdy look is so on right now. I mean, many have tried but few can pull it off. Is that cardigan actual vintage nineties?'

'And the brooch!' Possibly-Kylo gushed. 'I would offer to buy it off you, except it would be a crime to separate it from that blouse.'

'Um, what is happening here?' Irene stammered, clutching at the brooch, which was shaped like a swan with green gems for eyes.

'It's the Wednesday Business Builders, being Frea-Kayed out! Kyle, Kyron and Kylo,' Kyle said, pointing to each of them in turn.

'You're joining us, aren't you?' Kyron asked. 'I have so many questions.'

'I don't think...'

'Come on, the seat next to me is free,' Kyle said, pulling out a chair. 'One more cappuccino, please, Trev. Hang on a minute, is that a genuine horse-hair belt, Kate?'

Well, the rest of the meeting certainly kept my mind off the looming grandparental reunion. The remaining hour was mostly spent getting to know each other, along with compiling a list of useful topics for further meetings, which wasn't anywhere near as straightforward as it sounds.

The triplets were polite enough to take a sample of Nomato, promising to share on social media if they liked it. Yasmin was able to find common ground with Kate when it turned out she made biodegradable dog beds, and I found a moment to discreetly speak to the boys about their tattoos. That led to a horribly disturbing internet search to confirm my point, but by the time Kylo had stopped sobbing, the other two had already managed to pick off most of the Ks, which it turned out were only temporary stick-ons due to their needle phobia.

'No wonder that picture got only fifteen likes,' Kyron said, clutching his cheeks in dismay.

'Yeah, and that explains some of the DMs we got afterwards,' Kyle agreed.

'Thanks, Ollie. Our first meeting and you've already saved our brand!' Kylo added.

'And we got to meet Irene,' Kyle said, before showing her that the pictures they'd steamrolled her into appearing in earlier had already got hundreds of likes and dozens of comments. 'You've got almost as many fans as us already!'

'We should totally set you up with your own account,' Kyron squealed.

When I showed Joan after picking her up from the holiday club, #IreneTheLibraryLady already had over a thousand followers.

‘This world is crazy,’ she pronounced. ‘That’s why I prefer books, because they make more sense.’

I eyed her current read, about a gang of chameleon people who go back in time to save the dinosaurs, and was inclined to agree.

* * *

That evening we were in for an absolute treat. Ginger, who owned Hatherstone Hall, brought round a three-course dinner that if possible rivalled the one I’d eaten when Sam had gatecrashed my dinner for one.

Joan didn’t agree. ‘That looks weird. And there’s bits of mushroom. I hate mushrooms.’ She peered into each foil container in turn and sniffed. ‘I might try the pudding.’

I stuck some fish fingers in the oven and dashed next door.

‘Yes?’ Ebenezer automatically glanced at my hands, no doubt expecting to find them bearing food.

‘Hi, how are you, Ebenezer?’ I asked, deliberately mentioning his friendly nickname with a smile that dared him to tell me it was none of my business.

‘Been better. Been worse,’ he growled. ‘Did you want something, other than forcing me out of my chair after I’ve spent all afternoon pruning our roses.’

‘*Our* roses?’

He grunted. ‘The big thorny flowers that climb up the side fence.’

I said nothing. He knew what I meant.

‘I’ve got a three-course dinner from Hatherstone Hall keeping warm in my top oven. Joan is opting for fish fingers and chips.’

‘Sensible of her.’

‘It’s far too nice to eat alone.’

‘That’s a shame.’

‘Dinner will be served at the outside table in ten minutes. There’s also a very expensive bottle of wine.’

Ebenezer’s face remained a grizzled scowl, but his beard twitched, which I knew to be a good sign.

‘The dessert is white chocolate and sticky toffee pudding.’ Joan could try my portion. If she liked it, I’d have a biscuit instead.

Ebenezer shut the door. It was hard to tell, but I thought it might be slower than when he slammed it, so I took that as a yes.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, as I sat, heart in my mouth, feeling more nervous than I had on my first ever date, Ebenezer’s back door creaked open.

As soon as he shuffled outside, I saw the reason for his delay, causing my throat to constrict with emotion. Dressed in a faded, crumpled dinner jacket and white shirt, with a paisley pocket square and matching tie, Ebenezer had even tidied his beard.

Joan wolf-whistled, causing an eye roll, but there was that beard twitch again, and I felt such a rush of warmth I had to blot my eyes on my napkin.

‘Well, I’m glad I got changed, now.’ It was another warm evening, and I’d swapped my work trousers for a strappy dress with a full skirt.

He grunted again. ‘It’s only respectful to look smart for a lady.’

‘You look an absolute dish.’

Now, that was definitely a smile.

Being a polite, tactful adult, there was no way I was about to start grilling Ebenezer for personal information. My eleven-year-old companion had no such qualms.

‘How long have you lived in Middle Cottage?’

‘I was born there.’

‘Woooahhh!’ Joan said. ‘That must be nearly a hundred years ago.’

‘Eighty-one.’ Ebenezer shoved in a large mouthful of beef, as if hoping to avoid answering any more questions. Joan didn’t take the hint.

‘How long have you lived there by yourself? I mean, were you ever married and do you have any children or did you have brothers or sisters or anything?’

‘Joan,’ I chided, glancing at Ebenezer.

‘It’s all right. Children are naturally curious. It’s a crime how quickly adults can stamp that out of them. I was married. My wife died fifteen years ago. We had a son but he’s dead, too. My sister lived here until she got married at seventeen. She died in childbirth a few years later.’

‘Oh my goodness. I’m so sorry.’ I was aghast.

Ebenezer shrugged. ‘Everybody dies. Hopefully won’t be too much longer for me.’

‘My mum might die,’ Joan added, smashing a chip into a blob of ketchup. ‘I mean, she might die *soon*.’

‘That’s very unfortunate.’

‘Joan, Dr Morgan said that she’s not going to die any time soon; she might be poorly for a while, but the medication is really helping.’

‘Really?’ Joan looked at me, face an impassive mask. ‘Because with her cirrhosis score there’s a fifty-two per cent chance of dying within two years without a transplant. Hundreds of people die every

year before a suitable donor becomes available. So, I think Dr Morgan might not be telling you the whole truth. Oh, and it's irreversible. She isn't going to get better.'

'Every case is different. Dr Morgan is looking at her as an individual, not statistics.' I tried to sound calm, but inside my heart was like a jackhammer. I had to put down my fork to hide how badly my hand was trembling. *Fifty-two per cent?* Did Leanne know this? How did *Joan* know this? I would have to keep a closer eye on what she was up to in the library.

'Your mother is one very strong, determined woman,' Ebenezer said, giving Joan a serious look. 'I'd bet my hat on her beating the odds.'

'I know. But tomorrow we're going to find my grandparents and tell them what's happening, just in case.'

Ebenezer raised his eyebrows.

'Sam's coming with us, and he's a real ranger, for his actual job, and in his other job he hunted people so he's been helping us. Plus, he loves Ollie so he wants to impress her so she'll change her mind and decide to be his girlfriend.'

'Sam...' Ebenezer frowned in concentration. 'Short hair, big shoulders, looks like he spends all year in the sun? Smiles too often?'

'That's him!'

Ebenezer nodded. 'I'm sure he'll prove very useful.'

He endured a main course and dessertful of Joan's random chatter, before she swivelled her questions back to him. 'Why do you hardly ever come out of your house or want to talk to anyone?'

'Don't you have days when you want peace and quiet?'

Joan nodded thoughtfully. 'Well, yes. But not every day.'

'Each to their own.'

She thought some more. 'Is it because everybody you loved died, so you're afraid to get close to anyone else in case you lose them too?'

Oh my goodness. If this carried on, Ebenezer would never open his door again.

'Joan, enough of the personal questions! I'm so sorry.' I shook my head in embarrassment. 'She reads a lot of books.'

Ebenezer nodded. 'I'd noticed.'

I happened to notice that he didn't contradict Joan's suggestion. I made a note to tread slowly and carefully with my neighbour. Like a hunter sneaking up on a deer, we'd have to get close to him before he realised what was happening. Then, *BAM*, we'd be friends.

On Thursday morning, Joan finally gave up bumping about in her bedroom and clattered downstairs around six thirty. I decided to stop pretending I could sleep and join her. While I was of course anxious and apprehensive about the trip, I had to admit that the thought of Sam accompanying us had a complicated effect on my emotional state. While relieved to have another adult involved, the prospect of spending a whole day with him couldn't help but jack up my jitters.

'I can't eat!' Joan groaned, lolling over the table. 'My stomach is all scrumpled.'

'I know how you feel, but you'll have to unscrumple it. We aren't leaving until you've had breakfast.'

'Ugh!' She shook her head in frustration. 'I'll have a snack in the car.'

'We aren't leaving for another two hours. Why don't you get dressed, and then read for a bit to settle your nerves?'

'*Read?* How am I supposed to concentrate on a book when I'm about to meet my grandparents for the first time!'

'*Hopefully* meet...'

'Yes, I know, I know!'

She thumped upstairs and, I found out forty minutes later when I went to see where she'd got to, proceeded to try on and then toss aside every single one of her outfits.

'I have nothing to wear!'

'The clothes mountain would imply otherwise.'

'Arrrggggh! You don't get it! I have nothing right for *this!*' She began randomly picking up items and throwing them over her shoulder in dismissal. 'This is too small. This has a hole in the knee. This is stained. This looks weird. This makes me look about nine. This doesn't go with anything else...'

'Joan.' I stepped over the pile and put my arms around her. 'If they are the people we think they are, the kind of grandparents who want to be a part of your life, then they won't care what you wear.'

'They might, though!'

'Are you going to care what they're wearing?'

She sniffed, pressing her face onto my shoulder. 'I would if it was a Nazi uniform. Or just a dirty pair of pants and a string vest. Or like one of Ebenezer's T-shirts but it said something like "I hate reading" or "All lives matter".'

'Well, you'll be fine then in your blue shorts and the stripy T-shirt.'

'I wish I had a nice dress. Or... or something pink with flowers on it. The kind of clothes nice, pretty girls wear.'

'Joan.' I pulled back so I could look her right in the eyes. 'You are a fantastic, interesting, clever, brave, beautiful girl, and you don't like flowery pink dresses. Girls and women can wear whatever they like. It has no reflection on how nice or pretty they are.'

She shrugged, unconvinced. 'I just want to look like a normal kid.'

'Oh my darling. Don't ever wish you were normal – as if any one of us really is. Do normal girls find their long-lost grandparents and plan an expedition to meet them? Do they take in half-dead puppies

they find in the woods and teach them how to dance? Do they decide that they're so determined to be courageous and powerful that they change their own name? You are anything but normal, and that's what makes you so incredible. Was Frodo normal? Was Katniss Everdeen? Joan of Arc was pretty much the least normal woman in history!

'Okay, okay, I get it!' Joan sniffled, laughing through her tears. 'I'm a weirdo but a good weirdo, so I might as well dress like it so we can find out straight away if Nana and Grandad are going to be all right with it or not.'

'Genuinely, your outfit is not going to matter.' I handed her a tissue from the box by her bed. 'I understand that first impressions count, but I promise that it won't make a difference here. Neither will what you say, or how you act.'

'When you first saw me, what did you think?' she asked, trying to sound blasé about it.

'I thought, *That girl has very fine taste in books. I think I'd better buy the house next-door-but-one so we can be friends.*'

'Oh, shut up!' Joan gave me a frustrated shove, but when she appeared downstairs ten minutes later in her shorts and T-shirt, the worried look had been replaced by a gleam of excitement.

When I opened the front door, it took me a couple of blinks to process that it was Sam rather than a stray premiership footballer or Hollywood actor. The dark navy suit and white shirt unbuttoned at the tanned neck altered not only his appearance, but his whole posture and manner.

'I told you,' he said, grinning at the look on my face before affecting a serious, yet compassionate expression as he gazed (or dare I say smouldered?) into my eyes. 'Hello, I do apologise for

interrupting your day, but I'm Samuel Parker, solicitor with Parker and Sons. I was hoping to speak with Olivia Tennyson?'

Yes please!

The corner of his mouth creased up in a hint of a smile, and I had to turn away before my knees buckled beneath me.

'Joan, Sam's here. Are you ready?'

She burst out of the living room. 'I was ready hours ago!'

'You look lovely,' Sam said, causing her to stop dead in her tracks.

'You look weird,' she replied, face screwing up. 'But I appreciate the effort. I need to get my stuff – five seconds!'

'No rush,' I called up the stairs after her.

'You look lovely too, by the way,' Sam said quietly from behind me.

I ducked my head, hoping he couldn't see my flushed cheeks in the shadow of the hallway. 'I was going for trustworthy,' I said, picking a non-existent piece of fluff off my olive shirt-dress.

'I'd trust you with my life.' His mouth smiled but when I glanced up his eyes conveyed a look that was far from flippant. For a long moment, the air between us crackled like the promise of a summer storm.

'Come on, what are you doing standing here ogling each other?' Joan yelled, backpack in one hand, jumper flying from the other as she shot past us and out the front door.

Good question. This was Joan's day. She needed an adult who was paying full attention to the task in hand, not swooning into a pile of mush because a friend had paid her a compliment. I grabbed my bag and followed her out the door.

* * *

After a short detour to drop Nesbit off with Yasmin, we headed for the M1. Sam was driving his pick-up truck for the simple reason that he refused to squeeze into my tiny Fiat. Spread out in the passenger seat, his stereo playing the sort of feel-good classics I would have predicted to find on Sam's playlist, the air conditioning set to cool, calm and collected, I wasn't complaining.

It was nearly three hours later, thanks to Joan's nervous toilet stops, that we pulled off the M53 into Chester. Sam turned the music off, tension rising through the silence as we collectively held our breaths while Sam followed the satnav along an A road and into a small housing estate made up of well-proportioned 1950s semis with well-tended gardens and an air of middle-class respectability.

'That one,' Sam said, once we'd turned in to a cul-de-sac. He nodded at a house up ahead. We crept to a stop about three houses away, and he turned off the engine.

We sat there for a long moment, staring at the white frontage, the curtains in the windows and neat lawn as if it could reveal all we needed to know about the people residing within.

'It looks nice,' Joan said, with a tiny tremble.

'It does,' Sam agreed. 'No old mattress in the garden, or barbed wire to keep out trespassers. So far, so good.'

After falling back into another prolonged silence, I realised that Sam was waiting for me to act. The problem was, after endless hours thinking about this moment, now we were here I wasn't sure what to do.

'Two cars in the drive, so there's a good chance someone is home,' I said, my voice about an octave higher than usual.

'Yep,' Sam replied, nodding encouragingly.

'I suppose there's nothing more to do then, except go and check it out. Unless... we could just sit here and observe things for a while

first, if you think that's best? Or maybe knock on a neighbour's door, ask whether number ten are known for being violent psychopaths.'

'Oh my days! Will one of you just ring the doorbell before I'm forced to break my promise and go myself!' Joan cried, and hearing the strain in her voice was enough to get me out of the car.

Sam caught up with me as I reached the driveway, placing a hand of reassurance on the small of my back as we walked the remaining few steps.

'I know we said we'd scope it out, peek in the windows and whatever but I just need to get this over with,' I whispered.

Sam nodded his agreement, before pressing the brass doorbell, one hand smoothing back his hair, another giving mine a quick squeeze of encouragement.

'Hang on!' My heart sank as Joan popped into the space where Sam's hand had been. 'I couldn't wait. I'm sorry, I know I promised but it wasn't my fault, my legs got up out of the car all by themselves.'

Before I could tell her off or take her back down the driveway out of sight, the door swung open. I instinctively grabbed Joan's hand, bringing her closer into my side.

A woman stood there. Dyed ash-blonde hair. Greenish-grey eyes that I knew instantly. A face whose creases curved in arcs of sorrow, not laughter. She wore a Breton jersey with cropped, navy trousers. The butterfly dangling on a pendant around her neck caused hope to surge in my chest.

'Carole Armitage-Brown?' Sam asked.

'Yes?' she replied, forehead creasing in suspicion. We probably looked like members of a religious cult.

Joan sucked in a huge gasp of air, causing the frown to deepen.

Sam introduced himself, then got straight to it. 'I'm here as an advocate for Diamanté Butterfly Brown. Or Joan, as she prefers to be called.' He placed a hand on her shoulder. 'I know this is going to be a huge shock, but we believe that Joan is your granddaughter. Leanne's daughter.'

Every molecule in Carole Armitage-Brown's body froze. She stood there, like a statue of solid misery, before eventually giving a sharp shake of her head and swinging the door shut as if we'd been a mere figment of her imagination, or the ghost of a forgotten nightmare.

Joan turned to me, her eyes pleading with me to do something. In that moment, as her thin fingers curled into mine, I suddenly realised what it was to be a parent, the weight of responsibility slamming into me.

I took a deep breath, trying to wriggle past anything sounding remotely like 'I told you so', to find some word of genuine comfort, when the door was flung open again.

'Peter, look at her,' Carole breathed, one hand clutched to the chain around her neck, the other gripping the arm of the man who stood beside her. 'It's Leanne's girl!'

Peter Armitage-Brown, six foot three with shoulders like the barn doors he used to build, face a craggy map of hard work and dependability, the kind of man who wore a tie even in retirement, dissolved into tears.

