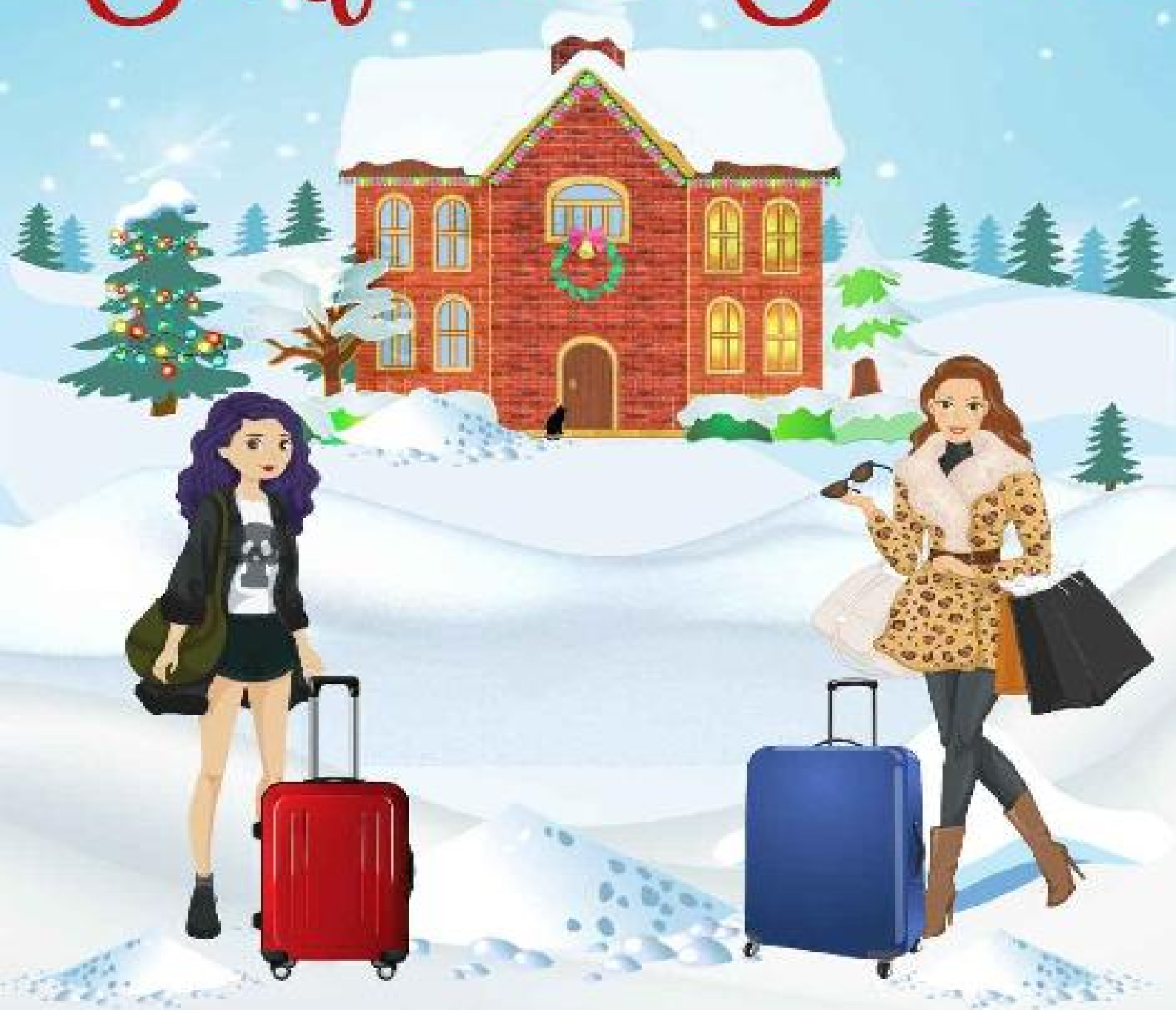


RACHEL GRIFFITHS

A Christmas to Remember
ON
Sunflower Street



A CHRISTMAS TO
REMEMBER ON SUNFLOWER
STREET

A gorgeously festive romance

Sunflower Street

Book 13

Rachel Griffiths



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For my family, with love always. XXX

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A CHRISTMAS TO REMEMBER ON SUNFLOWER STREET

Freelance English tutor Erin Dawlish is heading to her parents' new home on Sunflower Street for a big old-fashioned family Christmas. She's looking forward to spending time with her family and to having a break from her busy life in Bath.

After recently losing his mum, Leo Steele was expecting to spend Christmas alone in London, but his childhood best friend, Paul Dawlish, insists that he joins him and his family.

When Erin and Leo meet after years apart, they get to know each other again as adults and find that they get on well. But they've both loved and lost and carry the scars to prove it.

Can they find a way to heal and move on together so they can make this a Christmas to remember on Sunflower Street?

Chapter 1

Erin

‘Welcome to Snoresville!’ Erin Dawlish’s younger sister, Zara, said when she opened the front door to Erin.

Erin laughed. ‘It can’t be *that* bad.’

‘Don’t you believe it.’ Zara rolled her eyes. ‘Wisteria Hollow is like the most boring village on the planet.’

‘You’re just used to being busy in London.’ Erin picked up her suitcase and carried it over the doorstep. Her twenty-year-old sister was currently studying fashion design in London while Erin lived in Bath where she’d grown up.

‘And I wish I’d stayed there. Trust Mum and Dad to want us all together for a big, old-fashioned family Christmas.’

‘When did you get here?’ Erin asked.

‘This morning. And I’m already bored.’

Erin shook her head. ‘Try to enjoy spending some time together as a family. You know... with Dad having been through a tough few months, we should make the most of having him around.’

Zara nodded. ‘I know. I’ve just been trying not to think about that.’

Erin put her suitcase down and placed a hand on Zara’s arm. ‘Hey... He’s OK now but it should be a lesson to us all that time is precious.’

‘I know.’ Zara sighed then opened her arms and hugged Erin. ‘Anyway, it’s great to see you. I miss you so much.’

‘I miss you too.’

Erin hugged her sister tight. They didn’t see much of each other these days with Zara being at university in London and Erin living in Bath in a house share. As an online English tutor, Erin often worked evenings and weekends, so even though she was self-employed, she didn’t have much flexibility in her working hours.

‘So we have a few weeks together then?’ Zara asked.

‘We do. I’ve signed off for the holidays because not many students want to work over Christmas.’

Zara released Erin then picked up her suitcase. ‘Shall I show you to your room?’

‘Yes, please.’

Erin closed the front door behind her then looked around the large hallway. A Christmas tree stood at the centre of the gleaming wooden floorboards, tiny lights twinkling on its branches and more lights had been wound around the banisters of the wide staircase that led up to a mezzanine landing. Her parents had bought the house on Sunflower Street three months ago then moved in six weeks ago after renovating the property. They’d sold their family home in Bath when her dad had retired following a heart attack six months earlier. Her mum had taken early retirement from her job as a senior midwife, and they’d decided to leave the city and move somewhere quieter with a slower pace of life. Their beautiful family home in Bath had sold for a small fortune so they had no mortgage and would, hopefully, be able to spend more quality time together enjoying village life.

As they climbed the stairs, Erin said, ‘I’ve got to be honest though, I thought Mum and Dad were downsizing.’

Zara giggled. ‘Yeah, me too. I guess this house is smaller than the one in Bath but it’s still bigger than a lot of houses they could have bought.’

‘It’s lovely though,’ Erin said.

‘Wait until you see the kitchen!’ Zara led the way off to the right of the landing and along a corridor. At the end, she opened a door and stood back. ‘Your chamber, Mademoiselle.’

Erin entered the bedroom and gasped. ‘Wow!’

The room was large with a double bed straight in front of her with oak bedside cabinets and large sash windows to either side of the bed. Off to her left was a doorway that led to an ensuite and to the right were fitted wardrobes with mirror doors. Zara put Erin’s suitcase down by the bed then gestured at the window closest to the bathroom. ‘Take a look at the view.’

Erin crossed the room and looked out of the window. ‘Bloody hell! It’s gorgeous.’

‘I know, right? Even if it is a bit too quiet here for my liking.’

Erin gazed out of the window at the large rear garden. There were trees and hedges bordering the perimeter, a large willow tree at the centre, a greenhouse and shed towards the far end of the grass and what looked like a gate that led out to fields. And the fields were magnificent, stretching out for as far as the eye could see. With it being December, it was a winter landscape but even so, it was still beautiful.

‘I can see why Mum and Dad decided to buy here.’

‘I know, right? I guess they wanted peace and quiet and they’ve certainly got it.’

‘How’re you, anyway?’ Erin asked her sister as she turned back to the room.

Zara flopped into the bed and stretched out her arms. ‘I’m OK.’

‘How’s the course?’

‘Amazing. I’m loving it!’

‘I had a feeling you’d go into fashion design because of the way you used to cut up your dolls’ clothes and redesign them.’

Zara had always been interested in designing and it had showed in her dolls' clothes as well as in her colouring books and how she dressed as she got older. While her friends were following trends, Zara liked to create her own outfits by combining items she found in charity shops or ones she made herself with the sewing machine she'd requested for her fourteenth birthday. She was very different to Erin, who'd always been an avid reader and had studied English Literature at university then gone on to do her teacher training before qualifying as an English teacher. That had been followed by four years teaching English in Dubai, a time that she'd enjoyed in some ways but that had also led to heartbreak.

'I'd love to set up my own online shop on Etsy or to open a boutique called *Designed by Zara*.'

'On the way here I saw that there's a small boutique in the village.'

'Dragonfly Dreams?'

'That's the one. I bet they've got some lovely items in there.'

'Fancy going to have a look one day while we're here?' Zara asked.

'Love to!' Erin tilted her head. 'It's very quiet. Where are Mum and Dad?'

'At the supermarket. They didn't have enough wine, apparently.'

'Dad's not even supposed to be drinking much.'

'I know but it's because we're expecting company.'

'Are we now? And who's that?'

'Just Paul and someone he's bringing.'

'What? A lady friend?' Erin sat on the bed next to Zara.

'I think so. And one of his colleagues.'

'For Christmas?' Paul had brought his friends home over the years but not for Christmas.

‘That’s what Mum said.’ Zara yawned. ‘You hungry?’

‘Always!’ Erin laughed.

‘Come on then there’s mince pies in the kitchen. Dad made them earlier.’

‘Yum!’

Erin got up and held out a hand and pulled Zara up and they went downstairs together. Zara might be eight years younger than Erin but they’d always got on well and Erin was looking forward to having some time with her sister over the holidays. As for Paul, she hoped his guests would be all right because she didn’t fancy having to make small talk with anyone stuffy over breakfast.

Chapter 2

Leo

Leo Steele stifled a yawn as he looked around the club. Another evening surrounded by drunk people in a swanky London club was not how he wanted to spend the start of the weekend but what else could he do when his oldest friend asked him to go out?

Paul was meeting his latest girlfriend at the club and apparently, she was bringing her friend to meet Leo. Not that he was interested, not at all, but he didn't want to be rude and he knew Paul was just looking out for him. Leo wished he could be more like Paul, he really did. Paul moved from woman to woman, treating each one like she was the centre of his world and then moving on again when he grew tired. Leo didn't want to be like him in that respect, but he did wish he could wrap his head around dating again. It was just so difficult after what he'd been through. His life had seemed to be on course up until two years ago and then it had exploded, and he'd been left with the fragments of what he'd thought he'd have. After going through so much pain and anguish, he couldn't imagine ever wanting to go through it again. To love and lose was the absolute worst and he didn't know if he'd have the strength to keep going if he had to go through anything similar.

'Here you go.' Paul set a bottle of champagne on the table in front of Leo then handed him a glass.

Leo held the glass out while Paul filled it then he raised it. 'Cheers!'

'You OK, man?' Paul asked as he sat next to Leo.

‘Yeah, you know.’ Leo gave a small nod, not wanting to be a party pooper.

‘It’s OK not to be OK,’ Paul said, turning his body so he was facing Leo. ‘You’ve had a tough time. Losing your mum recently and before that... well... you’ve been through more than most people in the space of two years.’

‘Yeah.’ Leo coughed to clear his throat. ‘Well, more than some but not more than everyone. Lots of people suffer loss.’

‘Don’t downplay what you’ve been through. You’re a stronger man than me. I’d struggle if I’d lost my partner and my mother.’

Leo took a gulp of champagne. He did not want to talk about this now. Not here with all these people around. It was hard enough thinking about it when he was at home, hidden from view, but now... he blinked hard and drank some more champagne then gazed around the club, trying to focus on what people were wearing, what music was playing and what colour the lights above the bar were because they kept changing.

‘Sorry, Leo.’ Paul patted his arm. ‘I know you probably don’t want to think about all of it right now. Not here, anyway. So... Are you still on for coming to Mum and Dad’s for Christmas with me?’

Leo put his glass on the table and folded his hands in his lap. Paul had asked him a few weeks ago if he fancied spending Christmas with him and his family in the Surrey village they’d moved to, and Leo had nodded but evaded answering. However, it seemed that Paul hadn’t forgotten about it.

‘Oh... Uhhh...’

Paul frowned at him. ‘Don’t tell me you forgot?’

‘No. Not forgot, I just didn’t think you were serious because you’d had a few drinks and I thought you were just getting sentimental.’

‘Me? Sentimental?’ Paul laughed. ‘Look, Mum wants you to come. She’s been worried about you. And what else are you

going to do? Sit home alone with a microwave meal and pretend Christmas isn't happening?'

That was exactly what Leo had imagined doing but when Paul said it out loud, it sounded even sadder.

'You *were* going to do that, weren't you?' Paul shook his head. 'No way I can allow that. You're coming home with me.'

'But isn't... uhhh... your lady going with you?' Dammit! What was Paul's latest girlfriend called?

'Angelina?' Paul cocked a brow. 'Yes. Yes, she is, but that doesn't mean you can't come with me too.'

'You don't want me there. I'm not great company right now.'

'I'm sorry, Leo, but I can't take no for an answer. I need to know you're OK and the only way I can do that is by taking you with me. You still have a week before we go so sort everything out in work and then we can head to Wisteria Hollow and have a good old-fashioned family Christmas.'

Leo sighed inwardly. He didn't know how he could refuse when Paul seemed so set on it. Besides which, Leo did like Paul's family and had spent a lot of time at their home when he was growing up. They'd treated him like a member of the family and just because he hadn't seen much of them in recent years, it didn't mean they'd have changed. Also, he knew that Paul's dad had been very unwell a few months back and so it would be good to see him and see how he was. As much as he would have liked to ignore the holidays, he didn't think that was going to be possible, so he'd take a deep breath and go with Paul. In fact, he would plaster on his polite smile and be as helpful as he could. After all, what could possibly be worse than spending Christmas alone thinking about his partner and his mum? At least he'd be busy and distracted by Paul's family.

'I guess I'm coming to Wisteria Hollow with you then,' Leo said, reaching for his glass.

‘That’s my boy!’ Paul tapped his glass against Leo’s then they drank. ‘You wait and see... we’ll have a good Christmas. And if you play your cards right with Angelina’s friend, who knows... you could have something special in your Christmas stocking.’

Leo hid his grimace behind his glass. The only thing he wanted in his stocking this year was some peace of mind and he didn’t know if that was possible, so he’d settle for a change of scenery and some time with his best mate.

Chapter 3

Erin

Erin yawned then shook her head. ‘Excuse me!’

‘Oh darling, you’re exhausted,’ her mum said from the other sofa.

After her parents had come back to their new home, they’d made dinner then the four of them — Erin, her mum, dad and Zara — had eaten at the table in the large dining area of the kitchen. The room had bifold doors that opened out onto the garden, and although they hadn’t opened them because it was too cold and, by that point dark, Erin had enjoyed knowing that just beyond the glass was a gorgeous garden and then those fields that stretched for miles.

‘I am. That delicious dinner and the drive here have finished me off. Plus the log burner makes the lounge so cosy.’

‘It does. Doesn’t it?’ Her mum smiled. ‘I do love this room. Actually, I love this house. I’m so glad we bought it.’

‘Me too,’ her dad said. ‘I think I’ll make a hot chocolate before bed. Anyone else want one?’

‘Yes, please,’ her mum replied.

‘Me too.’ Zara waved a hand. She was lying on the opposite end of the sofa from Erin and had a soft blanket draped over her.

‘Not for me, thanks, Dad. I’m going to head upstairs and hopefully sleep well in the lovely new bed.’

Erin got up then gave Zara a hug before kissing her mum and dad. Her dad hugged her tight then leant back and smiled

at her. 'I'm so glad you came. We're going to have a wonderful Christmas as a family.'