Carole stepped forwards, wrapped Joan up in a shaking embrace and joined him, wet cheek pressed against the top of her granddaughter's head.

'Oh my girl, my darling girl,' she sobbed, in between kisses and pulling away to inspect Joan's face before tugging her in close again. 'I can't believe you found us. You don't know how long we've waited.'

Peter, who had soon gingerly lowered himself on stiff knees to join them, could merely shake his head, one arm around his wife, the other gently patting Joan's heaving shoulders.

'I knew it!' Joan said, eventually pulling away to wipe her face on Peter's offered handkerchief. 'I knew that you were waiting for us all this time. They said not to get my hopes up, but I could feel it. My DNA knew that you were good and kind and wondering where we were, too.'

'We?' Carole asked, her eyes wide with a sudden rush of hope as she glanced to Sam and I, and then past us to the street beyond. 'Is she here? Your mum?'

'Could we perhaps talk about that inside?' Sam asked.

Carole looked at him, her face plummeting as she swayed back on slippered feet.

'She's alive,' I added.

Peter stood up, wincing. 'Well, if that's the best you can tell us, then I think we better had.'

They led us into a living room that at a guess hadn't been decorated since long before Leanne had left. But none of us were focusing on the rose-pink carpet or mahogany furniture. As we sat stiffly on the stripy sofas, we couldn't take our eyes off the dozens of photographs, lined up along the mantelpiece and decorating the end tables, bookcases and shelving units.

'It's Mum,' Joan whispered in wonder.

'You can take a closer look if you want,' Carole said, waiting for Peter to start showing Joan the pictures before turning to Sam. 'I'll make us a drink, but I'd rather you tell us first, if you don't mind.'

Sam nodded at me. 'I'll let Ollie explain.'

'I'm Joan and Leanne's neighbour,' I started, fumbling slightly for the right words. 'I'm taking care of Joan at the moment because

Leanne is in hospital. She's not in any immediate danger or anything like that, but she is fairly ill, and her long-term prognosis is uncertain, so Joan wanted to find you, so you could know, and, well... we can talk about that later.'

Once Carole had brought through tea and a glass of orange juice for Joan ('I'm sorry, we haven't had squash in the house since, well, since your mum left'), I explained what had happened, and how things stood, waiting patiently every minute or so to allow Peter and Carole to compose themselves.

'So she doesn't know you've found us?' Peter asked.

'She doesn't know we've been looking.'

He nodded. 'Waiting until you knew whether it was worth the trouble.'

'Something like that.'

'So what's next, then?'

'I think the next step is really up to you.'

Carole looked thoughtful. 'How about some lunch? I've a fish pie in the fridge.'

For the couple of hours or so before we left, Sam and I sat back and watched as Joan clicked into conversation with her grandparents as though they were merely catching up on a few months apart, not a lifetime. It was surreal to watch how Carole tilted her head up in an exact mirror of her daughter – and granddaughter – and as she asked questions about Joan's life, and answered many more about Leanne's life before she'd left, the similarity in tone and cadence was mesmerising.

To my relief, Peter and Carole stayed well away from sensitive topics, such as why Leanne had left home or what had happened in the years prior to her moving to Bigley. They fought back tears many times and I could see the temptation to keep touching Joan, to stare

at her. Instead, they chattered about holidays and hobbies and Leanne's favourite school subjects. Peter was the book lover, and he would probably have spent the rest of the afternoon discussing Tolkien and C.S. Lewis if I hadn't gently insisted (for the third time) that we really had to go.

'Can I have your phone numbers?' Joan asked. 'I know you might not want to see Mum and she might not want to see you, but even if she tells me I'm not allowed to see you again, that doesn't mean we can't talk on the phone. I have so much more I want to tell you. And ask. Like, did Mum have a best friend, or lots of friends? Or no friends, like before she met Ollie?'

'Joan, my darling.' Carole's hand shook as she took Joan's. 'This has been the happiest day of our lives. And there is not a chance on this earth that we won't be coming to visit your mother. Not a chance. You could break both our legs and arms and we'd still roll and wriggle our way to Sherwood Forest.'

'Well, hopefully you could just get a taxi instead.'

'That's a much better idea; we'd do that. But. What I want to say very clearly is that now you've found us, we are not going to do anything more behind your mother's back. But today – *oh!* – we got to meet *you* and hear that our girl is alive, and safe, even if she's not well, and that is more than we dared to dream any more! We will treasure this forever. What an amazing gift, what an incredible feat, finding us like this!'

'I don't want to go.' Joan burst into fretful, exhausted tears. 'I don't want to never see you again. It's not fair, I've just found you. Mum really needs you. The shower doesn't work and we have to borrow Ollie's washing machine and there's no money and now she can't even work to get more and we need you. That's why I found

you. Not for a happy day. I don't need you to be thinking about me. We need your help!

As she collapsed against my chest, I tried to give Carole and Peter a look that offered some reassurance. Carole stepped close enough to hand me a Post-it with her phone number on, gesturing for me to call her later as Sam and I gently led Joan back to the car, where she wept until falling into a merciful sleep.

* * *

'Do you want me to come in for a bit?' Sam asked, when we finally pulled up at End Cottage.

It was nearing dinner time, and part of me wanted nothing more than to keep Sam's reassuring presence with me for the rest of the evening. I knew he'd help make something to eat, sit nearby while I called Carole to fill her in on the details that hadn't been appropriate to discuss that afternoon. Pour a glass of wine and maybe even hold my hand while we sat and watched the sunset.

But this evening I needed to focus on Joan, not my growing yearning for Sam's company. Besides, I'd promised I'd call Leanne to let her know that Joan was okay, and I didn't think I could rustle up a convincing lie while Sam was sitting watching me. I also saw the creases of fatigue at the corners of his eyes, and I remembered how he'd told me that being there for his old girlfriend Carrie had become a pressure he couldn't carry. I suspected that the only company Sam wanted that night was his dogs.

I'd asked Pia not to bother sending a meal around, but once we'd let an exhausted (and definitely more attentive, since his day with Yasmin the Dog Mother) Nesbit into the back garden, I found a basket on my outside table, brimming with glistening blackberries.

‘Don’t eat all of them!’ I laughed at Joan’s purple lips and fingers when I brought out plates of cheese on toast for supper. ‘We’re going to make the rest into a pie tomorrow. We can take your mum a slice.’

Once she’d had a brief call with Leanne, dodging questions and chattering about nothing to avoid any more lying than necessary, Joan could barely drag herself up the stairs to bed. After checking a few minutes later that she was asleep, feeling more than a twinge of envy that I couldn’t do the same just yet, I tiptoed downstairs and phoned Carole, who immediately called Peter and switched to speakerphone.

We didn’t talk for long. I was torn between wanting to answer their torrent of questions while maintaining as much of Leanne’s confidentiality as I could. I briefly summed up her prognosis again, providing no details on how she ended up with hepatitis C or a severely damaged liver. I explained how and why Joan had ended up living with me, and Joan’s worries about what would happen longer term. When they asked how long I was able to keep taking care of her, the answer that had been incubating inside slipped out strong and sure: *as long as she needs me*. Finding Leanne’s parents hadn’t changed that. Instead, I felt a sharp tug of worry that maybe they would want to take her home to Chester. If it came to that, of course I wouldn’t fight it, but she’d take a chunk of my heart with her.

I wasn’t surprised to hear that they had already booked a hotel for the following night. We agreed to meet in the hospital in the morning. Carole wanted to just appear at her bedside, so that Leanne didn’t have the opportunity to refuse to see them, but Peter persuaded her otherwise.

‘She’s our daughter, my love. No matter what went on before, she knows we always loved her; she’s no reason not to see us.’

‘Then why hasn’t she? We’ve stayed, rattling around in that house of memories, so she could find us whenever she wanted to. Keeping the landline going so she could call. She’s not tried once, in fifteen years. There’s no reason to believe that’s changed.’

‘A life-threatening diagnosis and a child who needs a family are the reason,’ Peter replied steadily. ‘We’ve never gone looking for her – always given her the choice. We won’t take that from her, however devastating it might be for us. This is about her, and what she needs. We aren’t getting it wrong this time.’

‘I just don’t know if I can bear it,’ Carole wept.

Peter tried to reply, but I couldn’t distinguish any words between his rough sobs.

I had never heard the sound of true heartbreak until that phone call.

I confirmed the meeting time and ended the call, praying that this wasn’t the most terrible mistake.

* * *

A message pinged through as I rolled into bed just after nine.

Holding up OK?

Three short words that managed to create the same effect as if I’d sunk into a bath of steaming hot loveliness.

Despite every inch of me sagging with fatigue, my cheek muscles somehow found the strength to smile.

Knackered but OK, thanks

A second later came a reply:

Too tired to talk? Or type?

Smile growing, limbs instantly re-energised, I dialled Sam's number.

It was an hour or so later I finally fell asleep, still clutching the phone, Sam's soft laughter and gentle conversation like a lullaby, soothing all the what-ifs away.

The morning was only bearable thanks to a dog walk, pie-making and Joan's insistence that we tidied up the worst of her house in case Carole and Peter wanted to see it. However, it was two jangling bags of nerves that rode up in the hospital lift the second visiting hours opened.

'I feel worse than yesterday,' Joan said.

'Me, too,' I added. 'I don't know why.'

'Because if Nana and Grandad were angry and horrible, then we could just go home and forget about them. If Mum's angry then she might not want to be friends with you any more.' Joan looked at me then, eyes round as it hit her. 'She might not let me keep staying with you!'

I swallowed hard and somehow wrestled a reassuring smile onto my face. 'That won't happen. It's going to be a big surprise, and she might need some time, but I'm sure she'll understand that we were only trying to help.'

Joan scoffed. 'Well, I'm not at all sure, and I know her better than you. I think you should be more prepared for this to be a complete disaster, Ollie.'

‘Thanks, Joan, that’s really encouraging advice when we’re about to go and break the news.’

‘Sorry, but I think we need to be realistic. There’s only a tiny chance that she won’t totally freak out.’

‘Then why are we going through with it?’ I asked as the lift doors opened. ‘Why did we even start this in the first place?’

‘Because a tiny chance is still a chance. And that makes it worth it.’ She stepped out and started marching towards the ward entrance. ‘Now, are you going to tell her or shall I?’

Before we had a chance to decide, my phone rang. Thinking it might be Carole, I whipped it out of my bag and saw that it was in fact Steph. For Steph to phone me on a weekday afternoon was unusual enough to make me answer.

‘Hey, everything all right?’ I asked.

‘Yes, fine. Are you okay, you sound stressed?’

‘I thought it must be an emergency.’

‘Oh, no, I’ve got the afternoon off, had a doctor’s appointment. So now I’m feeling depressed and was looking for something to cheer me up, and then I remembered your party.’

‘My party?’ I glanced at Joan, who was making impatient gestures in the direction of the ward.

‘Yes. How are the plans coming along? Have you got a date yet? Because I was thinking that you might as well go for your actual birthday. I mean, how often does a thirtieth end up on a Saturday? But you would need to decide soon, so that other people don’t start making plans, and although that’s not that long away, it’s plenty of time for us to—’

‘Yes.’

‘What?’

‘Yes, great idea. I’ll have it on my birthday.’

‘Fantastic! Let me just... there... it’s in my calendar. So. What about the theme? I presume you’re not going to stick to Harry Potter and drunk Jenga! I mean, with it being August you can use that amazing garden, do something outside.’

Joan was gripping two huge handfuls of hair and pulling on them, face screwed up in frustration.

‘Fine, yes. I’ll have a... barbecue?’

‘Okay, good idea. But you do need a bit more than that, for it to be worthy of the Dream List. What other ideas have you got?’

‘Um, to be honest, Steph, I’m in the middle of something. I’ll call you back.’

For the first time since I’d got a phone for my thirteenth birthday, I hung up on her. By the time I’d slipped my phone away, Joan was already pressing the intercom buzzer for the door to the ward.

* * *

In the end, neither of us had to find the gumption to bring it up. As soon as she saw Joan, Leanne’s eyes narrowed in suspicion and concern.

‘What’s up, Diamanté Butterfly?’ she asked, leaning forwards in the hospital armchair.

Joan looked straight at me.

‘You look good today. How are you feeling? Great to see you out of bed!’ I garbled, causing Leanne’s eyes to shrink into slits.

‘It’s my liver that’s malfunctioning, not my brain. Stop wittering and tell me what’s going on.’

Oh boy. Here we go.

All the introductions and lead-ups and half-baked explanations that had been swirling around my head evaporated.

‘Your parents are here.’

Leanne froze, her hand gripping Joan’s so tightly that she winced. Then all at once, it was as though every bone in her body turned to liquid. She collapsed against the back of the chair, face draining to a stark white, eyes blank, mouth slack.

I held my breath, clueless as to whether Leanne’s shock was going to flip into anger, or melt into tears. But her daughter did indeed know her mother far better than me. After a few seconds, Joan picked up her hand. ‘It’s true, Mum. They’re really here, and they really want to see you.’

‘You found them?’ Leanne whispered, still staring at nothing.

‘Ollie’s friend Sam helped us. He’s a ranger.’

‘And they’re *here*?’

‘Yes!’

‘They want to see me?’

‘They’re desperate to see you,’ I added. ‘They’ve missed you more than you can imagine.’

‘No,’ Leanne said slowly. ‘I don’t have to imagine.’ She paused, shook her head, finally managed to pull her gaze back into focus, and fixed it on me. ‘They’re really here?’

‘YES!’ Joan shouted, tugging on her mum’s hand. ‘Let’s go and get them!’

Leanne turned to look at her daughter, face scrunched in bewilderment. ‘Okay.’

When we arrived back ten minutes later, Leanne had pulled a hoodie over the top of her pyjamas and tucked her lank hair behind her ears. She looked all of the sixteen years old she’d been when she last saw her parents.

I stepped back, one arm around Joan as Carole and Peter approached the bay.

'Oh, *oh!*' As soon as Carole saw where Leanne was sitting, she launched herself across the remaining few metres past two pairs of beds on either side, bag flying behind her with the contents spilling. Stopping right in front of the chair, she sank slowly to her knees before reaching up with one tentative hand to stroke her daughter's wan, tear-streaked cheek.

'My darling girl.'

'Mum.' Leanne clasped her mother's hand, pressing it tight against her jutting cheekbone.

Then Peter reached them, the strewn contents of Carole's bag that he'd gathered along the way quickly dumped on the bed as he bent to enfold his daughter inside fifteen years of waiting and hoping.

'Dad.'

'I'm here, I'm here, it's all right now, we're here,' was the reply.

I quietly drew the curtain around the bay, and Joan and I went to see if we could find a drink and a snack in the café.

* * *

Steph messaged while we were eating our muffins:

You hung up on me! Sherwood Ollie would never have been so assertive. I'm proud of you, keep up the good work xxx

Another one pinged through a second later:

Drew says he'll bring his BBQ

We didn't stay much longer at the hospital. Leanne was unable to keep her eyes open, and Joan was flagging. Her Nana and Grandad

asked if they could take her out for dinner, so I used my newfound assertiveness to insist that Joan had a couple of hours' downtime first.

It was a strange feeling, being home alone for the first evening in a fortnight. After so many months of pleasing myself, I'd quickly readjusted to planning my routine around another person. And whatever Steph might have to say on the matter, I *liked* having someone to tether my decisions to. Some of the time, at least.

Once I'd waved Joan off, I spent a lacklustre hour clicking through emails and other admin, spending more time thinking about the momentous events of the past two days than I did providing managerial support to my ReadUp coaching team.

And then I shut the laptop, picked up the phone and called my mother.

I didn't expect tears (not of joy, anyway) or anything like the kind of reaction I'd witnessed that afternoon. It had only been three months, for one thing. And this was Mum; a top psychologist couldn't predict how she'd react, let alone her own daughter.

'Hello?'

Well, that was a reasonable start at least.

'Hi, Mum. It's me.'

'I know that.'

'I was thinking about you. I mean, I always think about you. But. Well. I just wanted to say hi and ask how you're getting on.'

She sniffed. 'I thought your spies provide regular reports.'

'I've not spoken to Aunty Linda – or Karina – in a couple of weeks, actually.'

'Oh, poor them. A whole two weeks without speaking to you, they must be distraught.'

I closed my eyes, forced my jaw to unclench and ploughed on. 'I saw you on the Buttonhole website. It's great that you're teaching more courses again.'

'Great as in you don't have to feel guilty for ghosting me?'

This was a bad idea. I glanced at the time. I'd give her a couple more minutes to get it out her system, and if things didn't improve I'd hang up.

'Great, as in I was really pleased to see you're out doing the things you love.'

'Well, as long as you're pleased that's all right, then, isn't it?'

'Your hair looks amazing.'

There was such a long pause I wondered if she'd ended the call.

'Thank you.'

'And did you make the cushions with the leaves on them?'

'I did.'

'I thought that was your handiwork!' Oh my goodness, I'd forgotten how excruciating it was to keep up a fake cheerful conversation when Mum was in victim mode. 'Aunty Linda is a professional, but she can't bring embroidery to life like you.'

'Well.' Mum sniffed again. 'I have always considered myself to be the more talented sister when it comes to a needle and thread.'

'Absolutely. Don't tell Aunty Linda I said that, though,' I added, knowing full well that she'd have heard before the end of the day, but also knowing that she'd understand the reason I'd said it.

'Anyway, I mentioned the cushions because I was wondering if you'd have time to make some for me.' I paused and tried to ignore the voice in my head telling me that this was the stupidest thing I'd ever say. 'I'd be happy to pay you. Or... I was wondering if you'd like to give them to me as a birthday present?'

‘Oh, now I see!’ Mum cackled. ‘It’s your big special birthday, and you’ve realised that cutting me off means you won’t get a present. What, is Steph busy with her real family? Worried you’ll end up sitting home alone and thought you’d better wheel out Mother?’

‘No, Mum. Please listen to me.’ *For the first time ever.* ‘I’m having a birthday party, and if you wanted to come along you’d be very welcome. If you don’t want to make the cushions, I’d still like you to come.’

I counted about a thousand thundering heartbeats before she replied.

‘You’re having a party?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you want me to come?’

‘If you’d like to. Please don’t feel obliged.’ I dropped my head onto the closed laptop, resisting the urge to smack it against the cover a few times.

‘Why?’

‘Why do I want you to come?’

‘Yes.’

I straightened up. Mum’s tone had completely flipped again. I’d never heard her like this before. She sounded meek. Contrite. Almost grateful.

‘Because I don’t want to pass a major milestone like turning thirty without my mum being a part of it. I needed some space – I still need space – and I know you don’t understand why, and it hurts you, and I’m genuinely sorry about that. But I’ve missed you, Mum. I’ve never had a birthday without you; it would feel wrong if you weren’t there.’

Another silence.

‘Is it at the place you live now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you going to block me again once this call is over?’

I blew out as quiet a sigh as I could manage. ‘No. Not unless you start bombarding me with messages.’

‘When is the party?’

‘On my birthday.’

‘Remind me of the date again?’

Keep breathing, Ollie.

‘It’s Saturday nineteenth September. A month away. If you want to come then I’ll send you the details once I’ve sorted them. You’re the first person I’ve invited.’

‘Oh? You’ve not invited Steph?’

‘Not yet.’ Technically true.

‘I’ll check my diary. I’m very busy these days.’

And she was gone. It took longer to dispel the grey cloud now loitering over my head. I was already regretting inviting her. The problem was, I thought that in time I would regret not inviting her even more.

I decided to speak to Steph about Mum during our next Saturday breakfast, which meant I could put it to one side for now. Except that was easier said than done, mooching about the house by myself. I really needed some company to help distract me. I was far too nervous to message Sam – it was a Friday night; he surely had plans that didn't include sitting about wanting to talk to me. Instead, I knocked on Ebenezer's door.

This evening I was met with a pair of raised eyebrows in lieu of a greeting.

'Joan's out and I'm all dressed up with nowhere to go.' This was true; I'd changed into my jumpsuit, hoping it might help persuade him to accept my offer, and had even put on some make-up and styled my hair into glossy curls. 'I was wondering if you'd do me the honour of joining me for dinner?'

'Again?' He narrowed one eye. 'Tongues'll start wagging.'

I threw him a coy look. 'And why would I care about that?'

'Don't want to give a certain forest ranger the impression you're already spoken for.'

Damn my red-head complexion. I could feel my cheeks betraying me even as I tried to laugh it off. 'Oh, neither of us are interested in

being more than good friends.'

He harumphed. 'When a man looks at a woman the way he looks at you, it's not friendship on his mind.'

'Well, for this evening anyway, I am very free to have dinner with whoever I like, without worrying what the village grapevine might make of it. Will you join me, or have you got a date already lined up?'

'What's on the menu?'

'Leftovers from meals I've been brought round. Oh, and there's blackberry pie for dessert.'

He nodded in approval. 'I'll get my shoes on.'

The conversation wasn't exactly scintillating without Joan's constant chatter, but we talked about Leanne and her parents, and the work that Ebenezer had been doing in the garden.

'Now that we're friends, you could do some gardening during the day, when I'm around, so I could pick up some tips. Joan might even like to help you.'

He pursed his lips. 'I like doing it early.'

'What about in winter, when it's still dark?'

'Less to be done in winter.' He took a sip of water. 'I don't sleep so well these days. Still not used to an empty bed. Getting out here with the birds and the beasties helps it not seem so...' I waited while he stared at his plate for a long moment. 'It's a bit of company. The kind who don't ask intrusive questions about how you're feeling.'

'Well, I for one am very grateful. But if I can keep thanking you with a meal or a drink from time to time, I'll try really hard not to ask anything intrusive. Although I can't vouch for Joan.'

It was another gorgeous summer evening. Sultry and sweet with the scent of honeysuckle, cut grass and the faintest hint of a bonfire from somewhere down the lane. In between the birdsong a distant tractor hummed, and the sky was palest periwinkle.

I curled my bare toes in contentment, my mother's shadow banished by the glow of the evening sunshine. It had been a hell of a week, but here, sipping coffee with my neighbour, I soaked up the peace and embraced the moment.

I even managed to stop thinking about Sam.

Joan arrived back just after nine, and after a solid fifteen minutes of describing her entire trip out, from the colour of the waiter's tie to the number of Maltesers on her ice-cream sundae, I escorted her up to bed. Hurrying back down, hoping that Ebenezer hadn't taken the opportunity to slip back inside now the sun had begun to set, I was offering him another drink before I'd even spotted that the bald head and grumpy T-shirt were now a sun-kissed crop and a checked shirt.

'Hi!' I skidded to a stop. Nesbit had no such qualms, running to greet the collies, Scout and Willow, as long-lost friends.

'Hey!' Sam jerked to attention, rubbing a hand through his hair as if self-conscious.

'Your neighbour offered me a drink. Having said that, it was about ten minutes ago.' He checked his watch.

'He can be quite slow.'

'Right.'

'He can also be quite strange. You're probably best off having one with me, instead.'

He shifted in the chair. There was a chance I was imagining it, but Sam really did seem a bit awkward. 'Okay, thanks. That would be great.'

'Tea, coffee? A beer?'

'I'll have whatever you're having.'

Before I could decide what that was, the door of Middle Cottage opened and Ebenezer shuffled out carrying a bottle of wine and two glasses on a tray.

‘Oh, wonderful. We were just wondering what to drink.’

‘I’ll leave these here,’ Ebenezer said, placing the tray on my table. He then twitched his face at me in a gesture so out of character that it took me a few seconds to realise that he’d actually *winked*.

‘There’s only two glasses.’

‘I’ve only got two glasses,’ he said.

‘No problem, I can fetch one.’

‘No, no need to bother with all that. You two enjoy your evening.’

‘Ebenezer, it’s less than ten steps away; it’s no trouble.’

‘I’m feeling very tired. I need to go to bed,’ he said, suddenly finding the ability to scurry inside before we could object any further.

‘I’m so sorry about that. As I said, he’s a bit strange.’

‘No apology necessary. This is a decent bottle,’ Sam said, picking it up to read the label, before holding it up to me. ‘Shall we?’

‘Um... were you looking for me, or...?’ I asked, sitting down next to him.

‘Oh, yes, I was out walking the girls, and realised that I was right by your back hedge, and I heard Joan, meaning you were probably up, so thought I’d call in and see how it went today.’

‘Oh, I see.’

Or rather, I saw that Sam had just made up a convoluted excuse to visit me on a Friday night. When I started pouring, I felt so jittery that I slopped wine all over the table.

‘I must have arrived just as you went inside. But like I said, your neighbour offered me a drink.’ He took a paper napkin from the pile I’d brought out at dinner and started mopping up the mess. ‘I hope I’m not disturbing your plans?’

‘My plan was to sit here and have a drink with a friend until the stars come out. Seeing as that friend has bailed on me, I can cope

with that being you instead.'

'Excellent.'

We sat there pretending to admire the lovely surroundings while in reality the peace of the evening had been engulfed by strange tension and unspoken subtext that I had no idea how to interpret. If Ebenezer had wanted to kindle some romance, he'd instead managed to snuff out any trace of embers.

After a while, Sam suddenly spoke. 'So, um, how did it go at the hospital?'

'Better than any of us hoped. Any of us apart from Joan, that is.'

The tension gradually dissipated as we spoke about everything that had happened. Sam asked what the plan was for when Leanne left hospital, and when my throat seized up before I could finish explaining that they might all go back to Chester, him reaching across the shadows and taking my hand seemed completely natural.

A few seconds later, the music started.

'Is that a coincidence, or is he some sort of peeping Tom?' Sam asked, dropping my hand as he glanced over his shoulder at Ebenezer's now open kitchen window.

'Maybe he had one quick peep, concluded that his plan must be working and moved to stage two.'

'His plan?' Sam looked back at me, teeth glinting in amusement.

'He thinks that you might be interested in being more than friends,' I mumbled. 'I've told him that's not the case.'

'Ah. Okay.' Sam's voice was low. I huddled back in my chair, not sure whether to be hideously embarrassed, to shrug it off as a hilarious joke between friends or to hope that somehow, Ebenezer might end up being right.

Sam raised his eyebrows at me in invitation, holding out his hand as the music twined around us. I had to smile and shake my head

when I realised that Ebenezer had put on 'Perfect' by Ed Sheeran. When it got to the line about dancing in the dark, barefoot in the grass, the wine mingling with the attraction in my veins decided it would be rude not to.

How many opportunities did a woman have to dance under the stars with a stunningly handsome man? In my case, only one so far, and history would strongly imply that there wouldn't be a second. I would be a fool to pass this up.

Sam placed one hand on the small of my back, his other hand clasping mine and pressed between our chests as we swayed, and, resting my head on his shoulder, feeling the smooth skin of his neck and the pulse that hammered beneath it, the evening was about as close to perfect as it gets.

When the song finished, Sam whispered, 'Is he going to give us a round of applause, or hold up a mark out of ten?' and we both started laughing, so that when he pulled back and fixed his gaze on mine, it caught me off guard.

Sam looked deadly serious as his eyes locked onto mine. This did not feel fun or light-hearted. My heart had never felt so full and heavy with emotions that were nothing to do with friendship.

His mouth twitched slightly as he dropped his gaze to my lips.

'I would really like to kiss you,' he whispered, voice hoarse.

I had to close my eyes to push beyond the building passion and find one last smithereen of reason.

This was Sam, my friend, and I really, *really* wanted him to kiss me.

But this was Sam. My friend. And I didn't want to do something stupid in a moment of summer madness that would ruin our friendship forever.

If for one second I could think beyond this kiss, I could see what would follow. And every possible scenario ended with him having to tell me that he'd been honest from the start about what he wanted, and me walking away from our friendship with my emotions in tatters.

'That's... I can't...' I stammered back. 'The No-Man Mandate...'

He tipped his head down slightly towards me, almost resting his forehead against mine. 'You made up the No-Man Mandate. If you don't want to kiss me, that's fine, I won't ask again. But it's your rules, Ollie. You can break them if you want.'

I shook my head, fumbling for the right words. Honestly, I felt *terrified* about how badly I wanted to kiss this man. And how much I wanted that to lead to a thousand more kisses, and starlit dances, and days and nights spent together so I never had to make this kind of impossible decision alone again.

And that in itself was enough reason to say what I had to say next. Even if it did feel as though I'd punched myself in the heart.

'I don't want...' I had to stop and clear my throat. 'I'm sorry.'

Then I turned and ran into the house as fast as I could.

But if I thought that was the equivalent to smashing my internal organs with a meat mallet, it was nothing to what happened next.

When Leanne came home three days later, End Cottage was rife with mixed feelings. Both Joan and I were of course delighted that Leanne was well enough to be discharged. No child should have to face the ongoing trauma of visiting their only parent in hospital for a single day longer than is necessary. Seeing a tinge of pink override Leanne's sallow complexion along with the hint of steel back in her eyes was wonderful. However, she was still pitifully weak.

There was no way that Leanne would be able to take care of herself, let alone a child. We didn't speculate whether this was for now, or forever. Dealing with each day was more than enough to be going on with. The hospital were clear that they were only letting Leanne go home because her parents were ready and willing to provide whatever support was required.

Leanne had a two-bedroom cottage riddled with mould and broken appliances.

Her parents had a three-bedroom house with a hot tub.

The solution was obvious.

Joan also pointed out, several times, that it had a tiny back garden with no forest waiting to be explored, and, more importantly, no dog.

‘I don’t care about decorating a new bedroom or going to some fancy school!’ she cried, face buried in Nesbit’s neck after the hospital visit when Leanne had announced her decision to move. ‘When I’m in my bedroom, it’s dark and I’m asleep – I can’t even see what colour the walls are.’

‘I’m not sure what your mum would think about you choosing a dog over her,’ I said, stroking her hair.

‘It’s not only that.’ She straightened up, expression full of bewilderment. ‘It’ll be like when we go to the hospital, with people everywhere and concrete and zebra crossings and too much noise. Only all of the time, everywhere I go, and even thinking about it gives me a headache.’

I nodded my understanding. When I’d driven into Nottingham for a meeting a couple of weeks ago, it had transformed into an alien planet, so much hurrying about and so little space. My senses felt suffocated.

‘Everyone will think I’m weird.’

‘I’m sure that’s not true.’

‘I will be weird! I’ll be like a wild rabbit forced to live in a tiny cage with 118,000 domesticated rabbits who think it’s all normal and fine and don’t understand why I can’t even breathe properly squashed into that smelly, polluted, ugly cage.’

‘We can ask Nana and Grandad to take you out into the countryside as much as possible. There’s probably a bus so you can go by yourself.’

I tried to restrain from adding platitudes about how she’d get used to it, and soon learn to love having shops and places to eat and all the other benefits of a small city on her doorstep. That she’d enjoy living in a lovely house, where everything worked, and she could see her grandparents every day. I didn’t even mention that one

advantage of a big, new school would be that there were enough 'weird' kids there to find some who appreciated your differences, and she might have more friends to hang about with.

I didn't say a single word about being a 'normal' teenager.

Joan, like all of us, was one hundred per cent her own person.

Unlike most of us, she knew who that was and she was completely happy with it.

Plus, how can you console a child having to leave her dog behind?

I would have let her take him, as much as it would have killed me to lose Joan and Nesbit in one go, but Peter was highly allergic to animal fur, and more than ten seconds in an enclosed space with Nesbit resulted in startlingly violent sneezes.

'I'll talk to your mum about how often you can come and visit, and I promise I'll bring Nesbit to see you.'

'He'd hate it in Chester.'

The phrase that stuck in my windpipe like a fishhook was that it might not be forever, or even for long – just until her mum was back on her feet. Leanne had closed down her business and handed in her notice to the landlord, with a payment from Peter to cover the rest of the rent. Carole spent an afternoon showing Joan the website to a private girls' school with independent thinking and creating confidence as its key values.

'Look, Grandad helped build the new arts centre. Isn't it great?'

Joan nodded politely, but said nothing.

'I know she's sad about leaving,' Leanne said one evening as we sat in the garden listening to the birds while Joan helped her grandparents pack up some of her things. 'I'm sad about it. I'm not underestimating how big and scary this change is. But kids move all the time – Joan used to live in Liverpool, and she managed the

transition to here fine. I know that leaving her dog is a tough one, but she's only had him a couple of months, and we can get a guinea pig that can live in the garden away from Dad. I've said I'll look into that dog-borrowing scheme once we're settled.'

'Sounds great,' I replied.

Leanne sighed. 'No it doesn't, it sounds like I'm kidding myself. After all this, I'm uprooting her from everything she loves and plonking her down in a strange place, with no trees or streams or all the things that she loves. Don't think for one second that I'm not in bits about it.'

'That's not true.'

'Excuse me?' Leanne squinted at me sideways. 'Just because I don't show *her* or Mum and Dad how I feel.'

'It's not true that you're taking her away from everything she loves.' I gave her a nudge. 'Not only you. She's gained a family, which was her biggest dream. And besides, they have libraries up north, don't they?'

She gave a wry laugh. 'I think Dad'd buy her a whole bookshop if it made her happy.'

'She will be okay. It might take time, but she'll get there.' I could almost believe it for Joan. Whether I'd be okay was a whole other matter. Which was probably what prompted me to keep talking. 'But if she's really not, and she's... she's not able to be Joan any more, well... this is probably crossing the line, but you know that she's always welcome to stay here. I mean, for summer holidays or half-term or until I've died of old age, whatever works best.'

Leanne twisted around to face me, her movements still slow and careful. 'Ollie, after everything that you've done, there is no line between you and me. Ever. Who knows how much worse this whole thing would have been without you barging your way over that stupid

line I'd drawn to keep everyone out. You gave her a home.' She looked me right in the eye. 'Thank you. I appreciate the offer, but I've spent too much time away from her already, without packing her off here for a holiday. Although,' she pulled a face, 'Give it a couple of weeks back with Mum and Dad and I'll be the one needing a holiday. Perhaps we'll both come for a break.'

'The door's always open.'

'When most people say that, they really mean that the door is sometimes open, for a limited time and only when convenient. The thing with you is, I know you mean it.' She shook her head. 'Fool that you are.'

Of course I meant it. I was holding it together for everyone's sake, but as soon as they left I fully intended to dissolve into a complete wreck.

Once we'd both stopped pretending not to cry, then had a hug and topped up our mocktail glasses, Leanne changed the subject.