'I agree,' she said. 'What's the plan tomorrow?'

'We thought we might go and get a Christmas tree for the kitchen-diner. Want to come?' He raised his grey eyebrows.

'I'd love to.'

'Excellent!' He kissed her forehead. 'Sleep well, precious girl.'

Erin left the cosy lounge and climbed the stairs. The hallway was cold after the warmth of the lounge but she'd brought her fleecy pyjamas and was looking forward to putting them on and snuggling under the duvet.

In her room, she got changed then went to the ensuite to wash her face and brush her teeth. As she did so, she thought about how well her parents looked. She'd been worried about her dad but seeing him today had been reassuring. After the heart attack, that had been terrifying for them all, her dad had seemed diminished for a while. It had shaken him badly and he'd vowed that if he survived, he'd make some changes. The biggest change had been leaving his job as a police detective. The long hours and stress hadn't done him any favours over the years, and although he'd sworn he'd work until he was at least sixty, the heart attack had made him decide to retire early. Her mum had done the same, retiring early from her job as a midwife, and Erin knew it had been hard for them to leave the jobs they loved, but she'd reminded them both that it should be a case of work to live not live to work. Life was short and precious and therefore it was important to make the most of the time they had.

She dried her face then went through to the bedroom and switched the beside lamp on then turned off the main light. She lifted the covers and slipped between them then moaned with delight at how comfortable it was. She had a feeling that she was going to enjoy her time on Sunflower Street enormously, especially sleeping in this comfortable bed.

Chapter 4

Leo

Leo woke the next morning with a pounding head and a furry mouth. He grimaced as he swallowed. What had he been drinking last night? Champagne then more champagne then shots of something luminous green that tasted as bad as it looked.

Angelina had arrived with her friend, and it had been evident from the way the friend had looked down her nose at him that he wasn't what she'd been expecting. She'd been beautiful, yes, but in that highly polished way a lot of women seemed to be these days with a forehead that didn't move, high cheekbones that he suspected were enhanced with filler, a tiny, pert nose and lips that were so full he sincerely doubted they were natural. But then he found it so hard to tell what was real and what was enhanced and then he often wondered if it mattered anyway. Regardless of how he felt, the friend — whose name he had forgotten already... Sharon? Sade? Shakira? — had made it clear that he wasn't her cup of tea and so he'd been off the hook and rather relieved about it. He'd drunk more alcohol, danced badly and finally shuffled out to get a taxi when he got to the point where he was struggling to stay awake and just wanted a cup of tea and his bed.

But when he got home, he obviously didn't drink enough water and now he felt hungover. Not dreadfully so, but enough that he knew today would involve plenty of water, some serious carbs and an afternoon nap. Saturdays were precious days off and the last thing he wanted to do was to waste that time feeling sorry for himself because his head hurt and his stomach was churning.

During the evening at the club though, he had time to think about Paul's offer to spend Christmas with him and his family and the idea had grown on him. It would be nice to go somewhere different and to escape his empty home for a while. Even if he didn't feel particularly festive, it wouldn't matter because he could help out at Paul's parents' house and he'd at least feel useful. That had to be better than moping around alone, didn't it?

Chapter 5

Erin

Sitting in the back of the car next to her sister, Erin felt like a little girl all over again. Her dad was driving and her mum was sitting in front of her in the passenger seat. The only thing missing, or rather *person* missing, was Paul. When she'd been growing up, they'd gone to get the Christmas tree for the dining room in their old home every year as a family. It had been one of those lovely traditions that Erin had enjoyed and had missed since she'd moved out. Christmas could be such a special time and it was even better when the build-up was spent with family, making the most of time together. That felt even more relevant this year after her dad had been through such a tough time physically. After they'd nearly lost him.

A shiver ran down her spine as she thought about how close they'd come to that. Her dad, with his six-foot two-inch height, broad shoulders, bushy grey beard and thick hair, his twinkly blue eyes and warm smile, had almost died. How could a man who was so big and reassuring, so calm and kind cease to exist any more? He had always been there for her and for the rest of his family, had always taken care of them all and striven to provide for them in a financial and physical sense. But his heart had given him a warning and if he hadn't got to the hospital in time for emergency surgery to clear a blocked artery then he wouldn't be here right now.

She turned her head to look out of the window as tears pricked at her eyes. She'd done her best not to dwell on what had happened, but it had been hard. Every day, she found her thoughts straying to her dad and his health, wondering if he

really was OK now and if he'd still be here one day to walk her down the aisle and to hold his grandchildren — whether they were Paul's, hers or Zara's — on his broad shoulders. Life could change in an instant and she knew that losing him would be a huge blow for her mum, her siblings and for her. Cain Dawlish was a rock for his family and without him, they would all struggle to make sense of the world.

She felt a hand slide into hers and turned around to find Zara looking at her. Zara mouthed *You OK?* and Erin nodded.

Zara bobbed her head in the direction of their dad and Erin squeezed Zara's hand once for yes. Zara's eyes glistened immediately. Her sister understood and in that they were united and always would be. That was, she knew, one of the great things about having siblings, because one day, when her parents had gone, she would still (hopefully) have Zara and Paul and they would have her.

'Nearly there, girls,' her dad said as he indicated left then turned the car along a gravel road. The car jogged them from side to side as it progressed along the road and then her dad drove into a large carpark and cut the engine.

'I don't know about you lot but I'm hungry,' her mum said as she pushed open the door and got out.

Erin gave Zara's hand another squeeze then she undid her seatbelt and got out too, closing the car door behind her. 'I could eat something,' she said.

'Me too.' Her dad had come around the car to them and he was rubbing a hand over his stomach. It had once been rounded, the result of his healthy appetite and enjoyment of beer and whisky, but now it was smaller and flatter. The doctors had advised him to cut right down on booze and to follow a Mediterranean diet of lots of lean fish and vegetables. He'd done as they'd recommended, but he had told his family that he would still enjoy his favourite foods and tipples from time to time because otherwise, he'd said, where was the fun in being alive?

Erin tightened her scarf around her neck and slid her hands into her soft leather gloves, a gift from Zara for Christmas last

year, then they crossed the carpark and went through a wooden archway decorated with colourful fairy lights that led to the Christmas tree farm.

Festive music surrounded them, piped from speakers on fence posts and Erin could smell hot dogs and onions as well as spiced wine and crepes. Her stomach gave a growl and she licked her lips, anticipating food and maybe a spiced wine as they looked at the trees available.

They made their way to the food stalls and browsed what was on offer and soon, they all had something to eat and drink. Her dad led the way to a barrel table and they set their drinks down on it while they unwrapped their food. Erin had chosen a hot dog with onions, ketchup and mustard and her mouth watered as she took a bite. When she'd finished it, rather quickly, she took a sip from the paper cup and her tongue tingled. The mulled wine was sweet and tangy, spiced with cloves and cinnamon and slices of orange bobbed on the surface. When the wine reached her stomach, it warmed her from within and the alcohol soon sent a gentle buzz through her veins.

'I think it's as good a time as any to say Merry Christmas to my wonderful family.' Her dad held up his cup. 'I'm overjoyed to be here with you all and to have this chance to spend Christmas with you once more. I will never take a thing for granted from this point on. Not to sound cheesy, but I feel like I've been given a second chance to show you all how much you mean to me. I'm a bit like Scrooge after he'd been visited by the three ghosts!' He laughed but Erin's mum shook her head and dabbed at her eyes with the back of her hand.

'Cain! I wish you wouldn't make these emotional speeches. I'm constantly a wreck,' she said.

'I have to tell you all how much I love you,' he replied. 'There might not be a tomorrow.'

'Dad, please!' Zara said. 'Cut it out.'

Their dad smiled but he raised his cup again. 'Look... tomorrow isn't guaranteed for anyone but after you've been through what I have, you learn to grab hold of today and to

make every second count. This Christmas will be our best ever, I promise.' As he smiled at them, his eyes shone and Erin found her own vision blurring again.

'Love you so much, Dad,' she said then she gulped down some wine.

'And I love you all,' he said. 'Right then... shall we go and find the best tree ever?'

They all nodded then followed him towards where the trees were stored, and Erin was grateful as Zara slipped an arm around her shoulders. She'd have to put her brave pants on if she was going to make it through this Christmas without being an absolute snotty, tearful wreck. But at least she knew these were happy tears because her dad was alive and well and they were all together again for the holidays.

Chapter 6

Erin

Later on that day, back at her parents' house, Erin watched as Zara handed the silver star to her mum then her mum handed it to her dad who put it at the top of the tree. The four of them stood there admiring the tree and their efforts decorating it.

'It looks wonderful,' her mum said, wrapping an arm around her dad's waist. 'Our best tree yet.'

'I agree.' He kissed her on the cheek. 'We did well, team!'

'Time for some mulled cider?' Erin asked.

'Definitely!' Zara said, grabbing Erin's hand and leading her to the kitchen area.

They filled the glass mugs with cider from the steaming pan on the stove and placed them on a tray along with iced gingerbread and mince pies.

'Do you think Dad's OK?' Zara asked as she got festive napkins from the drawer then added them to the tray.

'I think so,' Erin replied. 'Don't you?'

Zara rubbed at her forehead and sighed. 'Yeah... I guess so... I just get scared.'

'I know. I understand.' Erin nodded. 'It is scary after what happened earlier this year. But he's taking care of himself and he's reduced his stress levels by leaving work and moving here. He should be fine now. Who knows, he could outlive us all!'

‘I suppose he could.’ Zara blinked. ‘I just can’t imagine life without him around.’

‘I feel the same.’ Erin opened her arms and embraced her sister. ‘But he’s all right now and that has to do. We can’t live in fear. We have today, right here and now, and we have to treasure that.’

Zara nodded against Erin’s shoulder but she didn’t reply and Erin suspected that her sister was trying to get a hold on her emotions.

‘Shall we get this cider to the parents before it gets cold?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’ Zara stepped back and wiped at her eyes then sniffed. ‘You’re right. I was just having a wobble.’

‘And it’s perfectly OK to have wobbles. I’ve got you, baby sister.’

Zara giggled. ‘I’ve got you too, big sister.’

Erin carried the tray through to the dining area and gasped with delight because her dad had turned the tree lights on and they twinkled in the gloom of the winter’s afternoon, reflecting in the glass of the bifold doors.

‘Here you go.’ Erin set the tray on the table then handed out napkins.

‘That smells delicious,’ her dad said as he accepted a mug and took a sip. ‘And it tastes even better than it smells.’

‘Glad you like it,’ Erin replied.

‘Mmmm. Yum!’ Her mum smiled at her over the top of her mug.

Erin pulled out a chair and sat down and Zara sat next to her then they clinked their mugs together.

‘Did I ever tell you the story about the first time your dad and I went Christmas tree shopping?’ their mum asked with a fond glance at their dad.

As she began reciting the familiar words, Erin sat back and relaxed. She’d heard the story every year for as long as she

could remember and enjoyed it every single time. Their parents had been newly married and spending their first Christmas in their new home. They'd gone to get a tree but money had been tight and so they'd picked out a small tree. They'd decorated it and her mum had thought it was very pretty but her dad hadn't seemed particularly impressed. They'd gone to bed and fallen asleep, or at least their mum had. When she'd woken the next day, the house had been filled with trees. Their dad had decided that his wife needed a Christmas to remember, so he'd gone out and got more trees then brought them home and decorated them. It was such a romantic story and Erin doubted she'd ever meet a man who'd care enough to do something that lovely for her.

Things like that only happened when you found *the one*, and so far, Erin hadn't found *a* one who had decent morals, let alone one who'd care enough to go out of his way to make her happy.

Still, she had her family and that was all she needed. Romance just wasn't for her, it seemed, and she was fine with that.

Chapter 7

Leo

‘One... Two... Three!’

Leo watched as some of his colleagues threw back tequila shots then slammed their glasses on the bar.

‘Come on, Leo! Catch up!’ Gillian Moorcroft gestured at his glass. ‘You’re being such a stick in the mud.’ She pouted at him, her smudged lipstick making her look like she’d drunk a glass of blackcurrant juice and forgotten to wipe her mouth. When she fluttered her eyelashes, he realised with a flash of horror that she was trying to flirt with him. He picked up his glass and downed it then set it carefully down on the bar.

‘There!’ he said, raising his voice to be heard over the noise in the club.

‘Well done,’ she said, sliding off her barstool. For a moment, he worried that she was going to come towards him with the mistletoe sprig he could see in her hand but as soon as her heels touched the wooden floor of the bar, she lost her balance and disappeared behind him. He turned around on the stool and gasped because poor Gillian was in a heap on the floor. He eased himself off his stool and crouched next to her.

‘Gillian? You OK?’ he asked as he helped her to sit up.

‘I’m fine...’ She grinned at him then the grin turned into a grimace. Her cheeks bulged and her eyes watered then her mouth opened and a torrent of tequila shot out. Leo moved sideways, avoiding the tequila, but another colleague who’d come to check on Gillian wasn’t so lucky. He looked down at his shirt in horror and Gillian burped then giggled. ‘Oops!’

Leo helped Gillian to her feet and onto her stool then he asked the bartender for a glass of water that he gave to Gillian.

‘I think we’d better get you a taxi home,’ he said.

‘Are you mad? It’s Christmas, Leo, and I’m out to have some fun.’ Gillian raised her eyebrows at him. ‘I’ll be fine to keep going.’

‘I don’t know if that’s wise,’ he said, peering at their colleague who was trying to sponge the tequila from his shirt.

‘Leo, I’ll be fine. I just had a touch of wind there.’ Gillian rubbed at her stomach then drank some more water. ‘Some more tequila will burn a hole in it.’

Leo shrugged. He could offer some advice, but he wasn’t about to start patronising his colleagues. Gillian was a grown woman, and it was up to her what she did.

‘Excuse me, Gillian,’ he said, ‘I have to speak to someone.’

He grabbed his jacket and headed towards the door to the street. He was almost there when an arm stopped him and he staggered backwards.

‘Where are you going?’ It was Paul and he was frowning, his cheeks red, his forehead beaded with sweat.

‘I need some air,’ Leo said.

‘Yeah, yeah! Bet you’re running away early.’ Paul was clearly quite drunk. He had gold tinsel wrapped around his neck and was wearing a red Santa hat with a giant fluffy white pompom at the end.

‘Uhhh... Would it matter if I was?’ Leo asked.

‘Of course it would. I want my best mate here with me to parrrr-taaay.’ Paul swayed slightly and Leo took his arm to steady him.

‘Well, look, I’ll get some air then come back.’

‘Promise?’ Paul held out his hand with his little finger wiggling.

‘Yeah... promise.’

‘Pinkie promise?’ Paul giggled then hiccupped.

‘Pinkie promise,’ Leo said grudgingly as he wrapped his little finger around Paul’s and shook it.

‘Excellent!’ Paul nodded then patted Leo hard on the back. ‘I’ll get a round in.’

As Leo hurried away, he sighed inwardly. It seemed that he had no chance of getting an early night and that he’d have to come back and probably see Paul home safely. He wanted to be there for his friend but he was also thinking about his warm bed and escaping into sleep. They were going to Wisteria Hollow the next day and he didn’t fancy having a hangover, especially seeing as how he hadn’t even packed yet.

But Paul was his friend and so Leo would be there for him, even if getting into bed and sleeping all night seemed a preferable way to spend his time. He’d just slip outside and get some cold air into his lungs then come back and try to get into the Christmas spirit. Even if he currently felt like saying *Bah Humbug!*

Chapter 8

Erin

Erin dusted off her hands then carried the tray of mince pies to the oven and set it on the middle shelf. She closed the oven door and checked the time before starting to tidy up. The kitchen in her parents' home was gorgeous with dark green cabinets and oak worktops. There was an island at the centre and it had a deep sink set into it with one of those fancy taps that provided instant boiling water. There were stools at the end of the island and part of the surface allowed for sitting, a bit like a breakfast bar, and Zara was currently perched on a stool there holding up her smartphone.

‘Smile!’ Zara said.

‘Oh no. Don’t take photos of me. I look terrible.’ Erin pushed a hand over her brow then realised she’d just spread flour in her hair. ‘Damn it!’

‘You look super cute!’ Zara laughed as she scrolled through the photos she’d just taken.

‘Yeah, right.’ Erin shook her head. ‘Just don’t post them anywhere.’

‘So... are you looking forward to meeting Paul’s new girlfriend?’ Zara asked.

Erin scrunched up her nose. ‘Not particularly. I kind of liked the last one.’

‘And the one before that,’ Zara sighed. ‘I don’t see why he has to keep changing who he’s dating. It’s too confusing. I bet

Dad will get this one's name wrong and call her Ulrika or Davinia.'

'He probably will and then she'll be offended and Paul will have to spend Christmas consoling her only to end up breaking up with her in January.'

'Yeah, sounds about right. He gets bored so easily.'

They stared at each other for a few quiet moments, lips twitching, then burst into laughter.

'Remember the one who got a fake engagement ring in her Christmas cracker?'

Erin shuddered. 'She thought Paul had put it in there to surprise her and she was furious.'

'That's right. She was some kind of high-powered business executive and she was about to head off to Hong Kong for a year, wasn't she?'

Erin nodded. 'She thought he was trying to thwart her plans so she dumped him on Boxing Day and we never saw her again.'

'I think he genuinely liked her though. He might well be trying to make up for that by not settling down with anyone else.' Zara raised her eyebrows.

'Perhaps. But you never know, perhaps this latest lady friend will be the one.'

'I hope so because at least then one of us will be getting married soon.' Zara shrugged.

'Ha! Well you're way too young and I'm sworn off men so it'll have to be Paul if it's going to be anyone.'

'Who's getting married?' Their dad was leaning against the doorway to the hall. Neither of them had heard him arrive.

'Oh... We were just talking about Paul and how he doesn't like settling down.' Erin coughed self-consciously, well aware of her own disastrous romantic history.

'Well, according to your mum, this latest lady could be the one.' Their dad wiggled his eyebrows as he took a seat next to

Zara.

‘Really?’ Erin was surprised.

‘Possibly.’ Her dad bobbed his head. ‘But who knows? I don’t usually get a chance to learn their names before he has a new love interest.’

‘We were just saying that,’ Zara said, turning her phone to face her dad. ‘Smile!’

Their dad grinned at the phone. ‘It’s so unfair the way he hops from one lovely lady to the next one and it makes me look like I’m losing my memory when I call them by the name of the last girlfriend.’

‘We all tend to forget their names, Dad,’ Erin said. ‘It’s not just you.’

‘I might write it on my arm so I can look at it when I have to speak to her.’ Their dad pulled up the sleeve of his jumper. ‘If I write it just by the strap of my watch, no one will be any the wiser.’

Erin laughed. ‘But it will wash off.’

‘Imagine if I wrote her name and some of it washed off and I called her the wrong name.’ Their dad widened his eyes. ‘Phil instead of Phillipa or Miran instead of Miranda.’ He tilted his head. ‘Then again, they’re not that different so that wouldn’t really matter.’

Erin checked the clock on the wall and realised that she needed to take a look at her mince pies. She crossed the kitchen to the oven and looked inside. The pastry was turning golden brown and the smell of spiced fruit and brandy wafted towards her making her mouth water.

‘They smell divine,’ their dad said. ‘Can’t wait to try one.’

‘I used a shortcrust pastry recipe I found online so I hope it’s not too heavy,’ Erin said.

‘I’m sure it will be perfect.’ Zara was pointing her phone at Erin again. ‘Smile before you eat a mince pie and put on three stone!’

‘Ha! Ha!’ Erin shook her head. ‘You’re so funny. *Not.*’

‘Right then, girls.’ Their dad slid off his stool and tucked it under the island. ‘I’m taking your mum to the supermarket to get what we need for dinner. She wants to make sure we impress Paul’s lady friend and anyone else he’s bringing with him. He mentioned something about bringing a friend or two when we spoke a few weeks ago... but I haven’t heard anything since so perhaps it’s not happening. Either way, it’s fine because we have plenty of room here.’ He gave her a quick hug then did the same to Zara and left the kitchen.

‘The more the merrier, I guess,’ she said, meeting Zara’s eyes across the island.

‘If he’s hot and old, he’s yours. If it’s a she and she’s hot, she’s mine.’ Zara winked.

‘I don’t want any hot men in my life, thank you very much.’ Erin opened the dishwasher and started loading it. ‘I’m very happy as I am right now and I don’t ever want to take a chance of getting hurt ever again.’

When she stood up straight, Zara was gazing at her with compassion on her face and it made Erin’s stomach lurch. Her sister felt sorry for her and that was something she’d been trying to avoid. She didn’t want her family seeing her as someone who needed pity. They had enough to worry about without worrying about her.

‘I’m fine!’ Erin said, pushing back her shoulders and plastering on her most dazzling smile. ‘Absolutely fine.’

Zara gave a small nod. ‘I know you are. You have us.’

As Erin put on the oven gloves and got the mince pies from the oven, she allowed herself to believe that it was the heat making her eyes water and not emotion at knowing how lucky she was to have such a loving family.

Chapter 9

Erin

Erin slicked on some lip gloss then gave her hair one final brush. After baking all afternoon, she'd needed a shower to wash the flour and the smell of mince pies and gingerbread off her. Paul was due to arrive soon, and she'd wanted to be fresh and clean to meet his girlfriend and whoever else he might decide to bring along for Christmas. He'd always been the same, taking people under his wing and trying to help them. Even though he was a bit of a ladies' man — and Erin had her own thoughts about why he was afraid to commit to someone — he was a good man with a good heart and he'd always tried to be there for his friends. He could come across as being arrogant and big headed but Erin knew it was a front and that underneath it all, Paul was one of the kindest people she knew.

She gave her reflection one last glance then opened her bedroom door and padded down the stairs. The hallway was truly magical in the evening gloom with twinkling lights on the tree in the hallway and entwined around the banisters, the scent of spice and pine that permeated the air and the festive music that she could hear drifting from the lounge.

Pausing at the bottom of the stairs, she listened for a moment, taking it all in. Sometimes she felt that she should take a mental snapshot of special times because goodness only knew life could deal some tough blows. Just a year ago, she'd been on a completely different trajectory. So much had changed since then and while it still saddened her that she'd lost the life and the future she'd thought she'd have, she

wanted to treasure what she did have because who knew how long things would be this way?

In the kitchen she loaded some of the freshly baked goodies onto trays and put the heat on under the pan of mulled wine to warm it gently. She heard the front door open and voices filling the hallway and she smiled, anticipating seeing her big brother again. Keen to offer him and whoever was with him a warm welcome, she picked up a tray of baked goods and made her way to the hallway.

Her mum, dad and Zara were standing together near the front door welcoming Paul inside. He had his arm around the shoulders of a woman who he introduced as Angelina, and Erin peered past Zara to get a better look at her. She was tall and had a shiny waterfall of black hair that tumbled over her shoulders. She was wearing what Erin thought must be a faux fur coat in leopard print and black boots that reached above the knee. In the hallway light, she appeared flawlessly made up, beautiful in the way that often made Erin feel a bit self-conscious. Erin had never thought of herself as ugly, but she did think she was plain and while she told herself time after time that looks weren't important, sometimes being around women as incredibly stunning as Angelina made her feel like she was less than in some way. She suspected it was some primitive instinct that had encouraged women to compete for the biggest, strongest mate and that it was inevitable that some women — usually the most beautiful — would win. Whatever it was, it didn't matter because this was her brother's new partner and Erin was going to welcome her into the family home.

She stepped forwards with the tray and was about to offer it to Angelina when another person stepped inside. She froze and gasped loud enough for Zara to hear and turn to look at her, curiosity burning in her eyes. When the new arrival turned his dazzling smile towards Erin, the room seemed to shudder beneath her feet and the tray slipped from her grasp and sent mince pies and gingerbread stars flying off in all directions.

'Hello, Erin,' he said, and she felt like she was a teenager all over again.

Chapter 10

Leo

Leo had entered the hallway to Paul's parents' home right behind Paul and Angelina, but he'd been carrying his bag and one of Angelina's suitcases and so, at first, he hadn't seen everyone who was waiting to greet them. But as he'd looked around, his eyes had locked with Erin's, and it had been like he'd hurtled back through time.

Erin was as beautiful as ever with her long, dark blonde hair, her sparkling blue eyes and her... clumsiness! She'd been carrying a tray of food and when their eyes had met, she'd dropped it. He set the luggage down and rushed over to help her. As he reached for a mince pie that had rolled underneath the beautiful Christmas tree, Erin did too and their hands met beneath the branches. He sucked in a breath and looked up and found that she was staring at him. It felt like hours passed as they gazed at each other but in reality it was only seconds because they both pulled their hands back quickly as if they'd been burnt.

'Sorry!' he said.

'Me too.' She shook her head. 'I mean, it's fine. Thanks for helping.'

They crawled around the hallway picking up food and putting it back on the tray and Leo had to admit that it was a shame because the mince pies and gingerbread stars smelt fantastic.

'What a waste,' he said when he finally stood up and brushed the crumbs off the knees of his chinos.

‘There’s more in the kitchen,’ she said, eyes glued to the tray as if she couldn’t bear to look up.

‘Oh dear, Erin.’ Her mum came to her side and peered at the tray. ‘What happened?’

‘Oh... uhhh... it slipped from my grasp.’

‘Let me take it and you go and wash your hands in the downstairs cloakroom,’ her mum said. ‘Would you like a drink, dear?’ she directed this question at Leo.

‘That would be great, thanks,’ he said.

‘Let me show you to your rooms and you can drop off your bags then we can all have a drink to welcome you to Sunflower Street,’ Cain said.

‘Great, thanks.’ Leo glanced back at Erin and she shot him a small smile then scurried away so he followed Cain up the wide staircase while Paul and Angelina followed, chatting about what a lovely village Wisteria Hollow was and how much they were looking forward to celebrating Christmas here.

In his room, which was a nice sized double with a view out to the side of the garden that appeared to wrap around the house, he put his bag on the bed then added his laptop case. Even though he was officially on holidays for three weeks, he knew he’d go stir crazy if he didn’t fit some work in. After all, work was his glue, it kept him sane and kept him from ruminating about things he wanted to avoid thinking about.

He put his washbag in the ensuite bathroom then washed his hands and face. In the mirror, he looked at his reflection, wondering what Erin had thought when she saw him. He was thirty-four now, so not exactly old, but older than the last time she’d seen him. What had she thought about him? Had she thought anything at all? Why would she care? There were a few greys in his brown hair but it was still thick and shiny. His eyes had some fine lines around them when he smiled but he didn’t mind them at all. He preferred to think of them as smile lines rather than frown lines, although in recent years he’d done more frowning than smiling. Shelley used to say she

loved the lines as they meant he was happy, and he'd loved that she loved them. He'd been very happy for six years but sometimes it felt like a dream or like a memory of someone else's life. Perhaps that was nature's way of protecting the mind so the pain wasn't as raw every time you thought about the person you'd lost.

Sighing, he rubbed a hand over his face and then placed both hands on the cool porcelain of the sink. He was here to share in the Dawlish family Christmas, so he needed to keep his thoughts positive and to avoid dwelling on what he'd lost. He had plenty of time alone when he could do exactly that and he didn't want to spoil Christmas for anyone else so he needed to make an effort to be positive.

Chapter II

Erin

In the kitchen, Erin dropped the broken pastries into the food recycling bin then cleaned the tray. She couldn't believe she'd been such an idiot and reacted in that way. Whatever was she thinking? It was only Leo Steele for goodness' sake! Her brother's best friend from childhood and, she thought, probably still his best friend now because the last she could remember they'd worked in London at the same company together as financial consultants and they even lived near each other. It had been a while since she'd heard anything about Leo but then she'd been away and going through her own crisis, so why would Paul tell her anything about Leo? Although... searching back through her memories she recalled something about Leo going through a hard time, but she hadn't asked about it because she'd been wallowing in her own sorrow after what had happened to her last Christmas.

'This wine smells wonderful,' her mum said as she turned off the heat under the pot. 'Shall I take it through to the lounge?'

'Yes please,' Erin replied. 'I've already taken the glasses through.'

Her mum tilted her head then came to her side. 'You OK, love?'

'What? Me? Yes, I'm fine.'

Her mum didn't look convinced. 'You seem a bit jittery.'

Erin laughed. 'Jittery?'

‘Yes. Like... uneasy.’

‘I’m fine. I just lost my grip on the tray and then felt dreadfully embarrassed that I’d made such a mess in front of Paul’s new girlfriend.’

‘And in front of poor Leo.’

Erin’s mouth dried up. ‘Why poor Leo?’

‘Well... he lost his mum recently, didn’t he?’

‘Did he?’

‘Yes. And they were very close. I know that she was there for him all through his... you know... other loss.’

‘Other loss?’

‘Don’t you know, Erin?’

‘Know what?’ Erin’s palms went clammy, and she rubbed them against her jeans. Somewhere at the back of her mind, a bell was ringing as if to alert her to a memory that was somewhat hazy.

‘He lost his partner two years ago.’

‘Poor Leo.’

‘I know. They went to bed one night and she didn’t wake up. I think they call it sudden death syndrome.’

Erin thought of Leo and the photos she’d seen of him years ago on Paul’s Facebook pages when they’d been out with their girlfriends. Leo had always looked so happy. But he’d lost the woman he loved in such a terrible way. It was tragic. Awful.

Poor Leo.

‘Wow.’ Erin sighed. ‘So Leo needs a break then?’

‘He does. I think we can spoil him a bit, can’t we?’

‘Of course.’

Erin had thought that this Christmas would not be without its challenges because of last year being so raw still but she’d also hoped to make it a good one because she was so glad that her dad was still around. But now, knowing that Leo was here

and that he'd been through hell... well, she wanted to make sure that he was able to relax and enjoy what he could of the holidays.

'Come on then, get some more pastries on the tray and bring it through.' Her mum picked up the pot of wine and carried through to the lounge.

Erin loaded up the tray and grabbed some festive napkins then followed her mum. It would, she thought, be nice to speak to Leo again and to catch up, even if he had been through such tragic losses. Sadly, life brought loss and pain, but it also brought love and joy and she hoped that going forwards it would bring far more of the latter for Leo.

Chapter 12

Leo

Sitting on the sofa in the lounge, Leo made an effort to relax his shoulders and to unclench his hands. It was all too easy these days to scrunch himself up as if preparing for trouble, like his body was constantly on high alert. He'd even found that he'd been grinding his teeth at night, waking with a tight and aching jaw and stiff fingers from scrunching up his hands. Stress and tension could do such awful things to the body and he needed to try to let them go or he'd make himself ill.

'Here you go.' Robyn handed him a glass goblet of mulled wine and he thanked her then took a sip. The spiced wine was warm and delicious and he wrapped his hands around the glass, enjoying the comforting warmth. Paul was sitting on the other sofa with Angelina and she was telling Cain all about her job as a model. Cain was nodding and smiling and seemed genuinely interested, although Leo did wonder if Cain had a sense of Déjà vu, having been there many times before with Paul's other girlfriends. Was Cain placing silent bets on how long Angelina would be around? Leo loved Paul — he was, and always had been, his best friend — but he never stayed interested in his girlfriends for long. This behaviour seemed to work for Paul, but Leo wondered how his family felt about it.

As for Leo, he'd been very different. Quite shy growing up, he'd been content to stand at Paul's side and watch as he exuded confidence. Paul was a good person with a good heart but Leo was quieter, calmer, didn't like to have too much attention focused his way. He'd happily let Paul hog the

limelight so he could stay out of it. Not much had changed in that way.

Robyn sat next to her husband and tuned into the conversation with Angelina, nodding and murmuring at the right times. Leo sat back, allowing himself to enjoy the warmth of the wine and the glow of the log fire, the hum of conversation and being around people he'd known for a long time. He'd been dreading Christmas this year, had known that he'd miss his dear mum and, of course, Shelley, but now he could enjoy being with friends. In a way, it took the pressure off because he could allow himself to go with the flow of this family Christmas rather than wallowing in his grief.

Zara walked into the room and looked around. She waved at Leo but went and sat on the arm of the sofa next to Paul, clearly keen to find out more about Angelina. Leo exhaled slowly, glad he didn't have to make conversation right now. He suddenly felt tired and like he could close his eyes and take a nap. But that would be rude seeing as how they'd just arrived and this wasn't his family but his best friend's.

And then Erin entered the room and he snapped awake. Alert and interested. She put a tray of pastries down on the coffee table then reached for a goblet of wine and looked around the lounge. There was a spare chair at the other side of the room or space on the sofa with Leo. She met his gaze and he smiled so she came and sat near him.

'Hey,' she said.

'Hi.'

'At least I didn't drop the tray this time.' A flush rose in her cheeks.

'Accidents happen,' he said.

'Especially around me,' she said, her blush deepening.

'To us all.'

'Thanks,' she replied, looking at him shyly. 'It's nice to see you again.'

'It's been a while, right?'

‘Quite some time.’