'Anyway, enough of my depressing life. What's happening with you? Made any progress with the handsome ranger yet?'

I nearly choked on my virgin mojito. Is this what village life was like? A new woman moves in and everyone assumes she'll be getting together with the nearest available male? I had to think quickly to come up with something that would avoid having to talk about Sam.

'I'm having a birthday party. For my thirtieth.'

'What?' Leanne tried to lean forwards, but decided it wasn't worth the effort. 'Joan never mentioned it.'

I shrugged. 'I haven't told Joan. Not that it's a secret or she – and you – aren't invited. I've kind of had other things on my mind lately, strange as that may sound.'

'And? When is it?'

‘It’s not until the nineteenth of September.’

‘That’s what, three weeks away?’

I grimaced, realising that she was right. I had no idea how long it took to organise a party, but I was planning on being quite busy over the next few weeks hiding under my duvet, crying and eating ice cream straight from the tub.

‘If you’re up for travelling, I’d love it if you can come back for it.’ If Leanne and Joan were coming, that would be a reason to actually look forward to it.

‘Neither wild horses nor my parents could stop me.’ She screwed up her nose. ‘Well, given my current state, both those things could. But they couldn’t stop Joan, and she’ll need someone here to make sure she comes back to Chester again.’

* * *

That weekend was the August bank holiday. The Armitage-Browns would be relocating on the Saturday. Peter had hired a small van to transport Leanne and Joan’s things, although by the time all the junk had been sorted through, what was left would probably have balanced on the back of a bicycle. Joan had politely requested to stay with me on the Friday for one final night, and then vigorously insisted upon it when her grandparents seemed hesitant.

Prior to that, despite wanting to lie on my sofa all day contemplating how sad and lonely I was about to be, I had an afternoon of ReadUp coaching, and having rearranged so many in the past few weeks, I wasn’t about to bail on them.

To my mild surprise, I found Yasmin and Trev both waiting for me at the usual table. Initially I wondered if this was the inevitable outcome of Trev turning up earlier and earlier each week, meaning

that at some point he'd overlap the whole of Yasmin's session, but I soon discovered otherwise.

'We thought it would be more efficient,' Yasmin said, opening up her workbook. 'Two hours of coaching, even if it's shared, has to be better than one. It was Trev's idea,' she added, eyeing him through lowered lashes.

Trev coughed. 'Well, yes, we got talking in the café, after the Wednesday Business Builders.'

'You'd already left by then, but Irene insisted we go once the time was up, even though there was no one else in the library except for her!' Yasmin tutted.

'Yes, well, the Frea-K Three-K did keep distracting her, what with all the questions about her fashion choices and wanting to take more photos,' I added, wincing and laughing at the memory.

'I think it was only when they forced her to take part in their new Library Lady dance move that she got really annoyed,' Yasmin said. 'Anyway, we hadn't finished discussing the Dog Mother. Ollie, did you know that Trev used to breed bulldogs? So, we decided to carry on at the café, and before we knew it we were talking about how nice it was to feel confident reading a fancy menu, and then we were talking about all the other things that we can do thanks to ReadUp like sort our bills and set up an email account, and then Trev had the idea that if we pooled our sessions, we could progress twice as fast.'

'It seemed the logical thing to do.' Trev shrugged.

'And then we realised that we didn't need to wait for Fridays; we could meet up and offer support and help during the week, too.'

'Wow. Great idea.'

Trev was turning the colour of Jaxx's Nomato.

'So, you've been working on your reading together?'

Yasmin opened to the last page of her latest workbook, and fluently ran through the final paragraph.

‘Yasmin, that’s amazing. Well done!’

‘She’s an amazing woman, all right,’ Trev mumbled.

‘You think that’s amazing? What about Trev?’ Yasmin said eagerly. ‘He had another brilliant idea that we should set up, wait for it... a book club!’

Trev shuffled on his chair. ‘There was one in my last place. Not that I went, of course.’

Yasmin pulled out a copy of a Roald Dahl book. ‘A bad readers’ book club! For people who can’t read very well, so no shame or blame or fancy discussions. Just friendly people, encouraging each other and not being snooty about how we’ve never read Jane Austen or Charles Dickens.’

‘That is a brilliant idea!’ I felt almost embarrassed that I’d not thought of it myself. ‘How many have joined?’

‘Oh, well.’ It was Yasmin’s turn to flush. ‘For now, just the two of us. But Irene said we could set up another, larger one in the library as long as we kept to the rules, only spoke in whispers, made sure nobody enjoyed themselves, blah blah blah. Oh, and she asked if I could stop her miniature poodle from chewing up her sofa while she’s at work. I mean, that’s easy enough – try listening to an intelligent, sensitive creature when they are telling you they hate being left on their own all day! So, another client for the Dog Mother’s Day Care.’ Yasmin leant forwards, cupping her mouth with both hands. ‘Would you have believed it, though, *Irene* has a dog! She’s called *Veronica Fluff!*’

After all that, the session ended up being mostly a lot of chattering, with a smattering of coaching whenever Irene frowned in our direction.

I remembered to invite them both to my party before they left, which meant a great deal more due to us deciding that the ReadUp Coaching had served its purpose, and this would be our final session. Jaxx arrived just as they were leaving, which prompted me to invite him as well, and while I was on such a sociable, friendly roll, I also offered Irene one of the invites I'd printed off. I felt a lot less intimidated by Irene Jenkins now I knew she'd named her poodle Veronica Fluff.

'What's this?' She sniffed, as though I'd offered her a used tissue.

'An invitation to my thirtieth birthday party.'

Irene's mouth dropped open in a silent O.

'There won't be loads of people, I'm keeping it fairly informal, but Jaxx and Trev and Yasmin will be there, hopefully some of the other Business Builders. We'd miss you not being there too. And you've done so much in making the library available for all these different activities.'

'The directors like the upturn in footfall,' she mumbled. 'If it means we avoid the next round of budget cuts, it'll be worth it, I suppose.'

'I heard the Library Lady stories are thriving.' I gestured to where a crowd was already gathering in the children's corner.

'It's getting unmanageable. Children spilling out into the local history section. I'm going to have to start another session on Monday. That is, if your crowd don't come up with reasons to hang about in here every day of the week. You'd think they had nothing better to do.'

'Most of them don't right now. That's why they're improving their literary skills. Anyway, I'll let you get on. I really hope you'll be able to come to the party. I thought I might introduce you to my mum and aunty. They run a craft shop in Sherwood, and would probably do a

great deal on some giant cushions for the children to sit on. Maybe some brightly coloured curtains, too.'

'I'm not sure what the colour of curtains has to do with children's literature.'

'Ask my aunty; she'll be happy to explain how a warm and welcoming environment can help open our minds to learning. Oh – and feel free to bring Veronica.'

'It's Veronica Fluff,' she snapped, just as the door swung shut behind me.

* * *

As I arrived back home, looking forward to swapping my humidity-crumpled work dress for a vest top and shorts, my phone beeped with a message. Glancing at the screen as I dumped my bag on the kitchen table, my bloodstream screeched to an emergency stop.

My mother.

I'd been waiting all week for this. Holding my breath every time I checked my phone. Frequently thinking I heard a ping only to find I'd imagined it.

The message was brief:

How many cushions do you need?

I sent back an equally short reply, debating whether to include a picture of the invitation providing the time and place for the party, but deciding against it in case this was all a ruse to lull me into a false sense of security until she had my address. I then called Aunty Linda to confirm that Mum wouldn't be at the Buttonhole that Sunday, but

my aunty would, and I'd be very welcome to pop in for a chat/rant/therapeutic cry.

Mum wasn't the only reason I'd been checking my phone obsessively. It had also been a whole week since I'd run away from the opportunity to kiss Sam in my garden, and it was both impressive and pathetic how often I'd managed to dwell on that evening, considering everything else that was going on.

Steph had patiently listened while I'd explained every second in great detail, before insisting that all it took to ensure things weren't going to be awkward was a quick message to clear the air.

'Either he's feeling as embarrassed as you – possibly even more so given that he made a move, meaning all you need to do is reassure him that it isn't a big deal. Or, he already knows it isn't a big deal – he asked, you answered, nothing more to be said. In which case, he's probably just been busy, or is giving you some space in case *you* feel embarrassed. Either way, a casual text, like "Hi, Joan moves to Chester tomorrow so if you and the dogs are in our end of the forest at any point, feel free to drop by and cheer Nesbit up" will show him that, like I said, it isn't a big deal.'

The problem that Steph seemed to be overlooking, of course, was that to me it was a very big deal.

I did take her point, however, about one unbearably mortifying moment not being a reason to end a good friendship. Plus, if Mum was definitely coming to this party, I'd need as many allies there as I could get.

I took a deep breath, scrunched up my face and sent him the party invite.

An angst-wracked minute later, having received no reply, I realised that accompanying it with some sort of personal message so that he didn't think it was a mass text was probably a good idea if

I wanted a personal reply. Better late than never, I spent another ten minutes typing and then deleting until I came up with a suitable follow-up:

Hey, Sam – really hope you can make it!

Joan came out as soon as she saw the tent pop up.

‘We’re allowed to sleep in here?’ she asked, her entire body drooping to show that even camping wasn’t going to lift her spirits.

‘Yes. Ebenezer agreed, as long as we take it down first thing in the morning.’

‘First thing?’ She pulled a face. ‘His first thing is like four o’clock. We might not have even gone to sleep by then.’

‘We most certainly will have gone to sleep! And he said eight thirty is fine, which is perfect because you’ve got a lot to do tomorrow.’

‘Yes, like take Nesbit and hide in the woods where no one can find us, then build a shelter and a campfire and help Nesbit catch squirrels before picking berries and mushrooms so we’ve got some vitamins.’

‘Except that you hate mushrooms, and Nesbit struggles to catch a slug, let alone a squirrel.’

‘We’ll eat slugs then!’ She glared at me, but it was half-hearted at best.

‘Come on.’ I put one arm around her. ‘Remember the rule: no feeling all sad and sorry for ourselves this evening. We’re going to

make the most of it and have the best time.'

Once the tent was up, sleeping bags and other necessities squeezed inside, we built a campfire inside a firepit that had mysteriously appeared on the lawn after I'd asked Ebenezer if he was okay about us pitching a tent. Once Joan had taken charge of lighting it, we soon had enough of a blaze to crisp up the sausages that I'd pre-cooked in the oven.

We stuffed hot dogs with fried onions, mustard and ketchup, opting for greasy hands instead of plates, the butter from charred corn on the cobs dripping off our chins. This was followed by the requisite marshmallows, and mugs of hot chocolate topped with cream and chocolate buttons.

We didn't quite manage to stick to the rule about feeling sad. There were a couple of moments when Joan fell silent, her gaze lost in the glow of the fire. I had to turn away more than once to swallow hard and pull myself together. Once Nesbit had wolfed down his sausage, he snuggled up close to Joan, as if sensing her melancholy.

Then the music started, the first bars of 'Uptown Funk' pumping into the garden, shattering the mood in the best possible way.

'Oh no,' I called, getting up and marching over to Ebenezer's open window. 'If we're dancing, you're joining us this time.'

'You can't make Ebenezer dance, he's eighty-one.' Joan giggled.

'If he can mow the lawn, trim the hedges and build a rain shelter, he can move two feet in time to his own music,' I replied, loud enough for him to hear.

'A good point!'

We stood there, side by side, hands on hips until the door finally opened, which was such a long time the track had gone all the way back to the beginning.

‘Is this what you do in that cottage all day?’ I said. ‘Dance to disco classics?’

Joan bopped over and took hold of her neighbour’s hand, swinging it about in encouragement.

I shrugged off the memories of the last time I’d danced in this garden and proceeded to attempt the kind of moves an eleven-year-old girl deserves when she’s about to leave her whole world behind because her mum is seriously ill.

Within moments, the door to New Cottage opened and Leanne shuffled out, Peter bracing her by the elbow. Carole was right behind them, flinging her arms out and singing along as though the pain of the past fifteen years was a forgotten nightmare.

As Ebenezer’s playlist rolled on to the next song, we adjusted our dance partners so that Leanne and Ebenezer could sway together while Peter and Carole did some sort of complicated jive and Joan gripped my hands as we spun and hopped and jigged about until the sun had set and the bats came swooping above our heads.

‘Right, that’s enough of that,’ Carole gasped eventually. ‘We’ve got a long day tomorrow. Let’s leave these wild ones to it.’

Once we’d cleared the remains of dinner into the kitchen and got ready for bed, we crawled inside the tent and lay on top of our sleeping bags. Still warm from the dancing, we left the tent flap open so we could see the moon sailing across the treetops. Our plan had been to read our own books before the designated lights out, but Joan handed me her battered copy of *The Hobbit*.

‘Will you read to me?’

I had to wait for the lump in my throat to ease before I could reply. ‘Where have you got to?’

‘The chapter called “An Unexpected Party”.’ She smiled. ‘Like we had just now.’

‘Joan, I’ve read this book more times than you can count. I know that’s the first chapter.’

She looked at me, eyes wide and innocent.

‘I’m not reading the whole book.’

‘Why don’t you start it from there and we’ll see how it goes. You can stop when we get to a boring bit.’

‘You mean the blank page at the end?’

She grinned, lying back with a contented sigh.

Bilbo had just set off on his adventure when I noticed that Joan was asleep. She’d wriggled closer to see the illustrations, and her head now rested against my upper arm with a heavy reassurance that kept me reading for another few pages. Closing the book softly, I eased back into a sort-of-comfortable position, checked that Nesbit was still curled up in the entrance and clicked off the lamp.

The second that Joan sighed and rolled over into the other side of the tent, the tears came. I was so grateful that I’d had the chance to get to know this remarkable child. She’d filled up a chasm in my heart that I’d not realised existed.

What on earth am I going to do without her?

* * *

Once the tent was packed away, I had one job on Saturday morning. Remain calm and collected. Or in other words, not dissolve into a snotty heap until the hire van had disappeared down Hatherstone Lane.

There may have been one tear, two at the most, but Joan’s stiff, bitter expression was enough to keep my emotions in check as I helped load up the final bits and pieces before hugging my friends

goodbye. Ebenezer appeared out his front door and handed Joan a book.

'I don't think you've read it.'

'I haven't,' she said, flipping open the cover of *Little Women*. 'Thank you...' She paused, the hint of a smile creeping over her face for the first time that day. 'Barry.'

'Ebenezer, if you don't mind.'

'I don't! I didn't even know Barry was a real name.'

I peeked at the inscription in the front of the book:

For my darling Ada, the best of women.

Yours forever, Barry.

Oh boy. Was I supposed to be not crying?

Joan didn't exactly help, throwing her arms around Ebenezer's waist. 'I'll never forget you.'

He patted her awkwardly on the head.

'Promise you'll make sure Ollie's okay without me.'

Ebenezer muttered something along the lines of how he'd do his best, but he'd got a lot of other important things that needed doing, and then hobbled back inside.

'Right, that's it,' Peter announced, slamming the van door with a thud.

One last hug, a cringe-worthy fake smile and a wave, and they were gone.

Steph phoned, as promised, but after a brief chat I insisted I was fine and no, she didn't need to come over, as 'I don't mean to be rude but I'd rather be on my own today'.

That feeling lasted for about half an hour.

I wasn't going to drag Steph over, though. I should have been able to handle feeling sad on my own for a day.

The issue was that I didn't feel sad; I felt like every last trace of colour had been packed into that van.

I felt like I was already sick and tired of my miserable, moping self, so I yanked on my walking boots, whistled for my dog and went for the kind of furious, pounding march through Bigley Forest that makes it impossible to think.

Forty-five minutes later I was steaming with exertion, sweat dripping down my back when Nesbit pricked up his ears, galloping into the undergrowth before scampering back a few seconds later, his prize in tow.

'Well, hello, girls,' I managed, automatically running both hands over my mass of tangled frizz as I braced myself for the appearance of Scout and Willow's owner.

'Hey,' he said, eyebrows raised in surprise as he rounded the corner and found me standing there, wishing I'd changed out of the T-shirt I'd worn to heft boxes into a van.

'Hi.'

I swallowed hard, focusing on bending down to pet the collies. The rational part of my brain knew that bursting into tears at the sight of Sam would prove more than a little awkward, but I was so pleased and relieved to see him it was all I could do not to launch myself into his arms where it was safe to fall apart.

'I was on my way to see you.'

'Oh?'

'Thought Nesbit might need some cheering up today, so we decided to reply to the party invitation in person.'

'You remembered?'

He managed to frown and smile at the same time. 'Of course I did. I'd have come earlier, but we had another forest fire.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.' The floodgate burst as a fresh wave of sobbing shook my shoulders.

'It's okay, no one was hurt. Maybe a couple of singed insects, but we handled it.' He stepped forwards, stopping a couple of feet away so that it was up to me what happened next. 'If I ask if you want a hug will you run away from me again?'

I gave a watery laugh. 'A hug would be really nice, thank you.'

'Purely platonic, of course,' he added, wrapping me up in his arms.

Speak for yourself, I couldn't help thinking, buried against his chest, my forehead resting in the dip above his collarbone. His warm, earthy scent had become so familiar, it was like coming home.

* * *

Sam suggested fish and chips. 'It's high time you had a proper tour of Bigley,' he said as we strolled back towards the village, the dogs crashing about in the undergrowth beside us.

'I've lived here for over three months; I know my way around.'

Sam shook his head in mock disgust. 'You know the shops and the library. The dog park. You've not scratched the surface of the real Bigley Bottom.'

'It's a village less than a mile long, and half as wide.'

'Yes, but what about its hidden depths?' He raised one eyebrow, trying and failing to appear mysterious. 'Or should I say, hidden bottom.'

When he looked at me sideways like that, one side of his mouth curled up in invitation, I had to wonder why I was bothering to argue.

The tour of Bigley's hidden bottom turned out to consist of Sam's old primary school, where we sneaked through a gap in the fence at the back of the enormous playing field that all the kids knew about and the teachers pretended not to, despite half of them having gone to that school themselves. Sam proudly showed me where he'd had his first kiss, promptly followed by his first punch in the face, because back then he'd not yet learnt to ask permission first.

'Speaking of kisses...' he said, jabbing at his haddock with the wooden fork. 'I owe you an apology.'

I kept my eyes on my chips, trying to ignore the flutter in my belly. We were sitting side by side on the grass, and I was suddenly hyper-aware of his arm, only inches away from mine. 'No, I'm the one who needs to say sorry. It was rude to leave you standing there.'

'You've been completely upfront about your commitment to stay single until your list is completed. I disrespected that, and you, by what I said.'

I nodded. Not that I agreed with him, but it was easier than trying to speak.

'I'd have felt terrible if you'd broken your promise, because of me. I...' He paused, shaking his head slightly before quickly glancing over. 'If I'm being honest, I got carried away, with the music and the wine, and everything so beautiful in the starlight.' He pulled a wry smile. 'That's not completely true. It was you. *You* looked so beautiful. I mean... you always look... you *are* beautiful. I knew you weren't interested in anything more than friendship, but it felt like... I thought that... there was something there. With us. That it wasn't just me. Which was clearly wishful thinking, probably helped along by Ebenezer's wine. So like I said, I'm really sorry. It won't happen again.'

I really hoped Sam couldn't tell how disappointing that felt. Even as I knew it was the only way to avoid far greater disappointment later on.

'Thank you. Apology accepted.' I took a deep breath, and in the safety of the evening shadows, it felt easier to appease his guilt with some honesty of my own. 'And it wasn't wishful thinking. I felt it too.'

His head jerked up, with a look of utter surprise. I hurried to get the rest of my words out. 'But I wouldn't have kissed you, even if I'd finished the Dream List. The whole point of it was to learn how to be my own person, to be content with my life so one day I can share that with someone else. While I've realised I don't need a committed relationship in order to be happy or complete, I've also realised that I do want one. I'm a "not yet" when it comes to falling in love. You're a "never". I really like you, Sam, but I'm not interested in casual dating or some sort of friends with benefits thing that's not going anywhere.'

I didn't add that my heart really couldn't take another bashing so soon after Joan had left, and it would be impossible for me to kiss or date Sam and keep it casual.

'Yes, of course. No, totally. I completely understand. I don't want that either. I wouldn't normally... I mean, I haven't... You're the first person I've wanted to kiss since Carrie. I don't make a habit of ambushing my friends.'

'It's none of my business who you choose to ambush,' I said, managing to keep my tone light-hearted despite every nerve in my body crackling in response to his words. 'As long as it's not me from now on.'

'Absolutely.' He got to his feet, screwing up the empty chip paper. 'Although, like I said—'

'So, is this it then, for the grand Bigley Bottom tour?' I asked.

Sam blinked a couple of times as if readjusting to the sudden change of subject. 'There is one more place I'd like to show you, if that's okay?'

He seemed slightly hesitant, almost nervous as he led me towards the far side of the village. When we stopped outside a large Georgian house, I realised why.

'Four generations of Parker and Sons were born and raised here. That window, there, is where I came into the world.' He turned to point at a side building. 'That used to be the office.'

'So your great-grandfather started the law firm?'

We leant on the white fence that bordered the imposing front garden. Sam wasn't worried that his parents would spot us snooping, as they were on holiday.

'Every male descendent since has joined as a solicitor, along with my cousin Kitty.'

'I wonder how many of them hated it, and spent their days wishing they had the courage to pack it in and become a ranger.'

'Well, none of the others had a nervous breakdown, as far as I know.' He pushed away from the fence, readying to move on. 'Still, every family has its weak link, as Dad loves to remind me.'

'You know that's rubbish, though, don't you?' I asked, keeping my voice soft so that the anger and disgust didn't show.

'Yeah, most of the time.'

I wasn't convinced.

'At least I've not had any children so I don't have to face that battle.' We began walking back into the village. 'Tom and Megan's fourteen-year-old, Ethan, wants to be a fashion designer.'

'Oh, I bet your dad loves that!'

'They haven't told him.'

'Might take some heat off you once they do.'

We walked back through the village in silence, until reaching Hatherstone Lane. 'I know it shouldn't bother me. In the rational, logical part of my head it doesn't. But everywhere I turn in this village I see our family history. I can't help wondering sometimes whether my ancestors would be as disappointed as Dad says.'

'Even with Tom and Chris working for the firm? It's not like it all depends on you to keep the legacy going. Even if it did, nothing lasts forever. There's nothing to gain in carrying on just because people who aren't here any more might feel upset about it.'

'Like I said, my logical brain...'

'I do get it,' I said, after a moment. 'It's not the same, but even after everything my mum's done, I can't help but want her approval.' We'd reached the cottage now, and I stopped to dig the keys out of my shorts pocket. 'I invited her to my party.'

Sam looked at me, eyebrows raised. 'Wow. That's a big move.'

'Will you help watch my back? Steph's coming, and she'll be on red alert, but when it comes to my mother you can never have too many allies.'

'Of course.' Sam's eyes were soft like caramel, his smile a thermal blanket wrapped around my battered heart. 'What are friends for?'

The next three weeks were somehow the hardest, and yet the most encouraging time since those first few days after I'd moved. The day after Joan and Leanne left, I went to the Buttonhole as arranged, and lost myself in embroidery for a while, the delicate stitching requiring all of my concentration. Aunty Linda confirmed that Mum seemed to be making progress. She'd had lunch with the manager of the bakery next to the Buttonhole, and when he confessed that he'd not spoken to his son since his bitter divorce, it hit home.

'Karina and I have co-ordinated a two-pronged attack,' Aunty Linda told me. 'We've been explaining on repeat about how trying to keep you to herself ended up driving you away, and any hope of a reconciliation has to be based on mutual respect and trust. At the same time, we've been giving her plenty of opportunities to find some purpose and enjoyment in other things, so that she doesn't depend on you quite so much.'

'I can't imagine ever being able to trust her. Not having that sense of dread that she'll suddenly get ill or flip out or do something else to force her own way.'

Aunty Linda sighed. 'I don't expect it will come easily to either of you. Your mother's also wondering about trust. How she can open

herself up to reconnecting without constantly living under the threat of you cutting her off again if she doesn't play by your rules.'

I sat back, a wave of nauseous anger churning in my stomach. 'I didn't cut off contact because she wouldn't play by my rules.' I shook my head, disgusted at the thought. 'I had no rules. Or rather, my only rule was to try to keep her happy!'

'I know.' Aunty Linda placed her hand on mine. 'I know. But she doesn't understand this new Ollie, who *does* lay down some boundaries. I'm not criticising, darling. You asked where she was at. I'm telling you that she's scared and confused and also navigating enormous change while wondering how she can make things better. I suppose what I mean to say is that it's complicated. It's going to take patience and proper communication on both sides.'

'I don't want to lose her. But I won't risk losing myself, now I've finally found me,' I said, my voice breaking. 'I like me a lot more than her.'

'No comment,' Aunty Linda replied, before offering me another brownie.

So, with no small sense of trepidation, on full alert for any sign of her old tricks and more than ready to implement a swift retreat if required, I began texting every few days. Keeping it light and simple, I asked her for a recipe, sent a photograph of a deer I spotted in the forest, had a brief conversation about my cousin's engagement to a woman he'd met online six weeks earlier. Mum sometimes replied immediately; other times it was several hours before an answer pinged through. Her messages were polite and cautious, which made me grateful and relieved yet at the same time peeved and lonely.

Aunty Linda wasn't wrong when she said it would be complicated. But it was a start.

In between these messages I welcomed some new ReadUp clients to replace Yasmin and Trev and managed various issues cropping up in my coaching team. I sat in on the Business Builders meetings, which only grew more bizarre each week. I coerced Irene into chatting with me and met Yasmin in the park so she could train me and play with Nesbit. On one sunny Saturday I ate breakfast with Steph and took Nicky on a bike ride through the forest.

I tried to organise a party that was worthy of the Dream List – the kind of party I would have wanted a man who was deliriously in love with me to arrange – even as I fought the urge to cancel, wrestling with feeling overwhelmed and deciding that I hated parties, so why should I be forced to have one for my own birthday.

I rattled around my empty house, and nursed my emotional bruises with dog walks and long-drawn-out nights staring at the ceiling forcing myself to count my blessings, of which I knew there must be many. I sent Joan updates about Nesbit, as promised, and snippets of trivia about how the forest was getting ready for autumn. She replied with streams of follow-up questions, while ignoring all mine about how she was settling in. I tried not to worry, reminded myself that she was with a family who loved her and got back to organising my party. Around ten days after they'd left, Carole phoned to say that she didn't think they'd be coming back for my birthday. At first she blamed it on Leanne's health, but when I offered to come and see them instead, she admitted that Joan was still struggling to adjust and she thought it best to wait. I was tempted to cancel the party altogether.

On top of all this, I seemed to have messed up with Sam, despite thinking that I'd handled things maturely and sensibly enough to avoid this from happening. On the two occasions I hiked far enough around the forest to eventually bump into him, he was polite rather

than friendly. He didn't pick up on my hints to have a drink or a walk, and acted distracted – almost dismissive – as though he was far too busy to chat. This was so unexpected that on top of all my other jumbled emotions, I had no idea how to interpret it, despite analysing every comment and gesture for torturous hours on end.

'He must have only been interested in a potential hook-up all along,' I bemoaned to Steph, who was surely fed up with this topic of conversation by now, but was kind enough to act like this was the first time she'd heard me droning on about it. 'Did he just want the challenge of getting me to crack? Like, as some sort of ego boost.'

'What if that whole story about his ex, and how he's a sworn singleton is all a line to reel you in?' she suggested, causing my innards to shrivel like slugs in salt. 'Maybe he didn't leave the family firm because he hated it and had a nervous breakdown, he was just crap so they kicked him out. It's all part of the sob-story to get you into bed.'

'Ugh, don't even say that!' I cried. 'Firstly, why would someone go to all that effort to get *me* of all people into bed? And secondly, if I'm still that vulnerable to being manipulated then all my fears about moving out have come true, and I might as well go back home where at least I know what's happening.'

'Alternatively, you chalk it up to experience, then congratulate yourself for communicating a clear boundary, meaning that whatever his reason for backing off, you've no horrible regrets. This proves that you are, in fact, the kick-ass woman I knew you were all along. Plus, you can breathe a big sigh of relief that he's got the message and moved on.' Steph huffed noisily down the phone. 'This was a win, Ollie.'

'Unless, of course, none of what he said was a lie. He *is* the loveliest man I've ever met, and once he got to know me he just

realised that I'm a boring, pathetic person with a mountain of issues and he decided he doesn't want to be friends with me after all.'

'Okay, I'm not listening to this any more. This is getting so boring and pathetic that I'm wondering why I've bothered to be friends with you for so long. You met a man who seemed nice and then maybe revealed himself to be a jerk, boohoo. Or here's a wild idea – perhaps he's genuinely busy. Maybe September is the busy season for forest rangers. Either way, no big deal. Can we please talk about your party now?'

I knew Steph was teasing but she was also smart enough to know when I was sinking into pitiful wallowing.

Not that it stopped the wallowing altogether, of course. I still felt confused and hurt by Sam's change in demeanour. I spent far too many hours wondering what would have happened if I'd gone ahead and kissed him. I might still be feeling lonely and rejected, but at least I'd have got to enjoy a kiss.

Early one mid-September morning, a week or so before the party, I decided that I couldn't bear to lie there and wait for the birds to start cheeping for another miserable second. Getting up, I shrugged into leggings and a hoodie, put on my flip-flops and slipped outside, Nesbit padding behind me. There was a narrow streak of blue where the sky met the roofline of the cottages, the moon above it a mere sliver of silver. Icy dewdrops brushed against my feet, and as I breathed in the crisp air, it was ripe with the scent of autumn.

I was startled by a sudden cough, even though I'd come out here hoping to find him. Swivelling around, I saw Ebenezer crouched on a tiny stool, offering me a garden fork. Accepting it gratefully, I knelt down beside him and got to work.

'Tomorrow, wear proper shoes,' Ebenezer instructed when he finally rose from the stool with a wheeze.

Nodding, I went inside for a hot shower, a mug of tea and three hours of the best sleep I'd had in months.

After several days of party-induced panic, driven by relentless overthinking, I decided that the party was going to be a celebration of the completed Dream List – although apart from Steph, no one would know that's what it was.

Initially, I wasn't quite sure how that would translate into food and décor and entertainment, but on an extra-long walk in the opposite direction to Sam's house, I decided it simply meant that instead of stressing out about everyone else, I was going to cram my party full of things that made me happy. Once I'd figured out what they were, of course.

* * *

The day before the big day, however, something even bigger happened. I came home from work to find a van outside New Cottage, and a man staggering under the weight of a giant cardboard box as he carried it up to the front door.

'Do you need a hand?' I asked.

The man dropped the box with a thud onto the pavement, revealing a pale face with startling blue eyes, floppy black hair and an overall air of dishevelment. He wasn't exactly handsome... more like interesting. There was something about his face that made it hard not to stare.

'It would appear so,' he replied, with a sardonic twitch of one eyebrow.

'I'm Ollie,' I replied, realising that for all he knew I was a random woman who happened to be walking past. Not that he seemed fazed by that. 'I live next door but one. In End Cottage.'

‘Ah, okay.’ The man nodded. ‘Leon.’

We spent half an hour hefting the remaining boxes and other items from the van into the cottage. At some point in the past few weeks the landlord had repainted the ugly beige walls in a crisp white and removed the disgusting lino, leaving freshly sanded floorboards. Instead of the scratched and stained furniture, there was a black leather sofa and a wall of metal bookcases. I couldn’t help bristling at the new kitchen appliances that Leanne would have found so helpful.

Leon was an English teacher; he’d started at the local secondary school earlier in the month, but had been in a short-term let until New Cottage became available. Slender and slouchy, wearing ripped black jeans and a wristful of beaded bracelets, his piercing gaze and slightly sarcastic manner made him seem like the kind of English teacher who had tatty notebooks full of bleak and complicated poetry, probably inspired by some doomed romance.

He was very laid-back about my random offer of help, but did offer to buy me a drink as a thank you. I didn’t think Leon would be someone I’d want to get involved with seriously. He was far too intense, and I couldn’t imagine laughing with him until my sides ached. He was, however, precisely the kind of man I’d had in mind when originally crafting the Dream List. My sixteen-year-old self would have found him intimidatingly sexy and mysterious.

My new neighbour might be the perfect person with which to dip my toe back into the dating waters.

‘Actually,’ I said, ‘I’m having a birthday party in our garden tomorrow evening...’

The morning of my thirtieth birthday, I indulged myself with a full two minutes of freaking out about the fact that I'd thought it would be a good idea to invite a load of people to my house all at the same time, followed by another five feeling weird and a bit forlorn about waking up alone with no one to say 'happy birthday', give me a hug or make me a cup of tea.

I then proceeded to spend a full hour celebrating waking up in my own house, eating exactly what I wanted for breakfast while wearing my most comfortable pyjamas and being able to please myself rather than putting all my energy into ensuring that my mother felt appropriately appreciated for all the (unasked for and unwanted) effort she'd have put into creating the kind of birthday that she would enjoy.

I remembered her offer to throw me the party off the Dream List – vodka jelly and Harry Potter – and I shuddered even as I breathed a sigh of delicious satisfaction that today was going to be just the way I wanted it.

And it was. I walked Nesbit to our favourite stream and back, and then helped Ebenezer hang fairy lights and weave ivy across the open-sided gazebo he'd spent the past few days constructing, as

well as twining lights around tree trunks and in between branches. He'd also planted autumn flowers in various-sized pots and distributed them around the patio.

At lunchtime, a hire company delivered trestle tables and chairs to seat thirty, along with glasses and crockery. Steph arrived shortly afterwards to help me decorate the tables in long rows with jam-jar lanterns, tiny bouquets of wildflowers and the brightly coloured runners that Aunty Linda had sewn for me.

We set up a drinks table a safe distance from Drew's barbecue (which he and Nicky had volunteered to man) and pegged down a cheap offcut of vinyl flooring to serve as a makeshift dance floor. That left the food. After much deliberation, I'd gone for the easiest option I could think of. This included placing a mammoth order at Hatherstone farm shop for meat, salad and bread, which I would supplement with nibbles, sides, sauces and other items to create a build-your-own hot dog and burger bar. All the extras were arriving as part of a supermarket delivery later that afternoon, along with the drinks.