‘I heard that you... uhhh... are back in England now?’

She nibbled at her lower lip before replying. ‘Yes. I came home earlier this year.’

‘Heat get too much for you?’ he asked, keen to offer her an out. He knew that her partner had cheated on her or dumped her or something similar, as Paul had relayed the story. But Leo had been caught up in his own grief and concern about his mum who’d been poorly and then passed away, so he hadn’t been able to absorb the full story.

‘Something like that,’ she said.

‘Are you OK?’ he asked gently.

‘I’m OK.’ She gave a small nod. ‘After all, it’s Christmas and I’m here with my lovely family and my dad is well so... you know... what more can I ask for, right?’

He inclined his head and pressed his lips together.

‘Oh my god, I’m so sorry!’ She covered her mouth with a hand as horror filled her eyes. ‘That was so insensitive of me.’

‘No, it’s fine. Please don’t feel you have to walk on eggshells around me. You’re right. It is wonderful that your dad is well again and that you get to spend Christmas together. Believe me, I’m grateful to be here with you all.’

‘I’m so sorry about your mum.’

‘Thanks. I miss her terribly but it was for the best in the end. She was so unwell with the cancer that her slipping away was the best thing for her.’ The lump in his throat made his eyes water. It was still so hard to talk about losing her. He’d thought that after losing Shelley, he’d be able to cope with anything, that grief would harden him but it hadn’t worked that way. The pain seemed to make him softer, weaker, more emotional rather than less.

Erin placed a hand on top of his and he looked down at where she was touching him. Such a basic gesture and yet so incredibly comforting. Human connection was important and

it could help but he found it hard to admit that, even to himself.

‘I really am sorry and if you want to talk about her or anything at all, then I’m here to listen. Please... if I can help... let me.’

‘Thanks, Erin. You were always very kind.’ Even when she was much younger, Erin had made time for others, offering them warmth and time. She’d always been so compassionate.

‘Oh... thank you.’ She smiled shyly at him. ‘I don’t think my ex would agree with you about that but then I do wonder if he even noticed me half the time.’ She sucked in a breath as if surprised at her comment and Leo wanted to offer her a hug. Quite badly. But doing so in front of her family and after not seeing her for so long would seem a bit strange, so instead, he turned his hand and took hold of hers and gave it a squeeze.

‘I’m here anytime you want to talk too.’

He gently brought his hand back and wrapped it around his goblet with the other one and noticed that she did the same, cradling her wine as if it was an anchor to cling to.

‘Life can be hard, right?’ she said, her eyes wandering to the fireplace.

‘It can be very hard,’ he said softly. ‘But there are many good things too.’

In the glow from the fire, her skin was golden. The light brightened her hair that flowed over her shoulders like spun silk and he wondered what it smelt like, what it would feel like if he ran his hands through it. She had always been pretty but now, in her late twenties, she was beautiful. She was no longer a girl, but a woman grown and Leo felt like he was seeing her properly for the first time.

He raised his wine to his mouth and took a sip. He wasn’t sure if it was seeing her after so long or because the wine was strong, but he suddenly felt very sentimental. Goodness only knew what would happen if they decided to put a Christmas movie on. He’d end up a blubbering wreck most likely. But he

also had a feeling that Erin would be right there next to him, offering him comfort and consolation. And something about that made his heart flutter as if there was something locked in there, yearning to be freed. It was funny how some people could have this effect upon you, even when you hadn't seen them for years, as if a part of you was waiting to be reunited with them again. As if the connection between you had always been there and could be roused like a spark in a fire when the time was right.

Chapter 13

Erin

Monday dawned as a clear and chilly day without a cloud in the bright blue sky. Erin dressed warmly in boots, jeans and a baggy chocolate brown jumper then went down to the kitchen.

‘Morning Mum,’ she said as she helped herself to coffee from the pot then pulled out a stool at the kitchen island.

‘Morning, sweetheart.’ Her mum smiled. ‘How did you sleep?’

‘Really well, thanks.’ Erin nodded, although remembering the dreams she’d had made her blush. She’d been young again, a teenager, and she’d been with Leo. They’d been watching a movie, just like last night, and then somehow ended up kissing and one thing had led to another and... well, that bit hadn’t been PG.

‘You OK, now? You look a bit flushed. I hope you’re not coming down with something.’ Her mum’s brows met above her slim nose and Erin shifted uncomfortably on her seat. The last thing she was about to do was to share details about *those* dreams.

‘I’m fine. It’s just quite warm in here.’ Erin fanned her face.

‘Yes, your dad has been busy baking.’ Her mum gestured at the trays of muffins and croissants on the worktop. ‘Hungry?’

‘Yes! And they look scrumptious.’ Erin got up and grabbed a muffin then returned to her stool and set the muffin down on a napkin. ‘So what’s the plan for today?’

‘Well,’ her mum said as she sat at the end of the island. ‘We thought we could go for a nice walk somewhere and get some air.’

‘Sounds good.’ Erin peeled the paper case from the muffin and broke a piece off. She put it in her mouth and chewed. ‘Mmm. This is good.’

‘Pumpkin and white chocolate I think.’ Her mum laughed. ‘Although I could be wrong because your dad was mixing so many flavours together this morning that it could be anything. It was like having Heston Blumenthal in the kitchen.’

Erin laughed. ‘I can taste pumpkin and white chocolate. They go well together.’ Erin sipped her coffee, washing the muffin down. ‘No one else up? Apart from Dad, I mean.’

‘Your sister was around here somewhere but I think she’s gone to have a shower. And I thought I heard Leo.’

‘You were right.’ Erin turned around to see Leo grinning from the doorway. ‘Sorry if I was a bit noisy this morning. I went to put my shirt on and I’d left one button done up and I got my arm stuck. Then I lost my balance and ended up staggering around the bedroom. Not a great way to start the day.’ He crossed the kitchen and stood next to Erin. He was so close she could smell his shower gel, some minty-woody blend, and the apple shampoo he’d used.

‘Oh dear!’ Erin said, looking up at him. His brown hair was still damp, and she felt an urge to reach up and touch it, to run her fingers down his skin to the collar of his checked shirt.

‘Ha! I didn’t actually fall over just did a kind of weird dance until I got my balance. Thankfully no one was watching although I am sorry for the noise,’ he said, looking at Erin’s mum.

‘It’s fine honestly. No problem at all. Are you hungry?’ Erin’s mum asked.

‘I am actually. Can I help myself?’

‘Of course.’

Leo got a mug from the cupboard then filled it with coffee and helped himself to a muffin. He was eating it when he came and sat right next to Erin. She had a piece of muffin in her mouth and she struggled to swallow it when his leg accidentally brushed against hers. She looked down at his muscular denim clad thigh and wondered if the worn denim was as soft as it looked. How she would like to touch that leg and...

Erin! Cut it out! Anyone would think you were sex starved.

Well... I am but that's beside the point. This is Leo, my brother's best friend, and I can hardly jump on him at the family Christmas gathering, can I?

‘Erin?’

She looked up and her mum was staring at her, eyebrows raised.

‘Yes?’

‘I was telling Leo that we fancied a walk today.’

‘Oh... yes.’ Had her mum spoken to her while she’d been ogling Leo’s thigh? *Yikes!*

‘Oh... yes... definitely.’ Erin turned to Leo and found him smiling at her. ‘A good walk in the fresh air is what we all need.’

‘I’d like a walk. I find it helps clear my head,’ he said.

Half an hour later, they’d eaten breakfast and tidied away and were waiting in the hallway for Paul and Angelina to come downstairs. When they finally appeared, Erin slid her arms into her coat and opened the front door then stepped out into the beautiful December morning.

Chapter 14

Leo

After some debate over breakfast about where to go for a walk, Cain had decided that he would take them on a surprise trip. They had piled into his black people carrier and set off, music filling the car as Robyn insisted on playing her Christmas CD. While the likes of Elton, Shaking Stevens and Mariah Carey had sung about the joys or sorrows of the festive season, Leo had sat back and let it all wash over him.

He was sitting next to Zara but he might as well have been sitting next to a dog for all the conversation he was getting from her. She had her earbuds in and was glued to her smartphone in the way that so many youngsters were these days. He wished he could have sat next to Erin but she'd ended up next to Paul and they were currently debating the pros and cons of nut roast versus turkey. And so, during the journey, he gazed out of the window and watched as the scenery sped past the window.

The problem with Christmas music was that it invariably brought back memories of Christmas past and for him, that usually involved memories of Shelley. Memories that were sweet and precious but that made a lump rise in his throat and his chest ache in a way that he couldn't get rid of, no matter how hard he swallowed or how firmly he rubbed at his ribcage. Grief was a horrid feeling and however much he tried to let it go, it was so hard. It had a tendency to rear its head like a dragon breathing fire at the most inconvenient of times and he didn't think he'd ever be free of it. He could understand why some people struggled to keep going. Not that he was

feeling like he'd do anything to hurt himself, because he knew Shelley would never have wanted that, but some days he wondered if he had the strength to get through another day without the woman he'd loved. How did other people move on? How did other people survive? One day at a time, he knew, but it was still so incredibly hard. And this year was even worse because he'd lost his mum and she'd been the one person who'd been able to wrap her arms around him, hug him tight and call him her boy. And, even though he was a fully grown man, she had helped him to feel safe and loved. Even when his heart was breaking, she'd made him feel that maybe, just maybe, everything would be OK again one day. But now she was gone and he'd been left in despair at the thought of coping without her.

However, out of nowhere, Paul had insisted that Leo join him and his family for Christmas and something about that made Leo feel that somehow, his mum and Shelley must be looking out for him. They didn't want Leo spending the holidays alone and there was comfort to be found in that, whether it was some form of spiritual intervention or just pure luck.

Soon, Cain pulled into a carpark and cut the engine and Leo packed away his feelings of grief and loss and took a few slow, deep breaths. Fresh air would help and he was looking forward to stretching his legs. He was not, as he'd thought he'd be, alone for Christmas this year and he was very grateful for that.

They all got out of the vehicle and looked around. The car park wasn't too busy although there were some other families and couples who'd clearly thought that heading to Box Hill for the day was a good plan.

'I haven't been here in years,' Leo said.

'Nor me.' Erin was at his side wrapping a long scarf around her neck. In her thick padded coat and bobble hat, she looked younger than her twenty-eight years and he found himself wondering again about why her relationship had ended as it had and why any man would let such a lovely woman go. 'I'd forgotten how beautiful it is.'

When everyone was ready, they walked over to the National Trust visitor centre and looked at the board that showed the routes around Box Hill. They decided to take the hilltop stroll which should take about thirty minutes and wasn't too taxing but would afford them gorgeous views.

Leo and Erin fell into step together behind her parents and Zara, while Paul and Angeline followed behind them. For some reason, Angeline was wearing a pair of heeled boots that Leo didn't think would be at all suitable for walking, but then what did he know? No one else had said anything and he certainly wasn't going to interfere. The boots made even less sense though considering that the ground beneath their feet was hard, the mud frozen solid by the low temperatures, and the leaves that lay on the paths that made them potentially slippery. Looking up though, Leo's heart lifted because the sky was a glorious clear blue and there was a gentle breeze that was pleasant and refreshing.

They followed the path and reached the gravestone of Peter Labillierre, a British Army Major and eccentric who died back in 1800 and was apparently, and weirdly, buried upside down.

'Whenever I see this headstone, I wonder how on earth he could have chosen to be buried like that,' Robyn said with a shiver. 'Makes me dizzy just thinking about it.'

'Mum, he's hardly going to know he's upside down is he?' Zara asked with a shake of her head.

'I know that but well... It's just a strange way to be laid to rest.'

'Yes but he was an eccentric, Mum.' Zara rolled her eyes then slid her arm through her father's. 'Come on, Dad, let's get going.'

Cain offered a conciliatory smile to his wife then let his daughter lead him away. His wife followed soon after with Paul and Angelina.

Erin was still gazing at the stone.

'Hey, you all right?' Leo asked.

‘Yes. Fine. Just thinking that if you’ve got to be buried somewhere then this is as good a spot as any.’

‘I don’t think they let people have their graves here now though,’ he said softly.

‘I guess not.’ She met his eyes. ‘Where is... Oh, sorry. That’s none of my business.’

‘You were going to ask where Shelley is buried? Or my mum?’

‘Uhm... both?’ Erin grimaced as if embarrassed. ‘Sorry, you don’t want to talk about that.’

‘It’s fine. Shelley was cremated as per her wishes and then her ashes went back up to Scotland. In her will she’d asked that this happen so she could join her family and be scattered in the Highlands. I don’t know if everyone would agree but for me, cremation seems preferable to being underground. Not that we’ll be aware of it because well...’ He shrugged.

‘I guess so.’ Erin chewed at her bottom lip.

‘But my mum is buried with my dad in Bath.’

‘That’s nice,’ she said. ‘Reunited.’

‘Exactly what she always said she wanted.’ He glanced at the headstone again then at the path ahead. ‘Shall we catch up with them?’

Erin looked in the direction he was pointing. ‘Oh! Yes. We better had.’

Leo held out his hand and she glanced at it for a moment before accepting it. ‘The ground is a bit uneven and slippery too because of the leaves. At least we can hang on to each other and then if one of us slips the other one can hold them up,’ he said, feeling the need to explain his gesture.

‘Good plan!’ she said, smiling.

They followed the others and soon caught up, mainly because in her heels, Angelina was struggling to do more than shuffle along. They took a right off the main path and then walked along a smaller chalky path with wild box trees

growing either side of it. Up ahead of them lay the grey stone building known as Box Hill Fort. Leo knew it had been built around 1892 and used to store ammunition and equipment as part of the London Defence Scheme. He thought it seemed incongruous in the peaceful rural setting though, even if it was a historical monument.

Erin shivered suddenly and Leo peered down at her. 'Everything all right?'

'I'm getting a bit cold,' she said. 'In spite of my padded coat.'

'It's a nice coat. Kind of like a sleeping bag you can wear,' he said with a smile.

'I'm going to take that positively although it could be kind of offensive. Like... I'm wearing a sleeping bag.'

'I like it.' He touched the sleeve with his free hand. 'It seems really warm.'

'It is.'

'I'm guessing you didn't need coats like this in Dubai,' he said, then winced inwardly because the last thing he wanted to do was remind her of what she'd left behind when she'd clearly had a tough time back there.

'No, I didn't. Although having said that the air con out there is so amazing that you wouldn't know the temperatures are soaring outside. Sometimes, it was so cold indoors that I did have to wrap up in layers.'

'Do you miss it?' he asked softly, watching her face.

'The city or the lifestyle?'

'Both?'

A tiny line appeared between her brows and she licked her lips before replying. 'Sometimes I do. It was very different to life here. Very different. But in a good way, although I did get homesick for British winters and Mum and Dad's home cooking. And for them and Zara, obviously. And occasionally for Paul.' She laughed and Leo joined her. She got on with Paul, he knew that, but he also knew that over the years Paul

had been the typical older brother and teased Erin and Zara. It was what big brothers were for though, right?

‘Even his teasing?’ he asked.

‘Even that, especially when things got tough out there.’ She blinked rapidly and Leo hoped she wasn’t upset but then she rubbed a hand over her face and sighed. ‘I missed Paul then because I knew he’d have had a sharp word with Billy. Not that I’d have wanted him to have a go at Billy, but it would have been nice to have felt like someone had my back. And it all seemed to go wrong so quickly, like overnight.’ She shrugged then and took a deep breath before exhaling audibly. ‘I’m fine though. I’m absolutely fine and I haven’t been through anything like you so I can’t complain.’

‘Loss is relative,’ he said. ‘All pain is pain whatever you go through. It all hurts and leaves scars.’

‘And leaves you stronger and more resilient,’ she said. ‘I feel stronger because of what I’ve been through even if it still hurts at times. Kind of like a cut that I don’t think about all the time but when I get soap in it, then I feel it.’

‘Yeah, that makes sense to me too,’ he said.

‘So then I wash the soap out and I can manage again.’ She dusted off her hands as if to prove her point. ‘I really fancy a hot chocolate now, do you?’

‘I could use a warm drink.’ He nodded. ‘And probably a snack too like—’

There was a piercing scream up ahead and they both froze then stared in the direction of the noise.

‘Come on.’ Erin grabbed his hand again, and they ran, fear evident in their speed as they hurried along.

Leo knew that Erin would be thinking the same thing as he was: Had something happened to Cain? Why else would there be screaming filling the air?

Chapter 15

Erin

Erin felt fear digging its icy fingers into her heart as they ran. It was her dad; she knew it was. Why else would there be screaming up ahead? But the closer they got, the more she realised the screaming didn't sound like her mum or Zara. She slowed her pace when they reached the group of people who'd stopped to help and she pushed through them, apologising loudly but also not caring about them as she was desperate to find out if her dad was OK.

'Dad?' When she saw him crouched down on the ground next to Paul and Angelina, tears sprang into her eyes. 'Oh my god, Dad, are you OK?'

He looked up at her and nodded, a quizzical frown concertinaing his forehead. 'I'm fine, Erin. Why, angel?'

'The screaming. I thought something had... Oh god, Dad!' She flung herself at him and he laughed as he stood up and hugged her.

'Hey, hey,' he said, rocking her from side to side. 'I'm good. Don't worry about me so much.'

'But the screaming and the cold and the slippery ground and...' She buried her face in his neck and breathed him in, gratitude filling her that this man she loved and adored, needed around for years to come, was safe.

'It wasn't me, it was Angelina,' he said, gesturing at his son's girlfriend who was on the muddy ground holding her leg in both hands. 'She fell and hurt her ankle.'

‘Oh no!’ Erin said, but she was so relieved that her dad was OK that finding sympathy for Angelina was tough in the moment. And Angelina had worn those ridiculous heels to go walking. Who did that?

‘There, there, Angie,’ Paul was checking his partner’s ankle, gently probing it inch by inch and every time he touched her, she winced dramatically as if his touch was like acid against her skin.

‘Ouch!’ Angelina said, tears running down her cheeks. ‘It’s so sore.’

Her boot lay abandoned on the ground next to her and once again, Erin thought that while the white leather stiletto boot was pretty, it was not at all practical.

‘Paulie, I can’t walk,’ Angelina said.

‘Don’t worry, my beloved, I’ll carry you,’ Paul said, and for a moment, Erin had to look around as she wondered if anyone else was seeing and hearing what she was.

She met Leo’s eyes and whispered, ‘Is that really my brother?’

‘I know,’ he replied. ‘I think he’s got it bad.’

‘I think so too.’ She watched as Paul stood up then swept Angelina into his arms as easily as if she was made of feathers and lace.

‘It’s not far to the visitor centre so I’ll take you there and ask to see someone with first aid skills,’ Paul said. Angelina nodded against his chest, her arms draped around his neck, her naked foot swinging with its fancy pedicure. ‘Mum and Dad? Ready?’ he asked.

Their parents nodded then her mum picked up Angelina’s boot and they all marched towards the visitor centre.

When they got there, Paul took Angelina inside to get her checked over and Cain looked around at his remaining family. ‘Shall we go and get drinks and a bite to eat while we wait?’

‘Good plan, Dad,’ Zara said. ‘I’m starving after all that cold air.’

‘Me too.’ Erin said then looked at Leo and he nodded.

As they walked towards the café, he leant close and whispered in her ear, ‘It was like a scene from a Hollywood movie then. Paul really is a hero in disguise.’

Erin giggled and tapped his arm playfully then she wondered who on earth she was because it seemed like she was actually flirting. With her big brother’s best friend. What was she, seventeen again?

Chapter 16

Erin

The next day, Erin lay in bed thinking about what had happened at Box Hill. It had been like something out of a Jane Austen novel where one of the female characters got hurt and one of the male ones swooped in and rescued the day. Angelina had been checked over and it turned out that she had sprained her ankle and not done anything more serious, and so she'd been advised to rest and to head to A and E if it got worse. Which it hadn't appeared to do. Although Angelina had clearly enjoyed having Paul wait on her hand and foot since they'd got home. Erin could barely believe that the kind, caring and selfless chap who was catering to his girlfriend's every need was the same person she'd grown up with. Where was the teasing man she'd come to know and love gone? She knew he had a heart of gold but didn't think he'd often revealed this to his girlfriends. Erin would always love him because he was her brother but that didn't mean he hadn't got on her nerves on occasion. It seemed that love really could change a person because that was the only explanation for how he was behaving now around Angelina. Unless, of course, Angelina was a witch who'd cast a spell on him. A love spell... And they were fictional so it must be love.

It seemed that love really could conquer all and Erin thought about what that might feel like. She'd loved Billy, or at least she'd thought she had, but then she'd never really known him. She'd thought she had known him but then she couldn't have done. He must have shown her only a version of him, the one he presented to the world and not the real Billy.

The Billy she'd fallen for would never have done what he did or treated her so poorly.

And, as always whenever she thought about him, her heart started to race. What was he doing now? Was he preparing for Christmas, a magical Dubai Christmas with his lover that would be filled with champagne and laughter, with Instagram squares and romantic moments? She grabbed the pillow from the empty spot in bed next to her and covered her face then groaned into it, trying to force out her frustration and anger. Bloody Billy had made her into a growling harpy at times and that was what she resented him for. How could he do that to her? She'd been fine before she'd met him. Just fine!

Removing the pillow, she sat up and pushed her messy hair back from her face. She never would have believed that Paul would be the one in love and that she would be single. Paul had always been such a player, never seeming to want to settle down and now, here he was, catering to Angelina's every whim. Next thing they knew he'd be proposing.

She froze.

Oh god, no! Not a Christmas proposal! Please no. That would just be the icing on the bloody Christmas cake, that would!

Then she caught herself and horror flooded through her. What was she thinking? She should be happy for Paul if he was in love and wanted to settle down at long last. Instead, here she was hoping that he wouldn't be in love enough to want to get married. That was horrid and selfish of her and not who she was at all. Again, bloody Billy had made her feel this way and while it lay in his infidelity, she needed to get a grip because otherwise she would become bitter and cynical and that was not the person she wanted to be at all. She loved her brother and wanted the best for him and if that meant getting married to a woman who wore heels on a long winter walk then that was absolutely fine. In fact, it was absolutely fabulous, and she would be happy for them.

'Right, come on, Erin get your ass out of bed immediately and stop wallowing.'

She threw back the duvet and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. It was a beautiful new day and she was going to make the most of being with her nearest and dearest because she was very lucky to have them.

Chapter 17

Erin

‘**T**his really is a lovely little village,’ Erin said as she walked along the street with Zara.

‘If you like dull and boring,’ Zara replied with a wrinkle of her nose.

Erin stopped walking and looked at her sister and spotted the smirk playing on her lips. ‘You don’t mean that, do you?’

Zara laughed. ‘Nah... It’s all right, actually. I did think it was a bit Snoresville when I first arrived but now I can see that it’s not so bad. And Mum and Dad like it and that’s what matters.’

They crossed the road and headed into the village. Erin looked around, taking in the pretty cottages, smoke curling from chimneys and the village green. Christmas lights twinkled all around them, fending off the gloom of the wintery day. The wind whipped up suddenly and a few flakes of snow drifted through the air.

‘Oooh! Looks like we might get a white Christmas,’ Zara said.

‘Perhaps we will.’ Erin pointed at the shops. ‘Shall we go in the bookshop?’

‘Do you need to ask?’ Zara shook her head as if shocked at Erin’s question.

‘Look at the name,’ Erin pointed at the sign. ‘It must be talking about Paul.’

‘*Off the Shelf*,’ Zara said. ‘Ha! I just got that. Paul’s all loved up now so he’s been taken off the shelf.’

Inside the bookshop, it was warm and cosy and smelt of cinnamon and pine. There was a large Christmas tree in the window decked with lights and tinsel and she spotted cinnamon sticks dangling from some of the branches, which explained the festive aroma.

Erin and Zara walked around, browsing the shelves and displays and by the time they got to the counter, they’d both selected several books.

‘It’s impossible to come into a bookshop and not buy something, right?’ Zara asked.

‘I can’t just browse in a bookshop.’ Erin shrugged. ‘It’s far too tempting.’

At the counter, the bookshop employee, a woman wearing glasses that looked too big for her face and that kept slipping down her nose, smiled at them. ‘New to the village or just visiting, lovelies?’ she asked.

Erin noted her name tag: *Joy, Shop Manager*

‘Our parents have bought a house on Sunflower Street,’ Erin said.

‘Ahhh. That’ll be the Dawlishes?’ Joy said with a warm smile.

‘That’s right.’ Erin nodded as the woman handed her a paper bag with her books inside.

‘Welcome to Wisteria Hollow, dears. I’m sure you’ll all love it here.’ Joy held out the card machine for Zara to pay then handed her a bag the same as Erin’s but bigger because Zara had bought more books.

‘Thank you, Joy,’ Erin said, returning the smile.

‘Ooh!’ Joy tapped the side of her head. ‘I forgot to offer you a loyalty card. Would you like one? I’ll stamp it for every five pounds you spend then you get 10% off when you’ve spent fifty pounds.’

‘Yes, please,’ Erin said and Zara nodded. ‘We’ll be back soon, I’m sure.’

‘We’ll have a sale in January so make sure you do come back and grab some bargains.’ Joy pushed her glasses up her nose again.

After Joy had signed them both up for loyalty cards, they went to the door and Erin paused to admire the tree. The bookshop was a warm, cosy haven and she could easily have taken a seat on one of the leather sofas in the shop and spent the morning reading.

‘It’s lovely in here,’ Zara said.

‘Perfect.’ Erin nodded. ‘Lucky Mum and Dad living so close to such a lovely independent bookshop.’

‘You could too if you moved here.’

‘Move here?’ Erin frowned. ‘I have a home in Bath.’

‘Not a real home though, is it? A house share with some people you don’t even really like that much is not a home.’

‘You make my life sound so depressing.’ Erin sighed as she opened the door and let Zara go out before her.

‘Not depressing,’ Zara said. ‘Just perhaps not what you wanted.’ Zara rubbed Erin’s arm and offered a smile. ‘Come on let’s see what else this village has to offer.’

They wandered along the street, looking in shop windows and Erin tried to push Zara’s comment away. It was true, she knew, that she lived with people she didn’t really get on with. They weren’t bad people just not friends and not even people she had anything in common with. She’d thought that by the time she reached her late twenties she’d have her life organised, that she’d at least have a place of her own and possibly a partner. Well, she’d had a partner but that all went wrong. She’d been saving her salary in Dubai to put down a deposit on a house when she returned to the UK, thinking that it would be with Billy. She still had that money saved, put away for a rainy day, but hadn’t felt like buying a place because she didn’t really know where she wanted to settle or if she actually wanted to settle anywhere. Adulting was hard and

it seemed to happen so quickly. There wasn't much of a bridge between being a teenager and being almost thirty. Her twenties had flown past in a blur of finishing university, studying for a teaching certificate and then jetting off to Dubai for what was meant to be an amazing few years of living the dream. It had seemed that way for while, but then Billy had gone and ruined it all and her dreams had been destroyed, her sense of self-worth too. Surely if she'd been worth something then her partner would not have cheated and treated her like dirt in the process. Bloody Billy and his wandering eye.

'Hey!' Zara clicked her fingers in front of Erin's face. 'Snap out of it.'

'What?'

'Oh come on, Erin, I can see you drifting off and letting that jerk into your thoughts. He doesn't deserve to have any of your time or head space at all. Come on, now, forget about him. Look at this beautiful little boutique.'

In front of them was a small shop with a sign hanging to one side featuring a bright blue dragonfly. 'Dragonfly Dreams,' Erin read. 'How pretty.'

'Exactly. Now come and have some more retail therapy.'

Erin let her sister lead her inside the shop. The first thing to greet them was Christmas music, an old favourite from Wham and goosebumps rose on Erin's arms. She loved this song so much because it brought back lovely childhood memories of Christmas with her family and of school discos where she'd danced all night and even had her first kiss.

The walls of the shop were dark blue contrasting with the gold of the cornicing and woodwork. There were lanterns hanging from hooks on the walls and fairy lights strung around the shop twinkling like tiny gold stars. The lights brightened the shop against the December day outside. There was a pleasant aroma in the shop too, like spice and some sort of lemony polish. And in the far corner stood a real Christmas tree decked with colourful lights and silver and gold baubles, as well as a few small glittery snowmen and women. At the

top of the tree was a vintage angel wearing a white satin gown and with a golden halo above her head.

‘Wow!’ Zara said. ‘It’s all vintage.’

Erin bobbed her head in agreement and they wandered around, admiring the clothes. There were dresses hanging on the circular rails at the centre of the shop floor and the dresses were all one of a kind by the look of it. There were sequined evening dresses, jumper dresses made of the softest cashmere wool and then tunic dresses made from leather and suede. Then there were rows of trousers, some were flares and some were embroidered with flowers and birds, some had sequins along the hems. ‘It looks like Abba probably shop here,’ Erin said, winking at her sister.

‘I should say so.’ Zara picked up a brown leather mini skirt and held it against herself. ‘What do you think?’

‘That’s lovely.’ Erin touched the skirt and it felt warm and smooth. ‘Not much give in it though if you eat a big meal.’

Zara sniggered. ‘It has a stretchy panel at the back, look.’

‘Oh yeah.’ Erin nodded. ‘Get it.’

Zara looked at the skirt for a while. ‘I’ll try it on and see how it fits first.’

‘Good morning.’ They both turned at the sound of a voice. Behind the counter was a woman holding a mug. ‘Apologies for being out the back then but I needed a coffee.’ The woman stifled a yawn.

‘Morning,’ Erin and Zara said.

‘Do you need any help with anything?’ the woman asked. ‘I’m Darcie, by the way. This is my shop so if you have any questions, I should be able to answer them. Also, if there’s anything you wanted in particular, and I don’t have it in, I might be able to source it for you.’

‘Brilliant, thank you.’ Erin smiled at the woman.

‘I’ll be right here drinking my coffee and going through some new stock if you need me,’ Darcie said. ‘Oh... where are

my manners? Would either of you like a drink? It's cold out today, right? Looks like we could have some snow later.'

'I'm fine, thanks,' Erin said, and Zara shook her head.

'No problem at all.' Darcie sipped her coffee then lifted a box onto the counter and started looking through it.

'Look, Erin, this would suit you.' Zara held up a gold velvet dress with long sleeves and an A-line skirt.

'Really?' Erin frowned. 'I don't know. I mean... gold?'

'Yes, gold. Try it on and you'll see,' Zara said.

They walked around the shop for a while longer and selected a few more garments then went to the changing rooms. 'Is it all right if we try these on?' Zara asked Darcie.

'Of course! Shout if you need help,' Darcie replied.

'Go on then, try that dress on. It would be lovely for Christmas Day,' Zara pushed Erin towards the changing room and Erin sighed. Her younger sister could be so bossy.

While she was getting changed, Erin heard the shop door opening and closing and the sound of voices. It seemed like someone Darcie knew had come in and they were giggling away at something.

Erin stared at her reflection in the changing room mirror and she had to admit that she was pleasantly surprised. The gold dress did suit her. If she paired it with long boots, it would look nice for Christmas Day. It had enough stretch in the material to cover a full belly and it was flawless, as if it had never been worn. She turned from side to side admiring how it draped over her curves and for the first time in a long time, she felt that she looked quite nice. Billy's infidelity had cut her deep and severely dented her confidence and she was trying to get it back, but it wasn't easy. She spoke to herself the way she'd read that you should do, like a caring friend would, but even then it was hard to believe that she was all the good things she said to herself. That was the problem with trusting someone with your heart. If they hurt you, it could cause damage that was hard to reverse.

‘Let’s see then!’ Zara’s voice dragged Erin from the changing room and she stepped out into the shop and found her sister waiting. ‘I knew it would suit you!’ Zara clapped her hands and whistled. ‘It’s gorgeous on you, sweetie.’

Erin blushed under her sister’s praise and her blush deepened when she realised that Darcie and another woman were also gazing at her.

‘That is lovely on you,’ Darcie said. ‘Don’t you agree, Ellie?’

‘Oh I do!’ The woman named Ellie nodded. ‘It’s gorgeous.’

‘Thanks.’ Erin swayed a bit then turned to her sister. ‘I love that skirt on you.’

‘Cheers!’ Zara smoothed her hands over the skirt. ‘I think it’ll go well with a boob tube on Christmas Day, don’t you?’

Erin grimaced and Zara giggled. ‘Joking! I have a plain black jumper that will look nice with it. I’ll leave the boob tubes to Angelina.’

‘Good plan,’ Erin said although she really hoped no one would be wearing boob tubes as they ate turkey dinner. It would be rather off putting, she thought.

‘Right let’s get changed then we can go and get a warm drink.’ Zara gestured at the changing rooms and Erin went back inside.

When she was dressed in her own clothes again, she wound her scarf around her neck and put her coat on then pushed the curtain aside. At the counter, Darcie and Ellie were busy pricing up clothing so she walked over and placed the dress on the counter.