It was nearly five when we returned with the farm shop order. I was already starting to stress because I felt like I had a million things still to do, and the guests were due to arrive at seven – one of whom would be my mother.

But that was nothing compared to the lightning bolt of panic that hit me when I realised Nesbit was gone.

I'd left him in the garden – Ebenezer had promised to be around tidying up the flower beds and checking no stray weeds had dared plant themselves in the garden on my big day. Besides, the garden was fully enclosed. When he failed to come bounding up to greet me as we arrived back, my first thought was that he'd been stolen. What

a stupid, thoughtless thing to do – leaving a beautiful, friendly dog outside where anyone could take him.

‘He’s probably feeling disconcerted by all the strange things in the garden and found a quiet place to hide,’ Steph said, her face creased with worry.

‘I’m carrying fifty sausages, Steph. If he was anywhere within sniffing distance he’d be here trying to convince me that he deserves at least one of them.’

I left the cool boxes on the barbecue table and went to look at the gate, which as usual was latched closed but unlocked.

‘He couldn’t have run out and closed the gate behind him.’ I ran over to Ebenezer’s cottage, where he confirmed that he’d been napping, and not seen Nesbit since we left.

‘Someone’s taken my dog.’ I collapsed onto one of the chairs, my voice rising in panic and fury. ‘It’s my thirtieth birthday and someone’s stolen my dog!’

‘Call Sam,’ Steph instructed. ‘He’ll know how to handle this.’

I’m not sure I managed one full breath in the next hour and a half.

Sam arrived on my doorstep less than ten minutes after I’d called him, my blood thundering even as my heart sat like a lump of ice in my chest. While Steph called the police, who were pleasant and helpful but not hopeful, Sam set about using Nesbit’s blanket and his dog-whispering magic to convey to Scout and Willow that we needed to find their spaniel friend.

‘Whoever took him isn’t going to have just walked him through the forest!’ I said, despite being willing to follow those dogs to the ends of the earth if it meant the tiniest chance of finding Nesbit.

‘Maybe not, but they must have entered your garden via the forest, and pretending to be a weekend dog walker is in some ways a brilliant getaway disguise.’

The other rangers would be on the lookout for a chocolate-coloured spaniel, stopping vehicles as they left the main car park and questioning anyone appearing suspicious. In the meantime, Steph was going to stay at the cottage and let the party guests know what was happening, while Sam and I followed the only lead we had.

For a long, frantic hour we followed the collies as they pressed on, keeping to the smaller, more overgrown trails, noses to the ground, only stopping every few minutes to allow Sam and I to catch up with them.

My head was clogged with terrified questions but I was too breathless to express any of them. I was slowing the search party down enough already.

How can we be sure this is a fresh scent?

How will we ever catch up with the thief?

More importantly – what will we do if we catch up with them?

Does Sam think this is going to work, or is he chasing after his dogs through the woods to humour me?

In the end, I shut off the questions and just concentrated on putting one exhausted foot in front of the other.

And then, Scout and Willow suddenly accelerated, sprinting off to the side through the undergrowth. For a despairing moment I thought they must have gone after a squirrel, but then we heard several joyous barks, followed by more barks in return.

Barks that made me ignore the stitch in my chest and run as fast as I could towards the sound, screaming my dog's name.

Emerging endless seconds later into a tiny clearing, I found Nesbit spinning in a jubilant circle with his rescuers.

While I slipped on his lead, fed him a chunk of cheese and then sat in the dirt squeezing him against my chest while he wriggled about trying to get back to his friends, Sam searched the clearing.

‘There’s no sign of anyone.’

‘Do you think whoever took him changed their mind and let him go? Or did you manage to escape and were on your way home?’ I asked my dog, giving the fur behind his ears a good rub as he looked at me, tongue lolling.

‘Or someone left the gate open and he got out himself,’ Sam said, shrugging. ‘Ebenezer could have seen it open and closed the latch without thinking.’

‘Leon could have left it open,’ I mused. ‘I didn’t think to tell him that the gate needs to be kept closed.’

‘Leon?’

I felt an uncomfortable prickle that was completely unnecessary.

‘The new neighbour. He moved in yesterday.’

‘Oh?’ Sam was staring at me with a strange look on his face.

‘Yep.’

‘What’s he like?’

‘We only had a brief conversation. He’s a teacher at Brooksby Academy. He seemed okay.’

‘Just him? No partner? Kids?’

‘No.’ I stood up, concentrating so hard on brushing the debris from my jeans that I couldn’t possibly answer any more probing questions.

‘Anyway,’ I added, once it felt like the topic had been shelved. ‘I can’t thank you enough for finding Nesbit. It would have completely... well.’ I shrugged, suddenly overcome with emotion as it hit me how close I’d been to losing my housemate. ‘You have dogs – you know.’

‘Just doing my job.’ Sam had gone back to polite ranger mode, before perhaps realising quite how cold he’d sounded. He crouched down to where Nesbit had been tugging at the end of the lead,

causing him to immediately flip over for a belly rub. 'Losing him doesn't bear thinking about. Whatever happened, I'm very relieved he's been found so quickly, and that he seems fine.'

Straightening up, he signalled to the collies that it was time to leave. 'Probably time you got a lock on that gate, though. A bolt at least.'

'Ebenezer will no doubt have already fitted one by the time we get back.'

'And have a word with this Leon bloke about shutting gates. Next time it could be a herd of sheep wandering loose.'

And with that, Sam stalked off. I attempted to follow him, given that I had no idea where we were, but Nesbit dug his heels in and ducked his head, determined to stay.

'Are you serious right now?' I glanced at the time on my phone. 'I've a party starting in thirty minutes.'

I gave a sharp tug on the lead, but after taking a couple of steps forwards, he suddenly turned around, using the momentum to drag me several feet back into the clearing before I could stop him. 'What's going on, boy? Have you found a good smell, is that why you ended up here?'

After another fruitless tug-of-war, where I grew increasingly sweaty and annoyed, and Nesbit began whining and barking with agitation, I gave up, scooping him up and carrying him until we were closer to the cottage than the clearing. Whatever it was, it couldn't be more exciting than the smell of Drew firing up the barbecue.

'Oh thank goodness!' Steph hollered, as we walked through the gate. 'I've asked everyone on the list to push it back to seven thirty, but if anyone arrives before then I can keep them entertained. First things first.' She wrinkled up her nose as she came close enough to take Nesbit's lead. 'Shower.'

‘I’ve changed my mind.’ I slumped onto the bed, lowering my head between my knees in the hope I wouldn’t faint. Then again, if I did faint, maybe it would stop this madness before it started. ‘This was a terrible idea and I don’t want to do it any more. You’ll just have to cancel. Make up an excuse about me being too upset after losing Nesbit or something.’

The doorbell rang for the second time.

‘Too late.’ Steph grinned. ‘Food’s all ready, the garden looks incredible and you look even better. Just keep reminding yourself that in four hours the Dream List will be done, the No-Man Mandate terminated and you can sit back and celebrate completing what you set out to achieve.’

She took hold of my hand and gave it a squeeze. ‘I’m proud of you, Ollie. Now go and show everyone what a fully functional, independent adult you are.’

By eight o’clock my lungs were starting to function again. The garden was full of guests, ranging from the ReadUp volunteers and clients to Pia, who was merrily chatting to my mum and Karina about local theatre. There was an empty space in my garden where Joan and Leanne should have been, but I’d arranged to video call the next

day, and the book Joan had sent me was waiting on my bedside table. I also couldn't help noticing that Sam hadn't arrived. I knew he'd been delayed by the hunt for Nesbit, but it was hard to relax when one eye insisted on flicking between the back gate and the kitchen door, waiting for him to appear, and behind my greetings and smiles and chitchat was a running commentary on why he wasn't here yet and if he was going to come...

As time ticked on, I determinedly dragged my gaze from the gate and scanned the clusters of people laughing and talking and loading up delicious platefuls of food. Yasmin and Trev were teasing Jaxx, who'd insisted on bringing a tub of Nomato, as well as his new girlfriend, who sternly told him it was disgusting and would be put to much better use as fake blood once he'd stopped being delusional and applied for the paramedic course.

Aunty Linda and Uncle Geoff were talking to Ebenezer, who even seemed to manage the odd reply. One table was a sprawling mass of Steph's family, including her mum and Nicky, delighted to have been given the task of keeping Nesbit entertained and out of trouble.

I'd done this. I'd organised and hosted a party, and to my bewildered amazement, it seemed to be going okay. I caught Leon's eye across the garden and he flicked his eyebrows in response, sending a slow roll of heat up from my stomach to my pink cheeks.

Okay, Ollie – time to stop wittering about who isn't here, and start enjoying those who are.

* * *

Before I made it round to Leon, aware that it might be a conversation I wanted to last a while, I stopped to talk to Mum.

'Hi,' I said.

‘Ollie,’ Mum replied, with a tense smile. ‘Happy birthday.’

‘I’m so glad you’re here,’ I said, realising with a rush of relief that this was true. ‘The cushions are stunning.’

The tension eased a fraction. ‘Thank you. Your house is lovely.’

We chatted for a few more minutes about family, Buttonhole friends and other safe topics of conversation before she stopped, suddenly, mid-sentence. ‘Olivia. I don’t want to keep you from your friends. It’s very nice to see you. I have missed you, and I’m... I’m sorry. But maybe we can catch up properly another time?’

I don’t want to keep you from your friends.

My mouth must have dropped open. Without thinking, I threw my arms around Mum and pulled her in for a hug. I may have hung on there for most of the evening, except that she patted my back and said, ‘Off you go, now, go and enjoy yourself. I’ll still be here.’

‘Thank you.’ Sometimes two words can convey more than a whole conversation. ‘Oh, and Mum? Back in February you bought two tickets for the outdoor theatre. *Much Ado About Nothing*. If you’ve asked someone else now, Karina or another friend, that’s totally fine, I understand. But if not... I’d love to go with you.’

It was Mum’s turn to let her jaw dangle. ‘Yes. I mean no! I mean, I’ve not asked anybody else.’ She paused, swallowed, gave one sharp nod. ‘That would be very nice. I’ll message you in the week with the details.’

Turning to go, I glimpsed Irene, standing stiffly under the gazebo alone.

‘Would you come and say hello to someone for me?’

* * *

Introductions made, a few more hellos and happy birthdays later, dusk was approaching as I wound my way to where Leon stood by the drinks table.

‘Hi, so pleased you could make it,’ I said, trying to sound cool and flirty but coming across like a nursery teacher greeting her class.

‘Well,’ he pulled a face, ‘I wasn’t sure if I could be bothered to come all this way, but then, you know, free food. Here.’ He held out a glass containing a swirl of pink, a sprig of mint floating amongst the crushed ice.

‘What’s this?’

‘I call it “The Olivia”.’

I took the glass, not sure whether to cringe or accept the compliment before noticing the gleam of humour in his eyes. ‘It’s a pink negroni. Legacy of a misspent summer as a cocktail waiter in Ibiza.’

‘Well,’ I said, taking a sip while breathing a sigh of relief, ‘It’s lovely. Thank you.’

‘In that case I count the summer totally worth it. *Salut.*’ He met my gaze over the rim of our glasses, and I felt a distinct flutter in my stomach. I resisted the urge to check the time, but by my reckoning I had about three hours left of the No-Man Mandate. Whatever time the party finished, I was declaring the Dream List complete on the stroke of midnight.

‘You look lovely, by the way,’ Leon added, and I accepted the compliment with a gracious nod, even as my face turned scarlet. It had been another challenge, deciding what to wear without any help from Steph, but I had no regrets about choosing a navy-blue dress that skimmed my curves and managed to be both dressy and comfortable whilst also feeling a teensy bit sexy, which was the perfect amount of sexy for me.

‘Hey.’

All of a sudden, a shadow loomed across what was hopefully becoming a promising conversation.

I turned around to see Sam, his face a bland mask that looked as though it might disintegrate if he attempted one of his usual friendly smiles.

‘Sam, hi!’ I chirruped, massively overcompensating for his lack of warmth. ‘You made it! That’s amazing!’ I did not sound amazed. More like dazed.

‘You must be Leon,’ Sam said, in a tone that for anyone else would seem reasonable, but for Sam was verging on frosty.

‘Yeah, hi. Nice to meet you. So, Ollie’s been talking about me?’ While addressing Sam, Leon kept his eyes directly on me.

‘Sam’s a forest ranger,’ I said, speaking about three times faster than normal. ‘He found Nesbit for me this afternoon.’

‘Someone must have left the garden gate open,’ Sam added, no longer bothering to hide his frown. ‘It’s vital to familiarise yourself with the basic countryside code before moving to the edge of a country park.’

Ah. That explained it. Sam blamed Leon for leaving the gate open.

Leon finally switched to face Sam. ‘I grew up on a cattle farm. I’m aware of the dangers of open gates as well as dogs running loose. I hadn’t even realised there was a back gate.’

‘Oh, I’m sure Sam didn’t mean to imply it was you,’ I gabbled.

‘Worth making sure,’ Sam said, before we all fell into an uncomfortable silence.

Sam took a long swig of his beer. ‘So, grew up on a farm. Tell us something else about yourself, Leon. Married? Girlfriend? Boyfriend?’

I turned to him in surprise. Sam had already asked me that. He might not have bothered listening to my answer at the time, but that didn't explain why he was bothered enough to ask again. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was jealous.

Leon looked back to me and said, 'No. I'm very single.'

'Really?' Sam drained his bottle. 'Happily single, or looking for someone?'

Leon leant back against the table, adjusting his stance as if amused rather than intimidated by this interrogation. 'Happily single. Not looking for someone, but hopeful that I might have found her.'

It was then that I realised how in changing position, he had moved to align himself nearer to me.

What the hell is going on here?

I glanced back at Sam, mentally pleading with him to stop being a jerk and start acting like Sam again. Before the conversation could get even more awkward, from somewhere out of sight came the announcement: 'Ladies, gentlemen and most of all, Ollie Tennyson! You are about to witness the greatest show in Bigley, if not the universe! Scream, shout, stomp your feet and shake your booties as we welcome to the stage the awesome, the awe-inspiring... FREA-K THREE-K!'

And while Yasmin, Trev and Jaxx hooted and hollered, and Irene stuck two fingers in her mouth and produced an ear-splitting whistle as the rest of us offered a decorous clap, Kyle, Kyron and Kylo launched themselves over the back hedge and onto the dance floor.

Once the first dance was over, and the guests were calling for an encore, I sidled around to where I'd just spotted Sam slipping into the kitchen.

'Sam, wait,' I hissed, causing him to stop in the far doorway and turn to face me. After an awkward moment where I waited for him to

speaking, I carried on. 'What was that about with Leon?'

'What do you mean?'

Okay, I'd had two cocktails and a glass of Prosecco but I wasn't imagining things. 'You were rude to him.'

'Just making small talk.'

'While I've clearly done something to spoil our friendship, like – I don't know – saying I don't want to engage in some casual fling with you, that doesn't make it okay to act like a caveman in front of every man who talks to me.'

'Talks to you? He was practically drooling. If I'd not intervened you'd have had no chance at sticking to your man-free plan.'

'I think I could have held him off for a couple more hours,' I snapped, tears pricking at the backs of my eyes.

'What?' Sam frowned.

'This is the last item on the Dream List. As of midnight I can date, kiss, do whatever I like with whoever I like.'

There was a stony silence. Sam was completely still.

'And he's the person you've been waiting for?'

'What's it to you if he is?'

Sam rolled his eyes. I felt a giant urge to kick him in the shin. 'He's a sleaze. That comment about how he's hoping he's already found someone, five minutes after he's met you.' He shook his head in contempt. 'I can promise you he's *not* interested in the kind of relationship you've been dreaming of.'

'Well, I'm so pleased you were here to work that out in the two minutes you stood there and glowered at him!' I said, grateful that the Frea-K Three-K were building to a loud enough crescendo that no one would hear me on the brink of yelling. 'Equally, how wonderful that you seem to know the exact kind of relationship I want. Please, do enlighten me.'

'You said yourself that you're not looking for anything casual.' Sam's voice had grown quieter now, his eyes boring into mine.

'Maybe I changed my mind,' I flung back at him, my own words softening in line with his. 'Maybe I just didn't want anything casual with you.'

Sam jerked back as though I'd slapped him. He froze there for a long second, before regaining his composure. 'Okay, well, I'm sorry for interfering. I was trying to be a good friend. Trying to protect you from a lecherous creep who you'll be stuck living next door to once you've realised he's nowhere near good enough for you.'

'Okay, well, apology accepted!' I said, almost choking on my unshed tears. 'Maybe next time you want to be my friend, try harder! Try letting me enjoy my first ever party, rather than ruining it!'

At that, I turned and clattered back into the garden just in time to see the Frea-K Three-K's human pyramid topple into a holly bush. When I glanced back into the kitchen, Sam had gone.

Good. I was fuming with him. If I wanted something casual with my new sexy neighbour on my birthday, that was none of his damn business. It was my party!

Only before I could get back to it, Steph came and grabbed me. 'Ollie, you need to come with me.'

'I don't want to come with you, I want to enjoy my party.'

Acting as though I'd not even spoken, Steph dragged me back into the kitchen. There in the doorway to the hall was a sight that sobered me up instantly.