‘Can I tempt you into buying anything to go with this?’ Ellie asked. ‘I work here part time,’ she said by way of explanation.

‘Oh, right.’ Erin nodded. ‘Ummm... Did you have something in mind?’

Ellie went over to a shelf and picked up a few things then returned to Erin's side. 'I thought that these beads would go with the dress.' She placed a necklace on the skirt and stood back. The multi strand necklace was made of gold and black beads and looked really good with the dress. 'They're vintage 70s.'

'I love them. I'll take them too,' Erin said. 'Thank you.'

'You're getting good at this, Ellie,' Darcie said with a smile.

When Zara eventually emerged from the changing room, she had several garments draped over her arm and Erin realised that she was clearly getting them all. 'Mum and Dad can get them for me for Christmas,' Zara said with a grin.

They left the shop with their new purchases in paper bags with a dragonfly print on the side and Erin closed the door carefully behind her.

'Look!' Zara pointed at the sky and Erin looked up. It had darkened during their time in Dragonfly Dreams and now flakes of snow were swirling down. They melted as soon as they touched the pavement, but she suspected that if it kept going like this then it would soon stick.

'Hot chocolate?' Zara said.

'Great idea.' Erin hooked her arm through Zara's and they headed for the café. 'This is lovely,' she said, giving her sister's arm a squeeze.

'I'm enjoying myself too. It's so nice to spend some time with you,' Zara said.

'It really is.' Erin smiled, realising that though she might have lost the life she'd had, there was a whole new one ahead of her and right now it looked very promising indeed.

Chapter 18

Leo

Leo placed the cutlery on the table then added the napkins that Cain had given him. He'd done some work on his laptop that afternoon, wanting to stay in the loop with things, then he'd showered and gone down to see what he could do to help. He hadn't seen much of Erin today, except in passing, but she'd been out for most of the day with Zara and when they'd returned they'd both gone to freshen up and, he suspected, to take a nap.

'Anything else I can do?' he asked Cain in the kitchen.

'No that's great, thanks.' Cain shook his head. 'Oh... actually you could grab some wine from the fridge and open a bottle?'

'No problem.'

Cain left the kitchen and Leo opened the wine then set the bottle on the table.

'Better get some champagne ready too.' Leo turned to find Paul standing in the doorway.

'Oh? Are we celebrating something?'

'We might be.' Paul winked at him.

'I think I saw some in the fridge.' Leo had seen more than one bottle in there but assumed it was for Christmas Day.

'I stocked up earlier,' Paul said.

Leo looked at his friend and noted that he was wearing a smart navy shirt with dark jeans and that he was freshly

shaven.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked Paul.

‘Wait and see.’ Paul grinned then left the room.

Leo straightened some of the cutlery then wiped the side of the bottle of wine with a napkin. What was Paul up to? He could be impulsive, Leo had known him long enough to be aware of this fact, but if Paul was plotting something he usually let Leo know what was going on. They’d always been close and Leo wasn’t used to Paul keeping things from him. But then they were adult men now and Paul was entitled to have secrets, but for some reason this one was making Leo feel a bit uneasy.

Soon, everyone made their way to the kitchen and took their seats at the table. Angelina was still limping, making the most of her injury from the walk at Box Hill, Leo thought, but it hadn’t stopped her putting on a pair of rose gold cork wedges with her white skinny jeans.

When everyone was seated, Paul tapped the side of his wine glass with a spoon.

‘Good evening family.’ He smiled around the table. ‘I wanted to take this opportunity to say how grateful I am to be here with you all this evening, including my beautiful girlfriend, Angelina.’ He paused. ‘I have something I need to attend to and I want to do it now because, to be honest, I can’t wait a second longer. I had planned on doing this on Christmas morning but hey... there’s no time like the present.’

He stood up and slid a hand into his shirt pocket then went down on one knee next to Angelina’s chair. She squealed and waved her hands in the air. ‘Paulie? What’re you doing?’

‘Ahem,’ Paul said. ‘Angelina... You are unlike any other woman I’ve ever met, and I am madly in love with you. I can’t imagine being without you now, just the thought is like a knife piercing my heart. You brighten every day with your beauty, your kindness and the way you make me feel so cared about. I need you like I need air, water and food. I need you in my

world now and for always. Angelina, darling, will you please do me the honour of becoming my wife?’

The room fell silent. Leo pushed a finger between his collar and his throat, feeling suddenly parched. What was Paul doing? Was he sure about this? Angelina was nice enough but marriage? It was such a big commitment. But he must have suspected deep down that this was what Paul had planned because he’d felt uneasy about it earlier.

‘Paulie, darling, of course I’ll marry you!’ Angelina held out her left hand and Paul slid a platinum band with an enormous diamond onto her finger. She moved her hand from side to side and the diamond caught the light and Leo knew that it must have cost a small fortune, probably Paul’s entire Christmas bonus.

Leo heard a gasp from across the table and noticed that Erin had gone dreadfully pale. Her lips were parted and she looked like she might cry at any moment.

‘Paulie... I have some news for you too,’ Angelina said as she slid a hand down her low-cut purple jumper and pulled out a white, plastic stick. ‘We’re going to be parents!’

‘What?’ Paul’s face moved from jubilant to shocked to delighted all within seconds. ‘Y-you’re pregnant?’

He stood up and Angelina joined him. ‘Yes! I haven’t been feeling great lately and then I did a test because my period was late and... and... we’re going to have a baby. Isn’t it amazing?’

Paul embraced Angelina and Leo looked away as they started to kiss. He met Erin’s gaze across the table and was surprised to see that there were tears in her eyes. She quietly pushed her chair out and slipped away from the table as her parents congratulated their son and his new fiancée.

‘Congratulations!’ Leo said, patting Paul on the back then kissing Angelina’s cheek before leaving the room in Erin’s wake. He found her in the lounge, sitting on the sofa, her head in her hands. ‘Erin?’ He approached her cautiously as if he

was afraid of startling her but she didn't look up and he felt scared. What had upset her so badly?

'Erin?' He sat next to her and reached for one of her hands, taking it gently between his. 'Are you OK?'

She sniffed then looked up and to his dismay he saw that her cheeks were streaked with tears.

'It... It should've been me getting engaged this year. Possibly even pregnant too.' She was trembling and Leo wasn't sure if it was shock or the cold so he grabbed the throw off the back of the sofa and wrapped it around her shoulders. From the kitchen he could hear the sound of champagne being corked and cheers of celebration.

'You were getting engaged?' he asked softly.

'Yes. Well, no. I mean... I had hoped that Billy would ask me sooner rather than later and I always imagined that I'd have a baby before I turned thirty.'

'I see,' he said. 'But now Paul's the one who's engaged and is expecting?'

'Y-yes!' She rubbed at her eyes with her free hand. 'P-Paul... the one of us that we never thought would get married or possibly ever become a dad. It wasn't what he wanted at all.'

'Not before, no, but he seems to really care about Angelina.'

'I know.' She nodded. 'I am happy for them. V-very happy... b-but I just wish that...'

'You were getting married too?' he asked.

'Y-yes.' She covered her face with her hands again and Leo rubbed her back in slow circles over the blanket, hoping he was offering her some comfort.

When Erin finally looked up, Leo offered her a tissue from the box on the side table and she wiped at her eyes and her face. 'I'm a terrible person and a dreadful sister, aren't I?'

‘Not at all.’ He shook his head. ‘I’ll be honest with you, I’m surprised that Paul’s engaged and expecting too and while I am happy for my oldest mate, I also wish I was as happy as he is. I can’t remember the last time I felt that good about life.’

‘Oh Leo, I’m so sorry.’ Erin took his hand now and squeezed his fingers. ‘I’m being selfish. You’ve been through so much and lost so much and I’m so terribly sorry for your loss.’

‘It’s not your fault and certainly nothing you need to apologise for. We’re people with feelings and that’s just fine.’

Zara appeared in the doorway, and she raised her eyebrows in question. ‘Everything all right in here?’

Leo looked at Erin and she nodded. ‘Bit of a shock.’

‘Tell me about it,’ Zara said in a stage whisper. ‘Paul getting married and having a baby! Whatever next?’

Erin giggled at her sister’s expression. ‘I can’t believe it.’

‘Me neither and between us, I think Mum and Dad are in shock too. But they’re doing a good job of showing him and Angelina that they’re pleased, bless them. At least they get to be grandparents now though, right?’

Erin stiffened next to Leo and he scanned her face.

‘Oh god, Erin, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it might’ve sounded,’ Zara said. ‘I meant because Dad’s been ill and he’s always wanted to be a grandparent and now he will be one and... I’m going to shut my big mouth now before I make it worse.’

‘It’s fine,’ Erin said. ‘I knew what you meant. It’s just a shock and yes, I did want to make him and mum grandparents, but it wasn’t meant to be.’

‘Erin, you’re only twenty-eight,’ Leo said. ‘You have plenty of time.’

‘But does Dad?’ Zara said and Erin and Leo both turned to look at her.

‘Don’t say that!’ Erin said. ‘He’s going to live forever.’

‘I bloody hope so but who knows?’ Zara held up her hands.

‘None of us know how long we have and Dad’s on the mend now.’ Erin sniffed. ‘He’s got years ahead of him.’

‘I hope so.’ Zara nodded. ‘I really do. And you are going to meet someone and get married and have plenty of lovely babies and make me a very proud aunt.’

Erin shrugged. ‘I don’t know about that.’

‘You will!’ Zara inclined her head and set her jaw. ‘Who knows... the man you’re going to fall in love with could be in this very village. On this street. Hell, he could even be under this roof right now!’

Leo was nodding along until he realised what Zara had just said. He felt his eyes widen in surprise and he met her teasing gaze. Zara merely winked at him then said, ‘I’ll get back to the kitchen and tell them you’ll join us shortly, shall I?’

‘Thanks.’ Erin nodded. When Zara had gone, Erin turned on the sofa to look at Leo. ‘Sorry, Leo.’

‘What for?’

‘For what Zara said about the man being here under this roof.’ She laughed nervously.

Leo shrugged. ‘It’s fine. I mean... Is it that terrible a prospect?’

‘Is what a terrible prospect?’

He scanned her face, her clear skin and beautiful blue eyes, the soft downy hair at her hairline and the thick length of it that tumbled over her shoulders. God she was beautiful!

‘The idea of you and... and... and me.’

Her lips parted and she frowned. ‘You mean... Y-you like me? Like *that*?’

He gave an embarrassed chuckle. He had no idea how she’d feel about the thought of being with him and he was simultaneously dreading rejection but also feeling incredibly nervous that he might not be ready for something like this.

‘Look, Erin, I... I’ve always liked you. Always been fond of you. But you are my best friend’s younger sister and it’s not like... the *done thing* to go after a mate’s sister. There’s a code.’

‘A code, eh?’ She smiled and a gentle flush stole into her cheeks. ‘And you like to stick to the code?’

‘I have done so far but hey... we’re all getting older and —’

He was silenced by her lips as they met his and her hands entwined behind his head. He froze for a moment but then, something inside him seemed to unfurl like the petals of a flower opening to the sun and before he knew what was happening, he had pulled Erin close, and he was kissing her back. Their lips pressed against each other, their tongues tangled together, and desire rushed through Leo’s whole body. It had been so long since he’d felt this alive and it was all because of Erin. When they finally parted, they were both breathless.

‘Wow!’ he said. ‘Who knew?’

‘Who knew indeed?’ Erin smiled shyly at him but there was something in her eyes that made his stomach clench. ‘I think we’d better join the others but... thanks for that.’

‘No, thank you.’

He brushed a few strands of hair from her cheek then pressed a kiss there and a soft sigh escaped her lips. The kind of sigh that made him long to embrace her again and kiss her sweet mouth, trail kisses down her neck and lower. That...

He shook himself. *Not now and not here.*

He stood up and held out a hand. ‘Shall we?’

‘Sure.’

She slid the blanket off her shoulders, folded it and placed it back on the sofa then they returned to the kitchen together. Leo was confused, elated and trying to work out if he’d just made a huge mistake or done the best thing for both of them. But he couldn’t deny that while in some ways, it could be

construed as wrong, it felt incredibly, undeniably, deliciously right.

Chapter 19

Erin

Sitting at the dinner table with her family, Erin passed the garlic bread along. Paul and Angelina were all smiles, in fact, they were both glowing with happiness and it made her realise that they were actually in love. This was not a passing fancy or whim of Paul's; it was real, and it seemed, for keeps. Paul would be married soon and become a father and her heart filled with joy for him. Plus, it dawned on her that she would become an aunt and there was a lot of joy to be found in that idea. And then, there were her parents who both looked ecstatic. How wonderful for them that they would soon have a little grandchild to love and adore.

Not forgetting the fact that... SHE HAD KISSED LEO!

OMG! I kissed Leo!

After all these years. And it had been a bloody amazing kiss that had made her whole body blaze with yearning and that had made her heart race like she'd just run a marathon. It was all she could do not to stand on her chair and dance. All those years when she was younger, thinking that Leo was gorgeous and sophisticated and believing that he thought she was just his best friend's younger sister. Which she was. But now they were both adults and the dynamic had changed. They were, she knew, also both nursing their own traumas and so neither of them came to this — whatever *this* was — unscathed or without baggage but wasn't that the way with all relationships that occurred when people were adults? Who didn't have baggage or pain in their past? It would be

incredibly rare to find a person in their late twenties or early thirties who hadn't been in love at least once.

She reached for her flute of champagne and took a sip, wrinkling her nose as the bubbles teased the tip. It was a night for celebrating in more ways than one and she was going to enjoy every minute.

She glanced at Leo, wondering what he was thinking. Was he happy too or was he regretting kissing her? She didn't think so because he'd certainly seemed enthusiastic and he was quite a serious man, not the type to kiss just anyone. And the way he had kissed her felt like he meant it. Like he *really, really* meant it.

But where could this go? They were living in different cities. They both had things from their pasts that they needed to sort through. After all, Erin still felt anger at what Billy had done and she knew that Leo was still hurting after losing his partner. Could there be a way ahead for them or had it just been a very pleasant kiss?

Leo looked up and met her gaze and his smile warmed her right through. It was, she thought, time to stop worrying and overthinking. She was here for Christmas and so was Leo. They might only have the next week or so and it was highly possible that after that time, they'd both return to their lives and carry on as before. But for now, for Christmas, she could enjoy herself and so could he. Not everything in life needed to lead somewhere. It was quite all right sometimes to live in the moment and to enjoy what was happening right then and there.

She raised her glass and cleared her throat then said, 'I'd like to take this opportunity to wish Paul and Angelina the very best for the future. I'm so excited I'm going to be an aunt. Congratulations, you two!'

Angelina smiled but her eyes glistened and Paul wrapped an arm around her shoulders and raised his glass. 'Thanks, Erin, that means a lot. It really does.'

Angelina nodded. 'Thank you. I'm so happy I could burst.'

‘Here’s to you and to a magical Christmas for us all.’ Erin clinked her glass against Leo’s then took a sip of champagne.

‘Here’s to us all,’ Leo said, holding her gaze, and she knew that his eyes were saying far more than his words ever could.

Chapter 20

Erin

Two days later, they were all heading into London to do some Christmas shopping and to soak up the atmosphere. They got the train from the village station and Erin settled back to watch as the scenery flew past. Zara was sitting next to her playing on her phone and opposite her, Paul and Angelina were looking at possible wedding venues on his smartphone. It seemed you had to book a venue well in advance, but that was OK with them as they'd decided to get married after the baby came so he or she could be present at the ceremony, which Erin thought was sweet. She also suspected that Angelina wouldn't want to be pregnant at her wedding as she was already gushing about the perfect wedding dress she'd always dreamt of wearing.

The train jogged Erin gently and she allowed herself to relax as she thought about the past few days. There had been no more kisses with Leo but then they'd barely had a minute alone and neither of them wanted to make what had happened between them common knowledge, so they'd shared sweet smiles and texted each other goodnight emojis but that was as far as it had gone. Erin thought that it might have been a one off, and she was fine with that. Well... she wanted to be fine with that, but she couldn't help hoping that they might kiss again or at least talk about it and what it had meant to him. And yet, she wasn't really sure what it had meant to her. What were her feelings for Leo? Was he just a crush she'd nursed for years that would fizzle out now that she'd kissed him or were her feelings for him deeper and more complex?

Right now, he was talking to her dad on the opposite side of the aisle. She wasn't sure what they were discussing but thought it probably had something to do with politics. Her dad was quite animated and Leo was nodding slowly as he listened. That was the thing with Leo, when he spoke to you, he also listened. *Really* listened. It made her aware of how little Billy had actually paid attention. All those times when she'd tried to speak to him about things and he'd been on his phone, distracted by a game or an app or something he was reading. Now she thought about it, he'd probably been reading text messages from *her*. His other woman.

Bloody cheating, lying, dishonest Billy!

She snorted. Why she was finding this funny now, she wasn't sure, but it was like some of the power Billy had held over her had dissipated and she could laugh at how ridiculous he'd been. He had been such a stickler for some things and she'd gone along with them because she'd loved him and wanted him to be happy. Thinking about it now, she'd compromised a lot to be the version of herself that he'd wanted her to be. She'd kept quiet in the mornings because he didn't like her chatting or singing before he'd had his second coffee. After coffee, he'd usually rush off to the gym, leaving her to fill her morning alone. And that was on their days off when she'd hoped to spend time with him and to go and do something like other couples did. She'd often felt lonely with being away from her home in the UK and because Billy had discouraged her from making friends in Dubai, telling her he liked having her all to himself. The reality had been that he liked knowing she was home while he went out and not cared about it being lonely for her. However, she'd never been one to moan and so she'd filled her time with the things she could like reading and watching TV, with planning for school and creating beautiful resources for the pupils she taught, with making video calls to her parents and siblings and sometimes, online shopping. There had been good times with Billy, of course there had or she'd never have stayed with him. Like in the early days of their relationship he had been caring and attentive, had made her feel treasured and adored, that he was genuinely interested in her. Was it possible then that he'd

found himself trapped, that his feelings for her had changed and he'd wanted out but not known how to tell her? They'd moved in together and talked about a future but then, something had altered and they'd started to drift apart. Had that been when he'd met his new girlfriend or had he met her after he'd realised that he didn't love Erin in the way he'd first believed? One thing was for certain and that was that Erin would never sacrifice who she was or how she lived her life for a man ever again. Any future relationships would be on her terms and with balance because when she'd lost Billy, she'd been bereft, had no one to turn to out in Dubai and so she'd come home to her parents and they'd helped her put the pieces of her life back together again. It had been such a mess. But that was in the past now and she had plenty to look forward to.

Zara lowered her phone and turned to Erin. 'Did you see anything strange outside last night?'

'Like what?'

'Well, when I was getting ready for bed, I thought I heard something, so I looked out the bedroom window and I'm sure I saw a man with a sledge being pulled by a dog.'

Erin snorted. 'Don't be daft.'

'I did. He was riding along the village green, and he was wearing a Santa hat and a red cape.'

Erin giggled. 'You're pulling my leg. There wasn't enough snow for a sledge.'

'There was some snow on the ground and a hard frost. Anyway, it could have had wheels or been greased along the bottom.'

'Why would someone be sledging along the green?'

'I don't know. Practising for Christmas Eve?' Zara pouted. 'It's perfectly possible.'

'Yeah, right. I'm sure it is. Exactly how much wine did you have last night with dinner?'

Zara shook her head. 'Mock me if you will but I definitely saw something. Perhaps he'll be out again tonight.'

‘I’ll make sure to have a good look in case I spot him.’ Erin winked at her sister and laughed as Zara shrugged.

‘Don’t believe me then.’ Zara waggled her eyebrows. ‘It’s no stranger than you and Leo having a snog.’

‘What?’ Erin sat bolt upright as if her seat had just given her an electric shock.

‘Now you’re alert, right?’ Zara laughed and Erin’s cheeks flushed red hot. ‘It’s OK, sis, your secret’s safe with me. I for one think it’s about time you two got it on anyway.’

‘There’s nothing going on. And yes... keep it to yourself.’ Erin sat back and stared out of the window again but her cheeks were still burning. Zara had seen her and Leo kissing? Had she come into the lounge when they were distracted and not said anything until now? What if one of her parents had seen them? Or Paul or Angelina. They might have thought she was trying to steal their thunder or something along those lines. And she hadn’t been but she’d been lost in the moment, in her feelings and in Leo.

To distract herself, she pulled her phone out of her bag and looked at her shopping list. She had a few things to get and she hoped she’d be able to pick them up in London today. Unfortunately, she had no idea what she was going to get for Leo, but she had to get him something. After all, he deserved a lovely gift waiting for him underneath the Christmas tree.

Chapter 21

Leo

When they got to London, they headed for Covent Garden first, keen to get a look at the Christmas decorations. This year, there was a much-anticipated Christmas installation inspired by golden bells. There were lights to admire with gigantic golden bells with red bows, giant glittery baubles and spinning mirror balls all displayed in the iconic Market Building.

‘I want my photo taken in the sleigh, Paul,’ Angelina said as they approached the 1884 carriage at the West Piazza. It was traditionally decorated in red and gold and behind it were beautifully adorned Christmas trees. They took their place in the queue and waited, watching as couples and families posed for photos to share with family and friends. Soon enough, it was their turn. Paul and Angelina went first, him placing a protective arm around her shoulders and they smiled at Cain as he snapped away on his phone. Then Cain, Robyn and Zara squeezed in and Erin took photographs of them.

‘Do you want to go in with Zara or your parents or... uhhh... with me?’ Leo asked.

‘With you, of course! Come on.’ Erin took his hand and led him to the sleigh and they climbed up then smiled as Zara took photographs of them. It was a bittersweet moment for Leo because it was lovely to be there with Erin, smiling at her family, but he’d also done this years ago with Shelley. It meant that the ghosts of Christmas past danced around the edges of his awareness, reminding him of what he’d lost even as he was

trying to appreciate what he'd gained. What he could still gain if luck was on his side.

When they got down from the sleigh, Zara said, 'Where next?'

'Why don't we just wander around and enjoy it?' Cain said and they all agreed.

They gazed in awe at the 60-foot Christmas tree in the main piazza decorated with over 30,000 lights and wrapped up with a large red bow. Leo thought it was magnificent and a spark of excitement shot through him, reminding him of how he'd felt about Christmas as a child. Back then it had been a good time filled with fun and laughter, with gifts under the tree and rituals like putting out a mince pie and a sherry for Santa and carrots for the reindeer. Then he would stay awake for as long as he could as he tried to listen for Santa parking the sleigh on the roof of his childhood home. It was so unusual to experience such a moment of unadulterated joy that tears sprang into his eyes and he closed them for a few seconds to clear his vision.

'I don't know about the rest of you but I'm peckish,' Cain said, making his wife laugh.

'You're always peckish, darling,' she said.

They walked around and found a pop-up stall selling Christmas sandwiches filled with turkey, cranberry and stuffing then bought mulled punch to wash them down, except for Angelina who had a hot chocolate. Leo noticed how she kept removing her glove so she could admire the diamond ring on her left hand. It was sweet how taken she was with it and what it meant to her, especially when Paul took her hand and pressed a kiss on the ring as if to seal the deal. Leo hoped that they would be happy together and that the future held years of wonderful times for them.

'That was delicious,' Leo said, wiping his mouth with a festive napkin.

'It was,' Erin agreed. 'And the punch was quite strong.'

He smiled at her, admiring her flushed cheeks and the shine in her eyes. She looked happy and relaxed and it was nice to see. She was so beautiful that his heart squeezed and he had to stop himself reaching for her to kiss her and find out if he could taste the mulled punch on her soft lips.

After wandering around the shops for a bit, they made some purchases then they went to Oxford Street. They went straight to Selfridges to look at the window displays, and Leo was as impressed as he was every year by the variety on offer. This year there was a mixture of traditional and modern scenes, all beautifully festive with plenty of shades of red, gold, green and lots of fake snow. Standing next to Erin as she gazed in each window, Leo found himself wanting to take her hand. He held back but he felt so drawn to her, more and more each day, and he was longing to kiss her again. He had never thought to desire Erin like this, had never thought he'd ever want to be with anyone again after losing Shelley, but this year, he found that something inside him was changing. Losing his mum too had been hard and he was wary of his feelings because he knew he was vulnerable, and yet, he suspected that what he felt for Erin was more than just a whim. He'd known her a long time, had seen her grow up, and now they were no longer children or teenagers but adults with jobs and pasts, with needs and wants and hopes and dreams.

‘Erin?’ he said softly. ‘What are your dreams?’

She looked up at him, confusion in her eyes before her lips turned upwards into a smile. ‘My dreams? That’s a deep question.’

He nodded. ‘Blame the punch.’

She chuckled. ‘To be healthy and happy.’

‘And what makes you happy?’

‘Honesty. Integrity. Respect.’

‘All good things to have in a partner.’

‘I’d like to have a special someone, to have a future to look forward to with them and to have a family of my own. I know that’s traditional but it’s what I want. I always thought I’d

want it one day but after last year... Well... it feels even more important to me. I'd like my partner to be someone who gets on with my family, who likes and respects them and who loves me *for me*. Who doesn't dislike things about me so much that he can't bear to be around me. But...' She chewed at her bottom lip.

'What is it?'

'Perhaps I'm asking too much.'

'I don't think so,' he said. 'Not at all. You should never settle for less than you want. And your partner should adore you for who you are and realise how bloody lucky he is to be with you. Plus... You are entitled to your dreams.'

'Thank you, Leo. You're such a kind man.'

He looked around them and saw that her family were further along the street so he removed his glove and gently brushed the back of his fingers against her cheek. She exhaled shakily and her pupils dilated. He couldn't help himself; he leant forwards and kissed her pretty pink lips. When he leant back, she was smiling up at him and he knew he'd done the right thing.

'And you, dear Erin, are an incredible woman. The man who let go of you was a fool.'

Emboldened by kissing her, he took her hand and they walked along the pavement to look at the next window. Leo felt comforted by being with someone he cared about, by not feeling alone as he had done for so long, by being with Erin and her family on this lovely December day.

Chapter 22

Erin

When they joined her family again, Erin let go of Leo's hand, not wanting to face questions or curious glances but she did stay close to Leo's side and they shared regular secret smiles.

'Shall we go to Hamleys?' she said.

'I'd like that,' Leo replied.

'Me too.' Angelina nodded.

'Well your mum and I still have some gifts to get for you lot, so shall we meet up outside Hamleys in an hour?' Cain asked.

'I'll come with you, Dad,' Zara said.

They parted ways then Erin, Leo, Paul and Angelina headed for Regent Street and went into Hamleys, agreeing to meet outside later because they all wanted to browse without worrying about losing each other.

'OK if I tag along with you?' Leo said.

'I was hoping you might.' Erin held out her hand and he took it. They roamed the seven floors, all festively decorated, browsing cuddly toys, Lego, dressing-up clothes, dolls and more. There were demonstrations of the latest trending toys and games and friendly staff on every floor offered assistance and recommendations.

'It makes you want to be a child again just to enjoy the magic,' Erin said.

‘Oh I don’t know,’ Leo replied. ‘It feels kind of magical anyway.’

Erin smiled shyly then pointed at a cute teddy bear wearing a faux fur coat with a hood. ‘I’d like to get that for the baby.’

‘It’s very early days, though,’ he said. ‘Not that I want to advise caution but sometimes it’s better to wait until after the first scan.’

‘I know.’ She nodded. ‘But everything will be OK, I’m sure.’

‘I hope so. Paul and Angelina seem very happy about the pregnancy.’

‘It is wonderful news.’ Erin let go of his hand and picked up the bear then ran her hand over its soft head. ‘About the other day... I’m really sorry. I’m not a diva and I’d hate for you to think I was being spoiled or bitter.’

‘Erin, I could never think that about you. I understand why you were upset. And there’s nothing wrong with feeling things.’

‘Thank you for being here and for comforting me. You’ve been through so much yourself and yet you held me and comforted me and it meant a lot.’

‘To me too.’ He took the bear from her and looked at it. ‘How’re you feeling now?’

‘Glad that you’re here. I always... had a crush on you.’

He grinned. ‘I know.’

‘What? How did you know?’

‘The blushing. The shy smiles. The times you ignored me.’

‘I was that obvious, hey?’

‘Yeah but I had a crush on you too. Not when you were much younger, I hasten to add. But as you got older, I could see how pretty you were and we always got on well, didn’t we?’

‘But you never made a move.’

‘How could I make a move? You were younger and my best friend’s little sister. There’s a code, you know?’

‘A code?’

‘Yeah. You don’t hit on your friend’s sister.’

‘Oh...’ She hung her head. ‘That’s a shame.’

‘When you’re kids, I meant. But we’re adults now and Paul has his own family coming together. I’m sure it wouldn’t be such a big deal to him now.’

‘I think he’d be OK about it. Like Ross in *Friends* when he finds out about Monica and Chandler.’

Leo laughed. ‘Not that first time Ross sees them together though!’

‘Oh my goodness, no! Through the apartment window ripping each other’s clothes off.’

‘Yeah.’ Leo widened his eyes.

‘Not that we’re going to do that.’ She took the bear back from him and stared at it as if it had the answers to all her questions.

‘You don’t fancy ripping my clothes off then?’

‘Do you want me to?’ She met his gaze and saw mischief in his eyes. ‘You’re teasing me.’

‘I am.’ He reached out and touched her cheek in the way he’d done on the street and her body stirred. She’d never felt like this before. Billy hadn’t had that effect on her. But then Billy had been selfish, even in bed. ‘But hey... I could rip your clothes off some time. If you want me to, Erin.’

Erin giggled. ‘Maybe I would like that.’

‘Maybe I will.’

She nudged him playfully and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed her against his side. They stayed that way for a moment, both gazing at the bear without really seeing it. Both lost in thoughts that made their cheeks flushed.

When they started wandering around the shop again, they kept picking things up so in the end, Leo got a basket and he carried it while Erin held his arm. It felt like they were a couple, making decisions together, touching each other and flirting in a way that made her feel excited about what the future held in store.

Chapter 23

Leo

The next two days passed in a flurry of wrapping gifts and tucking them under the Christmas tree in the lounge then with a group trip to the supermarket to get everything that was needed for Christmas dinner. By the evening of the 23rd, Robyn and Cain declared that everything was ready and it was time to relax and enjoy the next few days.

This evening they were going to carols at the village green and Leo was looking forward to it. He hadn't been to a carol concert in years, but this would be outdoors and there would be refreshments provided. It also meant more time with Erin and that was always a positive as far as he was concerned.

He pulled on his woolly hat and slid his arms into his coat then headed downstairs to join the others. It was strange knowing that he was under the same roof as Erin, that they were sleeping in the same house, just feet away from each other and all the while he had these feelings for her that seemed to be growing at an exponential rate. Or had they always been there, simmering beneath the surface, waiting for the right time to emerge? The thing was that he knew if Shelley had still been alive then this would never have happened because he'd loved her and never would have done anything to hurt her, but she was gone and so his life was different from the life he'd thought he'd have.

In the hallway, Erin and her family were waiting so he joined them then they left the house and crossed the road to the village green. A giant tree decked with lights stood at the centre of the green and more lights were strung from lamp

posts and signs and they swayed now in the gentle breeze casting a warm colourful glow across the grass. Quite a crowd had gathered and some people were queueing for hot dogs, mince pies, mulled cider and wine. Paul and Cain went to get drinks for everyone and Leo waited with the women, standing as close to Erin as he could get away with without arousing suspicion.

When Cain and Paul returned, they all stood sipping their drinks and waiting with a growing sense of anticipation as a hush fell over the green. When the first notes of *Silent Night* rang through the air on a violin, goosebumps rose on Leo's arms. The crowd of villagers joined in and he did too, feeling himself transported to times gone by when he'd spent Christmas with his mum and Shelley. He wasn't even aware of the tears trickling down his cheeks until Erin slid her arm through his and gently patted his cheeks with a tissue, taking care of him in a way no one had for what felt like ages.

'It's OK,' she said, her bottom lip wobbling. 'It's all OK.'

He gulped back his emotions, not wanting to crumble here in this public place but it was hard, especially when the music had roused such emotion inside him. It felt like a tidal wave that would sweep over him if he let it and so he took slow, deep breaths as he tried to regain his composure. Erin held on, his anchor in a stormy sea, keeping him standing, keeping him afloat and his heart swelled with gratitude and something else. With something that he could only describe as love.

The song changed to *Let it Snow*, and at that moment, there was a collective gasp from the crowd. Looking up, Leo started to laugh because big, fat snowflakes were floating down from the black night sky. Erin slid her arm around his waist and they swayed back and forth as the song continued, singing along with everyone else. The surge of raw emotion began ebbing away and in its place, Leo felt hope. Hope that there would be more moments like this. Hope that life could be good again. Hope that something might happen with this wonderful woman at his side.

Not caring what anyone thought and keen to live for the moment, as the song ended, he turned Erin in his arms,

lowered his head then kissed her. He looked up for a moment and whispered, 'Is this OK?'