Leanne clutched at her jacket, her face contorted in fear and panic. 'Ollie, tell me she's here!'

'What?'

'Joan. She's run away. Please tell me she's turned up here for a birthday surprise.'

It took a few minutes for Leanne and Peter, who'd been finding somewhere to park clear of the partygoers' cars, to explain. Joan was supposed to be at a sleepover with a girl from her school, but when Leanne called round to drop off a forgotten toothbrush, the girl's parent said that Joan had cancelled.

'We got straight in the car and came here. I've been calling you every ten minutes since we left.'

'My phone is in here. I've been outside.'

'We tried Pia, a couple of my other old clients, but no one answered. I didn't want anyone else to know what was happening.'

When we asked Leanne if she'd called the police, she had the same excuse. 'If I'd called the police, they'd have involved social services, and I can't bear to relive that nightmare unless I have to. I felt sure she'd be here.' Leanne's face fell. 'Where else would she be?'

And then it clicked.

'Nesbit went missing. We couldn't figure out how he'd escaped. When we found him, he was acting strange, like there was something in the undergrowth. I had to carry him away.'

Leanne and Peter stood up. 'Where?'

'Wait here, thirty seconds. If we're going out there, we need to know what we're looking for.'

A minute later I confirmed that my camping gear was missing. 'I never took the kitchen door key back.'

Five minutes after that, Leanne had called the police while Steph organised the limited number of party guests who were sober and knew the forest well enough to be relatively safe out there at night into a search party.

'Where's Sam?' she asked me, as Ebenezer handed out party lanterns to supplement the limited number of torches. 'He should be

doing this, not me.'

'I'll try him again.' I'd already called three times, but he'd not answered. This time I left a message and sent a text for good measure. Someone was calling the out-of-hours number for the forest park, but no one would be more dedicated or more skilled at locating Joan than Sam.

As the party broke up into those who were staying and those who were joining the search, the first drops of rain began to fall. It was fully dark now, and the temperature had dropped as the clouds rolled in, reminding us that it was now autumn, and before the night was over there could well be a frost on the ground.

'She'll be fine in the tent, with the sleeping bag,' I tried to reassure Leanne, but my own heart felt like it had frozen solid in my chest.

I swapped into thick leggings, a hoodie and raincoat, grabbed one of the remaining lanterns and slipped on Nesbit's lead.

'Who are you pairing up with?' Steph asked, glancing at the half-empty garden.

'Nesbit.'

'Not happening.'

I had a look at the people who were left. Steph's brothers had paired up with Bigley residents, and Drew was dropping her mum home. No one else was fit enough to keep up with me. I was fully intending on running with my dog until we either found Joan or collapsed with exhaustion. Before I could argue any further, Irene appeared at my shoulder.

'I'll come with you.'

'Irene, I'm going to be running. I don't want you holding me back.'

'Oh? Running quicker than twenty-six miles in five hours and thirty-one minutes? Because that was my latest marathon time, and

since then I've only got faster.'

I handed her a torch and we sprinted out the gate.

I took Nesbit straight back to where I'd found him earlier that day. If Joan was intending on hiding from us, then she'd have moved on by now, but it would hopefully be enough for Nesbit to remember that his best friend was here, and pick up her scent again.

I'd thought the hour or so that Sam and I had spent hunting my dog had been frightening. This was a living hell. Pushing through the freezing wet undergrowth, slipping and squelching as what had been dusty paths turned to a mudslide and the rain dripped off our noses.

I tried not to picture Joan, alone, cold and scared as her dreams of living free in the forest became a brutal reality. Instead I kept my head lowered against the stinging rain, swung the torch in a calculated arc to avoid missing any signs of human life, and thundered down the forest paths, even as my blood thundered through my veins.

Once we reached the clearing, I tried Sam again. Again, no answer, but I had next to no reception and if he was on his way, the call might not have got through. I let Nesbit sniff around and then as soon as he caught a scent that he wanted to follow, we were off again.

More endless minutes of pushing through brambles and nettles, losing our footing on loose tree roots and stumbling in the darkness as the rain began to seep through our clothing and numb our freezing hands. I was beyond grateful to have Irene's sensible shoes plodding right behind me, her silence somehow more reassuring than if she'd been trying to say something to make me feel better.

The twisting paths left me completely disorientated. In the darkness it was impossible to tell if I'd been in this section of the forest before. Irene eventually spoke, urging me to rest for a few

minutes to catch my breath and my bearings, but I couldn't ignore the compulsion to keep going until I knew Joan was safe.

Eventually, we had the reaction we'd been praying for. Nesbit started jerking at the end of the lead, barking and whining as he darted towards a sharp slope. Feet scrabbling for purchase on the carpet of wet leaves, I careened behind him, shouting Joan's name.

Just as my torch picked up the tent in the hollow below us, the lead snagged on a low branch and sent me sprawling into the dirt, tumbling down the rest of the incline while Nesbit broke free from my grip. I landed in a crumpled heap right in front of the tent entrance.

Every scratch and bruise dissolved into nothing when I saw the pale face peeking out and a scared, cold eleven-year-old collapsed into my arms, her dog smothering her in kisses.

‘What’s Irene doing here?’ Joan asked, once she’d prised herself out of my hug.

‘Looking for you,’ I replied, adjusting my position to try to ease the stabbing pain in my ankle. ‘Lots of people are.’

‘Oh.’ Joan pushed her mouth to one side of her face, eyes lowered. ‘Is Mum here?’

‘She’s at the cottage with Grandad. It was very hard for her not to come looking, but she knew she couldn’t get very far.’

‘Everyone is very, very worried,’ Irene added.

Joan swiped at the tears now mingling with the rain on her face. ‘They were supposed to think I was at a sleepover.’

‘This evening. What about tomorrow, and the day after that? Never mind you took Nesbit. I thought someone had stolen him.’ I kept my voice gentle as it was clear that the reality of what she’d done was starting to sink in.

Covering her face with both hands, she dissolved into hoarse sobs, only pausing to wail, ‘I want my Mum!’

‘Come on then, let’s get you home. Grab what you need for tonight; we can fetch the rest in the morning.’

By the time Joan re-emerged from the tent with her rucksack, it was clear that getting her home was not going to be that simple. I'd twisted my ankle quite badly, and even if I'd been strong enough to hobble a few steps, there was no way it would bear my weight all the way back. Neither Irene nor I had any signal on our phones, which was common in the forest hollows, and we had no idea how close we were to a main path, or anything else.

'I'll retrace our steps until my phone picks up reception again, then let people know Joan is safe but we need help.' Irene looked at Joan thoughtfully. 'I don't know if it's best for you to come with me, or stay in the tent so at least you're warm and dry.'

'I'm staying with Ollie.' Joan grabbed my arm with both hands. 'And Nesbit. We can't leave her here unable to walk! What if the Beast of Bigley finds her?'

'It might be best for her to wait with me. For all we know there's a main road on the other side of that hill, and she can get a lift back in a car rather than trekking for miles in the wet.' I looked at Irene, soaked to the skin and shivering with fatigue as much as the cold. I didn't add what I was thinking, that she could easily end up trailing around in circles out here; it was so difficult to maintain any sense of direction in the dark.

'Are you sure about going?' I asked, not sure how I wanted her to answer. 'You could stay with us in the tent until it's light, then make much faster progress.'

'And leave that poor girl's mother out of her mind with worry?' Irene shook her head determinedly. 'No. It's time for the Library Lady to have a real-life adventure. You two stay safe, and I'll see you soon.'

'Who'd have thought that Irene Jenkins would turn out to be a hero?' Joan asked, as we watched her disappear into the night.

‘Honestly, not many heroes wear capes or have huge muscles,’ I replied. ‘Most are ordinary people who simply have the courage to do the right thing when it needs to be done.’

‘I’m sorry I ruined your birthday, Ollie,’ Joan whispered later, her face buried under her arm.

‘Right now I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be,’ I whispered back, patting her shoulder.

She snorted. ‘Well, that’s clearly not true.’

‘Okay. I can’t think of anyone I’d rather be *with*.’ I waited a beat before adding, ‘And at least you’ve made it memorable.’

* * *

At some point in the seemingly endless night, as Joan and I huddled under my sleeping bag, trying not to imagine what awful fate might have beset Irene, the torch started to flicker.

Then, just as it gave one final angry buzz before abruptly switching off, Nesbit began scrabbling at the tent door. Clambering out from under the sleeping bag, I trusted in his wagging tail and manoeuvred around to unzip the tent.

Two black noses pushed their way in to greet Nesbit with a gentle whuffle. Behind them, the light of a professional forest ranger’s torch blazed through the darkness.

I’d never seen Sam look so grim. Rain dripped off the hood of his jacket, and blood trickled down one cheek from a jagged scratch. With a few curt sentences he’d established the situation and taken control, scooping up Joan with a promise that a service truck would be waiting a quarter of a mile away, along with two colleagues.

I felt awash with panic at the thought of being left alone, but when Sam instructed Scout to stay, it helped me quash the urge to wrap

my arms around his legs so he was either forced to stay too, or drag me with him.

'Have you heard from Irene?' I asked, just as he turned to go, Nesbit and Willow at his heel.

'Not yet, but we'll find her.'

Crap. I willed myself to keep it together. The last thing any of us needed right then was me falling apart. Offering what I hoped was a reassuring smile, I gave Sam a nod to indicate that it was fine for him to leave.

I was in a fretful doze when Scout's ears pricked to attention, already pulling myself into a sitting position and tumbling out the tent the second Sam unzipped the door. Holding my arms steady, his eyes roamed my face.

'Okay?'

'Yes. Yes, I'm okay. But oh my goodness, I'm so happy you came back.'

Sam pulled me into his chest, strong arms wrapping tightly around me. I felt him press a kiss against my forehead where my hood had slipped back. Nestling into his solid warmth, I would have smiled if I had the energy. I'd got a birthday kiss after all, and it was more wonderful than anything I could have imagined.

* * *

It was just after one when Sam's truck pulled up by End Cottage. It turned out that time passes much slower than it seems while crashing through a forest in the dark, or hiding all alone in a tent. Irene was fine, wrapped in a blanket, sipping her second hot tea with a generous tot of whisky, and there were enough of the other guests

still there that in the light of a successful search, it almost recreated the party atmosphere.

I asked if everyone could stay while I quickly changed. It was enough to set me off crying again, finding them all squeezed into the living room – my neighbours and friends. My family.

After offering a whole-hearted thanks to everyone, especially Irene and Sam, I dried my eyes, blew my nose and got straight to the point, given the late hour and the exhaustion seeping into my battered bones.

‘I had a speech all planned for this evening. I promise to keep it quick, but if you can indulge me for a few more minutes, I wanted to finish off a momentous four months by telling you what this evening was all about. It was all about this.’ I lifted up the Dream List in all its ticked-off glory. ‘When I was sixteen years old, I made a list of hopes and dreams for the future. Or rather, for a very specific future that included a Dream Man. A man I then spent thirteen years waiting to show up, so those dreams could come true. Despite my devastatingly honest best friend believing that the list was as daft as it was boring, she helped me realise that I didn’t need someone else to make my dreams happen. In fact, waiting for this elusive Dream Man was only stopping me from stepping into the kind of life that I wanted. So, I decided to tackle the Dream List on my own. And this evening, I completed it. You might agree with Steph that it’s a pretty pathetic list.’

‘I never said pathetic!’ Steph called out.

‘Okay, a not-so-wild-and-adventurous list, then. But to me, this has been the biggest adventure. Learning what matters most to me, when it comes down to it. Which is creating a safe, welcoming place to call home, spending time with people I love, knowing who I am and what I like, and making time for that. Helping people by sharing

my skills and letting them reciprocate that kindness. Having the courage to step out of my comfort zone, even if that is just the other side of the hedge. I don't want to travel the world having fantastical experiences. I want my adventures to be right here, to put down roots and build something solid that will last. Is there a bigger risk than choosing to be yourself, however boring or peculiar that might be, and allowing other people to know that person, while committing to loving them for the long haul?

'This summer has taught me that I can do it – I can stand on my own two feet and build a life that I'm proud of. But it's also taught me that I don't want to do it alone. That the best thing about life is when we share our dreams and the adventures that are making them come true. So, here's to a whole new life of adventures, and the people I'll get to share them with, hopefully including all of you. Thank you so much for still being here at stupid o'clock in the morning. The rain has stopped, so if you don't mind I'm going to go outside and burn this list now.'

I could still hear them clapping and cheering as I struck the match.

* * *

Once the other guests had left, Leanne came outside. She pulled a chair up beside mine, reaching out and taking my hand.

'Is she asleep?'

'In the spare bed. *Her* bed as she calls it. Dad's crashing at Pia's. The worst of it is, we'd already decided to come back.'

'What?' I twisted round to face her, aware my knuckles were white where they gripped her hand.

‘It was obvious what living there was doing to her. I tried pretending that in time she’d adjust. But it was unbearable to see the life being crushed out of her. Like you said, being true to ourselves is too important. Joan couldn’t be herself there. It was like she predicted, a wild rabbit trapped in a cage. I didn’t know what to do. Trying to get through each day is all I can handle at the moment. Then Mum and Dad said they couldn’t stand it either. They’ve put an offer in on a house with a granny-flat on the other side of the village. We were waiting for it to be accepted before we told Joan, but if this doesn’t go through, we’ll find another one. I still have no idea what the future holds for us. But I know it’s here.’

‘This is turning out to be the best birthday I’ve ever had. Also the worst. But this more than makes up for it. I’m so glad you’re moving back.’ I shifted over to give her a hug. ‘And I mean you.’ I sniffed. ‘As well as Joan.’

‘I haven’t forgotten that I still owe you a good house clean.’

I laughed. ‘What other possible reason would there be for me wishing you were back in Bigley?’

The worst of the mess had been cleaned up while I was out looking for Joan. Ebenezer had helped me roll up the dance floor and stack the remaining hire chairs, insisting that it was only to protect his lawn, before he'd shuffled back to Middle Cottage. I was now alone in my beautiful, hand-crafted garden chair, a glass of flat Prosecco in hand and the thick blanket that Aunty Linda had crocheted for my birthday tucked around my knees.

'Is it okay if I join you?'

Sam's voice was husky with tiredness. It still managed to generate a shiver of attraction.

I used my foot to push out the nearest chair in invitation.

'I thought I was the only one left awake.'

Sam picked up an empty glass from the stack waiting to be collected in the morning. I offered him my Prosecco bottle, and he sloshed out the remains before sinking into the chair. 'I wondered if you might need help tidying up.'

'I think you've helped enough for one night.' We sat and surveyed the garden for a moment. 'I know you don't want to hear this again, but I need to say it...'

Sam visibly braced himself. 'Are you going to shout at me for acting like a total prick at your party?'

I shook my head, a smile tweaking the corner of my mouth. 'I was going to say thank you for lugging my dead weight a quarter of a mile through the pouring rain.'

'The rain had stopped by then.'

'Oh, well, that makes all the difference. No biggie.'

I met Sam's eyes in the darkness, the light from the remaining lanterns sending shadows flickering across the contours of his features. Despite the chill of the night, a heat burnt where his gaze held mine. I hadn't noticed that the rain had stopped when he carried me, because he'd opened his jacket, so that I was pressed up tight against his jumper, my face nestled in the crook of his neck. Feeling the warmth of his chest, I had felt utterly secure in his arms.

'I am so sorry. For ruining your party.'

I smiled.

'I forgive you,' I said. 'Although I am wondering if we're still friends. Not that I don't want to be,' I added hastily, when Sam started to protest. 'But ever since we danced, and then I said that I only want to be friends, you've acted as if you *don't* want to be. It made me question whether you were only ever interested in more, and now you don't think there's any point in us hanging out together.'

Sam was silent for a long time. A prickle of fear slid slowly down my back, as I speculated on what could possibly be so awful that it was taking him this long to come out with it.

'You're right,' he said abruptly, causing my heart to plummet. 'I don't want to be friends with you.' He stopped, running an agitated hand through his hair. 'The more time we've spent together, the more I've realised that I *can't* be friends with you.'

'Right.'

Well. This was not the happy ending to my birthday I'd been hoping for. Was it too late to knock on Leon's door?

'I also...' He cleared his throat. I almost interrupted to tell him that I really didn't need to hear the 'also', but he carried on before I could.

'To be clear, I also never wanted a – how did you put it? – a *casual fling* with you.'

Okay. Good to know.

Sam shuffled his chair around so that he was facing me, and it was about the most excruciating moment of my life. If my ankle hadn't been so sore, I'd have kicked back the chair and scuttled inside, never to emerge again.

'My feelings for you couldn't be more serious.'

What?

What?!

'As soon as you told me about that list, I wanted to be the person who shared your dreams with you. Made your dreams come true. I tried to pretend we could just be friends, but for the first time in years I've started thinking about dreams of my own. To be honest, I've driven myself half-crazy dreaming about you. I was irrationally fuming that I'd not met you in time, so you'd ended up starting the thing without me. In the end I didn't say anything, not because I was unsure if I wanted to be with you. I held back because I was scared that I couldn't be the Dream Man you deserved. The one you wanted. Last time I tried to be the answer to someone's dreams, I ended up destroying everything. Plus...' He gave a rueful smile. 'That No-Man Mandate. I was trying to be respectful, until you looked up at me when we were dancing and all my good intentions were obliterated.'

He rolled his eyes before continuing. 'Anyway. Once I'd stopped being such a self-pitying, love-struck coward, I realised that you

weren't like Carrie. Or my dad. You weren't going to put all your dreams in my hands. To expect me to make everything perfect. You meant it when you said that you don't need a partner to be happy. But... you also said that you wanted someone to share your life with. I came to the party with the intention of asking whether you might consider seeing if that could be me.'

'And then you found me flirting with Leon.'

He sighed. 'I couldn't think straight, I was so jealous, Ollie. If you're looking for serious, for all-in, committed, building a life together, wildly in love as long as we both shall live, I'm your man. Or, at least, I would very much like the opportunity to try.'

'Wow.'

'And, if I'm not mistaken... ' Sam made a big show of checking his super-cool ranger watch. 'The No-Man Mandate ended nearly two hours ago. So, I had a question.'

'Yes,' I breathed, unable to take my eyes off his.

He smiled the smile that sent my heart soaring. 'I haven't asked the question yet.'

'The answer's yes.'

'Are you sure?'

'I don't care what time it is. Until I go to bed it's still my birthday, and I would very much like to celebrate with a non-casual, deeply serious kiss.'

Sam's whole face lit up. He slowly leant towards me in the darkness, pausing once his mouth was a breath away from mine.

'Just to be clear,' he murmured. 'Am I the person that you want to —'

Before he could finish the sentence, I tilted forwards, and softly pressed my lips against his. We lingered there for the sweetest

moment, before he gently pulled away. 'Hmm. That felt a bit casual to me.'

With one fluid movement, he pulled me into his lap, settling back in the chair to ensure we were both comfortable, before kissing me so intently that it hummed through every cell, sent my head spinning. A kiss that woke up parts of me I hadn't known were sleeping. A kiss that contained a thousand promises of love and laughter and a lifetime of kisses to come. It was the kiss I'd been dreaming of since I sat in my bedroom and started a list.

It was the kind of kiss that made a woman believe dreams can come true, after all.

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For Ciara, Joseph and Dominic, who continue to teach me so much about life and love, and never fail to make me laugh.

And for George – how precious to love and be loved just the way we are.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

While ReadUp is a fictional charity, it was inspired by the fantastic work of Read Easy UK. There are an estimated 2.4 million people in the UK either unable or barely able to read. As well as being five times more likely to be unemployed, adults who struggle to read face challenges in all areas of life, for example understanding road signs, household bills, food packaging or basic health information.

Read Easy is an adult literacy charity that provides free, confidential, one-to-one reading coaching to adults. It is changing lives across the country, but unlike my fictional ReadUp, the reading coaches are all volunteers. You can find out more about this amazing organisation, including ways to support them, at readeasy.org.uk, or [@ReadEasyUK](https://twitter.com/ReadEasyUK)

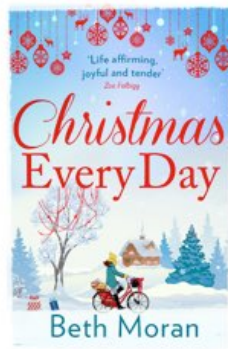
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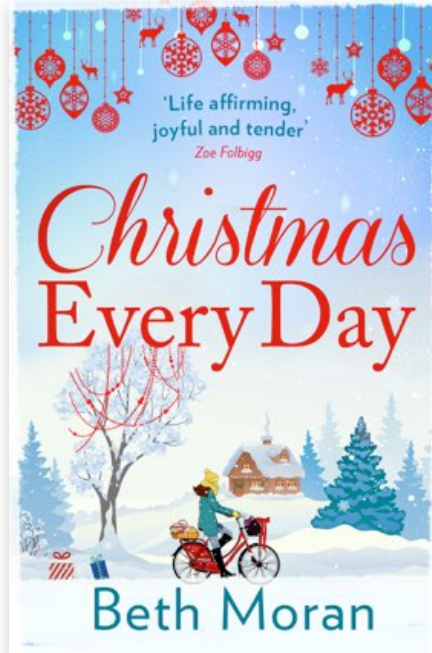
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Prologue

22 December

It was finally here. The highlight of the Dougal and Duff calendar. Everyone would be there, from the lowliest admin assistant to the senior partners. The oak bannisters were draped with ivy, dotted with twinkling red and white fairy lights. The doorway leading into the designated party room was framed with pine branches, a cheeky sprig of mistletoe hanging in the centre. Inside, the room looked even more spectacular than last year. Hundreds of sparkling snowflakes dangled from the wood-panelled ceiling, more fairy lights and greenery adorned every surface. The Christmas tree in the centre of the back wall stood festooned with baubles and ribbons.

Waiting staff slipped between the clusters of office cliques with trays of champagne and crumbly canapés, their black uniforms in sharp contrast to the glittering party dresses and tartan finery. A swing quartet thrummed, but it couldn't beat the buzz of festive gossip. Rumours had been flying that the newest partner, Richard Abernethy, freshly returned from yet another victory in the Paris office, had been dropping hints about an important announcement. And when a locally renowned jeweller delivered a ring-shaped box to Reception that morning, every one of the

sixty-three employees knew within minutes. The only question was who. Nobody had a clue.

That was, except me.

The other PAs assumed I must have some insight to the mystery woman, given that I'd almost unlimited access to his emails and diary. They spent most of the evening trying to badger me into giving them a name. Or at least a list of suspects.

I smoothed down my ridiculously expensive dress, patted my hair, took another fake-nonchalant swig of champagne and said nothing.

Not because of loyalty to my boss. Although that would have been reason enough.

Taut with nerves, heart fluttering, resisting the urge to wash the dryness from my mouth with another drink, I not so surreptitiously watched my secret boyfriend and soon to be fiancé from across the room and wished he'd hurry up and get on with it.

I had always dreaded Christmas. Particularly these last few years when it had simply been another day alone, opening the same gift card sent by my dad and watching someone else's television. Waiting to hear from Richard, despite him telling me that he'd probably not get a moment to call.

But this year – surely I'd be spending it on his family's estate in the Highlands? I had already planned the clothes I would pack, and spent a frantic afternoon searching for the perfect 'last-minute' gifts for his parents and younger brother.

For the first time, in so long that it made my heart ache just thinking about it, I would be spending Christmas with a loving, happy family.

I took a deep breath, smothered my smile and, for the millionth time that day, silently practised my surprised, thrilled and senior-partner's wife worthy 'yes'.

Chapter One

When the house had been described as like something out of a fairy tale, I'd been picturing Snow White's cottage, or a quaint gingerbread house (minus the evil witch, whom I'd left behind in Edinburgh), not a shrunken, grottier version of Sleeping Beauty's derelict outhouse. And, in my storybook, there hadn't been an old pram, two sagging armchairs and a turquoise toilet blocking the driveway.

I peered through the taxi window, trying to kid myself it would look better once I was out of the car. Or it had stopped raining. Or if I took my glasses off. The driver

pulled up in front of a rusted mangle.

'Could you get any closer to the door?' I asked, tugging the zip a bit higher on my jacket.

He swivelled his head to look at me, one eyebrow raised.

'What about parking on the lawn?'

'That ain't a lawn. It's a jungle. I ain't risking my tyres on that.'

I blew out a sigh, and unbuckled the seat belt.

'Fifty pound.

What?' My hand froze halfway to my purse. 'We agreed thirty.'

'That was before the ford, the mud pit and the overgrown branches scratching my paintwork. The car needs a full-on valet and the extra won't even cover it. I've got standards to uphold.'

I cast my eyes around the faded upholstery, scuffed trimmings and air freshener designed as a topless woman.

'You knew the address was on an unnamed road in the middle of a forest and you still said thirty.' I tried to keep the tremble out of my voice. The extra twenty pounds might not pay for a car valet but it would help me not starve for the next couple of weeks.

'I'm the only taxi-driver round 'ere who'll come out this far.' He grinned. The big bad wolf. 'I'm the only taxi full stop. If you want out of 'ere any time soon, best stay in my good books.' He tipped his head towards the house. 'And, trust me, you won't be wanting to 'ang around.

'Are you threatening me?' I did my best to channel some of the experience I'd gained working for sharks who'd sell your own baby back to you, and straightened my shoulders. After enduring a lifetime of being treated like a worthless wimp, this was supposed to be a fresh start. The new, improved, over-it, Jenny.

I opened my purse, and deliberately placed three notes on the plastic ledge between the front and back seats. 'I'm giving you the thirty pounds *you asked for*, and not a penny more.'

He curled up one side of his lip, leant towards me and growled. 'Are you sure about that?'

Letting out a squeak, I unclasped my purse again. 'And a tip! Of course. Here. I'll make it twenty.' Yanking open the door, I tumbled out into the freezing January rain, slipping and sliding round to the car boot. Hauling out my suitcase, followed by a rucksack, I stumbled out of the way just in time to avoid injury, but not a generous splattering of filthy spray from the revving wheels.

Wiping a smear of mud off my glasses with a sodden sleeve, I stared at my new home.

A semi-detached old woodsman's cottage; the grey plaster frontage streaked with grime, slumped chimney and patchy roof confirmed it hadn't worn the years well.

I squelched through the puddles, rucksack on my back, hand-me-down Mulberry suitcase dragging behind, and peered in through the ivy-smothered front window. Rummaging in my jacket pocket for the key, I gave up attempting to make out shapes in the gloom beyond.

'Right. Might as well get it over with. Get out of this rain and put the kettle on.' I wiped the worst of the dirt from the keyhole, congratulating myself for having had the foresight to have the utilities reconnected before I arrived, and forced the key in, slowly wiggling it until it unlocked.

I pushed against the door. Nothing. Not even a rattle.

Turning the key back to the original position, I tried again. As water ran in icy rivulets down my face and up my sleeves, I did everything I could to make the door budge. Pounding, shoulder-barging, kicking, taking a slippery running charge like the cops in films.

After a while, determined not to start crying, I dumped my luggage and precariously stepped along the front of the house to see if I could get around the back. No good. More bushes, the rain dripping off two-inch thorns. I glanced over at the adjoining cottage. There none of the windows were cracked and the garden didn't look as though it had been abandoned by a rag-and-bone man. Hmm. Maybe I could sleep in there instead. Just for tonight. According to my mother, the whole building had lain empty for years. There wasn't much demand for cottages in the middle of nowhere, unless done up as holiday lets, and no one wanted to holiday next door to a scrapheap.

I cautiously moved closer, trying to peek beyond the closed blinds, before looking through the letterbox, but the approaching dusk made it too dark to see. I tramped along a brick path around to the back; here things appeared much the same. A

wooden picnic bench sat forlornly on a patch of weed-riddled gravel about six feet square. Beyond that, my half of the building was nearly hidden where the forest had encroached right up to the house in a twist of branches and brambles. I might be able to squeeze through to the back door. I should at least *attempt* to squeeze through to the back door.

But then again, it would probably rip my jeans, and this was the only pair that fitted. And if I scratched my face, it would be harder to find a job, and then how could I survive here? I probably didn't even have any phone reception, so I couldn't call anyone if I tripped on a stray root and impaled myself on the thorns. I quickly checked my phone (not wondering *even for a second* whether Richard had been trying to send me any grovelling messages admitting it was all a terrible mistake). See! No signal. It would be reckless and foolish to force my way into that tangle of spikes.

I shuddered. Glancing at the shadows looming around me, I imagined the kinds of animals that prowled Sherwood Forest once darkness fell. They'd find my broken body, drawn to fresh meat by the scent of blood leaking from a thousand puncture wounds. I wouldn't stand a chance.

And even if I could call that taxi bloke for help, he probably wouldn't come.

If only there were a dry, empty, nearby dwelling-place for me to take refuge in! Just to get me through the night, until the rain stopped. I stood, hesitant, and pondered whether I had the guts to go for it.

I didn't ponder for long. I was too cold, wet, muddy, hungry and bone-shatteringly tired to care about the law. If I got arrested at least I'd have a dry place to sleep and, hopefully, some breakfast.

I hurried over to the cottage, said a quick prayer and tried the door. Locked. Taking a deep breath, I grabbed a stone and bashed it through the door's frosted window.

Preparing to carefully poke my hand through the hole, I nearly severed my wrist when a pair of arms grabbed me from behind. Pulling me away from the door, the arms wrestled me over to the picnic table and pushed me down face first until my top half lay in the pool of water collecting on the surface.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?' The man held me down with a hand on each shoulder, preventing me from seeing him. Okay, so with my eyes closed and glasses fallen off I wouldn't have been able to anyway, but still. His voice sounded rough, and strong, and mad as hell.

I gasped, sucking in half a mouthful of rainwater from the tabletop, which I proceeded to choke on. As a frankly hideous retching sound emerged from my throat, the man quickly let go. 'Woah. If you're going to throw up, at least do it in the bushes, not on my bench.'

I heaved myself upright, and twisted around, one hand gripping the table, trying to stop my brain racing long enough to catch hold of a useful thought.

'*Your* bench?'

'Yes. *My* bench. *My* broken pane of glass. *My* house. So, to repeat, what are *you* doing here?'

'But nobody lives here,' I managed to rasp. 'The house is abandoned.'

'Does it *look* abandoned?' he asked, his voice getting louder.

'Can't see. Glasses.' I felt around on the table in vain until he grunted in exasperation and bent down, before thrusting the rain-smearred glasses into my hand. I clutched them for a few raggedy breaths, a little scared to put them on and see the face matching that furious voice. It looked as bad as I had feared. Thick, dark eyebrows over eyes black with anger. And behind a bristling beard, a mouth twisted in disgust.

I glanced at the house, fear shoved aside as temper sparked, my constant bodyguard these days. 'Yes. It does. No lights on. All overgrown. No car outside. And I was *told* nobody lived here.'

'And who told you that?' He folded his arms.

'My mother. The previous owner of the other house.'

'The owner died six years ago.'

'Yes. So the house went to her daughter. My mother. And, as of last week, it belongs to me. Hence I have a key.' I pulled the key out of my pocket and waved it at him.

'If you have a key, what are you doing smashing my window?'

'I couldn't get the door open.'

He raised his eyebrows, waiting for more.

'So, I came around the back. But I couldn't get to the door. And it's nearly dark, everything I'm wearing is sopping wet. And the taxi driver stole my money...' I took

a long, deep breath. I would not cry in front of this man. I had vowed never to let a man think I was a pushover again. *Come on, Jenny, buck up.*

‘Tezza’s Taxis?’

I nodded, wiping a raindrop off my nose.

He sighed. ‘The front door won’t open from the outside. I’ll hack a path to the back and you can at least get out of the rain. Call round in the morning and I’ll give you the name of a decent taxi firm before you go.’

‘Go where?’

‘Back to wherever you came from.’

I gaped at him for a moment, vaguely registering that the rain had begun to ease, the background percussion replaced with the slow plop of water dripping off leaves, and the hiss of steam escaping both my ears.

‘I’m not going anywhere. I live here now.’

He looked me up and down. ‘Trust me. You’ll be leaving in the morning. If you last that long.’ He nodded towards a brick outbuilding tucked under an oak tree. ‘I’ll get hacking. But if the rain starts again I’m stopping to board up my window.’

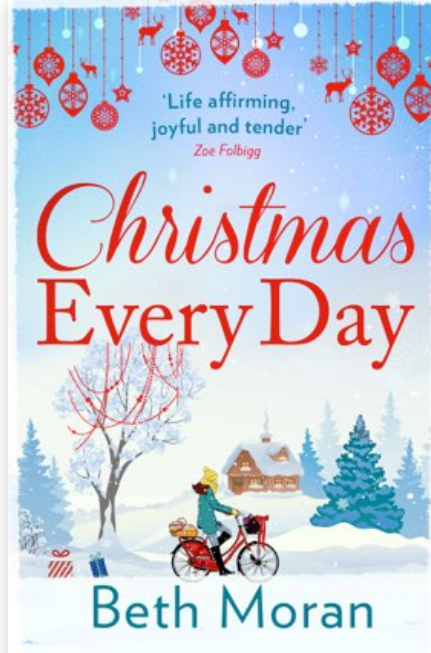
‘Actually, it’s fine. Thank you. I can do my own hacking. I apologise about your window. Do send me the bill. Good day.’

I marched as best I could back around the house, only losing my shoe once in the mud.

‘Okay, Fairy Godmother. I reckon right about now would be a perfect time for you to show up.’ I scanned the woods, struggling to make out anything in the deepening gloom. After a good ten minutes pulling branches aside, stamping them out of the way and ripping my hands to shreds in the process, I found a shed.

It took only a few tries to smash the wood, encircling the lock, to bits using a thick branch and the force of my anger. Nicely warmed up, somewhat exhilarated by my discovery, I stepped inside. Maybe a teensy bit unnerved by my neighbour’s comments about only lasting a night, I decided to put off investigating the house until morning. In front of me appeared to be an excellent place to unroll my sleeping bag and seek a very welcome oblivion.

We hope you enjoyed this exclusive extract. ***Christmas Every Day*** is available to buy now by clicking on the image below:



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Beth Moran is the author of four novels, including the bestselling *Christmas Every Day*. She regularly features on BBC Radio Nottingham and is a trustee of the national women's network Free Range Chicks. She lives on the outskirts of Sherwood Forest.

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