'Of course it is,' she said, so he pulled her close and kissed her again. She seemed to melt against him and he breathed her in, the scent of her skin, the scent of her hair, the scent of her.

When they finally came up for air, both self-conscious that they'd been snogging on the green in front of everyone, he was relieved to see that most of the crowd had wandered over to the food stalls and it was just him and Erin along with a few stragglers near the tree.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Now I've started kissing you I can't seem to stop.'

'Don't apologise,' she said. 'I'm not sorry.'

'What about your parents?'

She shrugged. 'They know as well as anyone that life's short and you have to grab happiness when you can.'

He nodded at the sense in her words. 'It is short and things can change at any given moment.'

'So let's have a wonderful Christmas and leave any worrying until January.'

'Deal,' he said, then he kissed her again.



On the way back to the house, something caught Leo's eye and he turned to get a better look. 'Is that a sledge being pulled by a dog?' he asked.

Erin followed his gaze and laughed. 'Zara told me she'd seen that the other day but I was sceptical. To be honest I thought she was winding me up.'

There was quite a bit of snow on the ground now and it was still falling from the sky, making the village feel like it had been covered by a cold white blanket. The air had a

muffled feel and sounds didn't seem to be carrying so a calming hush had fallen over the village.

'Perhaps it's one of Santa's elves,' he said with a grin.

'Perhaps it's Santa himself,' Erin replied. 'Leo... I've been thinking. Why don't you come to my room tonight? We can keep each other warm.'

He glanced at her parents who were walking behind them with the others. 'I don't know... It feels a bit strange under your parents' roof. Doesn't it?'

'I guess it does. But my room is far away from theirs and we can just cuddle. I'd really like to be held. I feel like I need to be held by you.'

'OK then. I'll come to your room. But just for a cuddle.' He winked at her and she giggled.

'Just a cuddle,' she agreed.

When they reached the house, Leo turned to look at Sunflower Street before he closed the door. The snow was piling up on the ground, the cars parked on the street, the driveways and the roofs of houses. It was beautiful, exactly like a scene from a chocolate box.

'It's wonderful here,' he said.

'It is but not as wonderful as you,' Erin replied, taking his hand and pulling him inside.

Chapter 24

Erin

Erin padded downstairs on Christmas Eve filled with a sense of something that she hadn't felt since she was a lot younger. She placed a hand on her belly when she reached the bottom step and tried to work out what it was. Then she realised. She felt excited. Filled with anticipation. And she liked it. A lot!

She checked her appearance in the hallway mirror, tried to tame her bed hair by running her fingers through it and tucking it behind her ears, then headed for the kitchen where she found her parents sitting at the island drinking coffee.

'Morning, Erin,' her mum said.

'Morning!' She breezed across the kitchen and helped herself to coffee then leant against the unit looking out of the window. 'Wow! It's a winter wonderland out there today.'

'It is indeed. Seems like the snow came thumping down last night,' her dad said.

'Well I didn't hear a thing because I slept like a log.' Erin turned to face her parents and found them both looking at her with their heads tilted as if they were assessing her. 'What?'

'Everything all right is it, Erin?' her mum asked.

'Yes everything's great. Why?'

Her mum cocked a shapely brow then sighed. 'We know, Erin. We're not stupid.'

'Or naïve,' her dad added.

Erin stared at them both, feeling like a naughty teenager, wondering what they knew or thought they knew. Warmth crawled across her chest and up her neck then into her cheeks.

‘Erin, love, we know that Leo stayed with you last night.’

‘Oh!’ She grimaced involuntarily and licked her lips nervously. ‘Nothing happened. Nothing at all! It was just that I couldn’t sleep and Leo couldn’t sleep and so we ended up talking all night and... and...’

Her parents glanced at each other and burst out laughing.

‘Erin, you’re an adult and what you do is up to you.’ Her dad took a sip of coffee. ‘But... we still worry about you and do ask that you think carefully about what you’re doing and what you want from this. We don’t want to seem patronising or condescending or anything horrid like that but... just take care, angel.’

‘Yes, Dad,’ she said, nodding.

Nothing had happened. Well, not really. Leo had come to her room and they’d snuggled up in her bed and talked for hours, falling asleep just before dawn. They’d talked about the past, the present and the future, about what they both wanted from life and what they’d lost. It had been a calm, quiet discussion and it was the closest Erin had ever felt to a man. She could trust Leo, she knew she could, and it was so different from how things had been with Billy. And then, she’d fallen asleep with Leo’s strong arms around her, his head on her pillow next to hers and she had slept well until gone eight. When she’d woken, he’d kissed her gently then said he better get up and go back to his room, so no one would know that he’d stayed with her. (It seemed that hadn’t worked out how he’d expected.) It had probably been the most romantic night of her life and apart from a few kisses, nothing else had happened, and yet she felt closer to him than she had done to any man.

‘Erin, we can see that you and Leo like each other. We know that you’ve always liked each other but years ago, you were younger and not ready to be together. Now though, you might well be in a place in your lives when you can see what

could happen between you. But... bear in mind that Leo has been through a great deal, as have you. Relationships are complicated and neither of us wants to see you or Leo hurt in any way.’ Her mum smiled. ‘However, having said that, you were very hurt by what happened in Dubai and Billy and Leo are completely different people. Leo is a good man and he cares for you, that much is clear and always has been. So... what you do is up to the two of you but take care of your hearts, angel, won’t you?’

Erin nodded slowly. She knew her mum and dad were speaking out of love and that they meant well. And that was fine, that was good. They loved her and Leo, loved him like a son. Of course they wanted to see him and Erin happy. And if that was together then she suspected they’d be very happy indeed.

‘We’re good, Mum and Dad. Please don’t worry.’

‘We trust you,’ her dad said. ‘Now then... shall I whip up some smoked salmon blinis and scrambled egg for a special Christmas Eve breakfast? I’m sure some of us have worked up an appetite.’

‘That would be great, thanks, Dad.’ Erin paused as she noticed that he was waggling his eyebrows at her. ‘Dad! Behave yourself.’

He chuckled as he slid off his stool and went to the fridge and started getting breakfast things out. ‘I was talking about me and your mum, Erin.’

Erin shook her head. ‘Too much information, Dad!’

He continued chuckling as she made a hasty retreat from the kitchen before their dad told her how sexy he found their mum. There were some things a person didn’t need to know about their parents, even when they were a fully grown adult.

Chapter 25

Leo

‘**T**he village looks like a postcard,’ Erin said as they tramped through the snow. The air was icy and their breaths came out like puffs of smoke ahead of them then disappeared. Erin and Leo had invited everyone else for a walk but Angelina and Paul had said they were going to take a nap, Zara and Robyn had been settling down to watch *It’s a Wonderful Life* and Cain had been rolling out pastry in preparation for the beef wellington he was making for supper.

‘It is beautiful,’ Leo agreed. ‘It makes me wonder if perhaps I should think about moving out of London. I love the city but it’s very expensive and I could get more for my money out here plus... well... I’m not getting any younger.’

‘You’re still young.’ Erin laughed.

‘I’m thirty-four so yeah, not exactly old but I can see forty from here and I think I’d like to have a house or a cottage rather than an apartment by the time I hit the big 4-0.’

‘I’d like to have a home of my own too. The house share is all well and good but it’s not mine. I can’t do anything without consulting the others and then there are things that remind me of student life like people helping themselves to my milk or bread so when I get up in the morning I don’t have anything for breakfast. Plus they leave dishes in the sink, which I hate, so I have to wash up because I can’t stand the mess.’

‘That would drive me mad,’ he said. ‘I was glad to leave my student digs behind. Living with a group of lads was not conducive to a life of cleanliness.’

‘I bet!’ Erin shook her head. ‘But coming here... well, it’s lovely and I do think that I’d like to be closer to Mum and Dad. With him being ill earlier in the year, it was terrifying, and I want to be there for them if they need me. Plus, in a lot of ways, I still need them too and I want to make the most of my time with them.’

‘No one knows what’s around the corner. Thank goodness, because we’d all go crazy if we did.’

‘I think we would.’ Erin sighed.

‘Your dad seems well now though. He’ll probably outlive us all.’

‘That wouldn’t surprise me.’

They followed the road that took them past the pub and the garage. The pub windows glowed with light from inside and the sound of music drifted from the doorway. Christmas was already in full swing for some people. The garage was closed, the employees gone home early for Christmas Eve but the fairy lights on the tree in the yard still twinkled and swayed in the afternoon breeze.

Next, they passed the lido grounds, all closed for the winter, then the small village primary school before taking a left and following the path that led down to the woodland. Before they had left, Cain had given Erin a bag of birdseed so she could sprinkle some near the lake for any birds looking for food in the snow. It was typical of her dad to think of other creatures and how they were managing in the winter and yet another reason why she loved him.

The picnic area was deserted except for a robin that was hopping around on one of the snow-covered picnic tables. ‘What is it they say?’ Leo asked. ‘Robins appear when loved ones are near?’

‘That’s right.’ Erin smiled and they stopped walking and watched the tiny robin, his red breast bright against the white of the snow. ‘Do you believe in all that then?’

He shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I’d like to believe it because then I could imagine that the robin was my mum or...’

‘Shelley?’

He nodded. ‘Yeah. But I can’t quite get my head around the idea that the tiny bird could be my partner, my mum or even my dad.’

‘Perhaps don’t take it so literally then. Instead think that the robin is a sign that your loved ones are still with you, whatever shape or form that takes.’

‘I like that idea,’ he said, looking at Erin. In her purple bobble hat and warm sleeping-bag like coat with a scarf wrapped around her neck, she looked adorable. ‘Erin?’

‘Yes?’ She turned to him.

‘I’m really glad I accepted Paul’s invite to join you for Christmas. It would have been a lonely one otherwise.’

‘Of course it would have and I’m incredibly glad you decided to join us. Incredibly glad,’ she repeated herself and reached for him.

He stepped closer to her and opened his arms and she wrapped her arms around his waist. He rested his head on top of hers and they stood that way for a few moments, comforting each other and enjoying the simplicity of being together.

There was a ping then that seemed incongruous in the woodland area and Erin stepped back and pulled her phone from her pocket. ‘Better just check if it’s Mum or Dad needing something,’ she said.

She looked at her phone and the glow of it reflected in her eyes. Leo thought he had never seen anything more beautiful than Erin in this moment. But then... her expression changed and she went as white as the snow.

‘What’s wrong? Is it your dad?’ he asked.

She shook her head.

‘Your mum?’

Another shake of her head.

‘What is it then?’ He touched her arm but she flinched and he pulled his hand back.

She held out her phone and he took it then looked at the screen and instantly he understood what was wrong, what had destroyed their perfect moment of peace and tranquillity.

Chapter 26

Erin

Erin watched as Leo stared at her phone then nodded slowly as he began to understand what had shocked her.

She stood there trembling violently and it wasn't the cold that had sent her into this state but what she'd just seen on Instagram. She didn't look on there very often anymore, but her phone had updated this morning and she must have forgotten to turn off the notifications. The one that had come through had turned her stomach.

'I'm sorry,' Leo said, his voice soft, as he passed her phone back.

She looked at the screen again then slid it into her coat pocket. 'It's certainly not your fault.'

'I know that but it's not pleasant to seeing things like that and I'm sorry you had to see it.'

'He always said he didn't want to get married or have a family. But all along it was *me* he didn't want.' She placed a hand on her chest and swallowed hard against the pain there.

'He's a fool, Erin,' Leo said. 'An utter fool.'

Erin sucked in a shaky breath then pushed it out. 'No, not a fool. He was simply dishonest with me and also with himself for quite some time. He was afraid and I get that, afraid of being alone, but what he did wasn't fair. He shouldn't have strung me along like that until someone better came along.'

'Better?' Leo frowned. 'There's no one better than you. She's different but certainly not better. Please don't ever think

that.'

Erin brushed her gloved hand over her cheeks, wiping away the tears. 'I guess I knew this was coming. It was bound to happen at some point. It just took me by surprise today.'

She met Leo's gaze and the kindness she saw there, as well as something else that she wasn't quite sure how to take, made her smile. 'You're so kind, Leo. Thank you for what you said.'

'I'm not being kind or saying it for the sake of it, Erin. I'm telling you the truth. You are a wonderful person, an amazing daughter, sister and friend. And you're more than that... You're beautiful, kind, special, sweet, lovely, and I, for one, would love to have you in my life. Permanently. And I mean as more than a friend.'

She gazed at him, from his black beanie to his broad shoulders encased in his black wool coat to the dark stubble that covered his square jaw. He was utterly beautiful. Inside and out. She'd made the wrong choice with Billy and she wouldn't do that again.

The Instagram post she'd seen had been on Billy's account. It had been of him and his girlfriend smiling as she held her hand up for the camera to show off an emerald and diamond engagement ring. Billy had been holding a sign that said: *SHE SAID YES!!!* It had been a shock at first, but now, as Leo took hold of her hands and held her gaze, she knew that everything was as it was meant to be.

Life moved on. People moved on. She was moving on.

'I'm scared,' she said. 'I don't want to be scared but I can't help it.'

'Me too.' He nodded. 'There's a lot to lose because of our history and our family connection.'

'There is.'

'But you know what?' He smiled broadly. 'I think it means that there's even more to gain. So, Erin, will you give us a chance?'

She closed her eyes.

Breathed in.

Exhaled.

Opened her eyes and smiled at Leo.

‘I would love to see where this goes.’

Leo lowered his head and kissed her in a way that made her skin tingle delightfully.

When he raised his head again, he said, ‘Now shall we feed the birds then get home because my toes are starting to go numb?’

They looked down at the snow drift he’d somehow stepped in and laughed.

‘That’s a very good plan,’ Erin replied.

Leo wrapped an arm around her shoulders and they walked over to the chopped logs that served as bird feeders and sprinkled the food there then they made their way back to Sunflower Street to tell Erin’s family their good news.

EPILOGUE – ERIN

‘Merry Christmas!’ Leo said as he covered Erin’s face with kisses.

‘Morning! What time is it?’ she asked, pushing up on her elbows.

Leo grabbed his phone from the bedside table and checked. ‘Just after six.’

‘In the morning?’

‘Well, yes... unless we slept through the day.’

She laughed and nudged him. ‘Less of that, thank you. Why are you awake so early?’

‘It’s Christmas Day and I’m excited.’

‘You are?’

‘Aren’t you?’

She smiled at him. ‘I am.’

‘I also heard something outside, so I crept across the hallway to look out the front window and I definitely saw someone on a sledge led by a dog.’

Erin laughed. ‘You saw Santa?’

‘I think I did.’

‘Do you think he left us anything under the tree?’

‘He might have done. But then that would mean he’d have come in the house and that’s a bit unsettling so perhaps he left

it on the doorstep.’

‘We’ll have a look after, shall we?’

‘After?’

‘After this.’ Erin pulled Leo towards her and kissed him. He wrapped his strong arms around her and she melted into his embrace. Last night they’d talked for hours about what they felt, about their fears, about what they both wanted from life and love and from each other. It had been freeing to be so open and honest and she knew now where they both stood. They wanted this, wanted to be together and had agreed to enjoy Christmas then make some changes. Erin was planning on giving up her room in the house share in Bath and coming to stay with her parents for a bit and Leo was going to put his London apartment on the market and look for somewhere in Wisteria Hollow. They wouldn’t move in together immediately, but they would spend time together and get to know each other properly again.

Erin knew that she adored Leo; she always had done and always would do. He said he felt the same and even after everything she’d been through with Billy, she knew she could trust Leo. She’d known him all her life and he wasn’t the type of man to break her heart. She would put her faith in him as he would in her and they would make the most of every single day. They’d both learnt that time was to be treasured and agreed that they didn’t want to waste another minute apart when they could be together.

As Leo’s kisses grew more passionate, Erin relaxed into his embrace and before she lost all sense completely, she had one clear thought...

This was definitely going to be a Christmas to remember on Sunflower Street...

The End

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading *A Christmas to Remember on Sunflower Street*. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

How did the story make you feel? Did you care about the characters? Did you have a favourite?

If you can spare five minutes of your time, I would be so grateful if you could leave a short review. Genuine word of mouth helps other readers decide whether to pick up one of my books too.

With love,

Rachel X

Acknowledgments

Firstly, thanks to my gorgeous family. I love you so much!
XXX

To my friends, for your love and support, huge heartfelt thanks.

To everyone who buys, reads and reviews this book, thank you.

About the Author

Rachel Griffiths is an author, wife, mother, Earl Grey tea drinker, gin enthusiast, dog walker and fan of the afternoon nap. She loves to read, write and spend time with her family.



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