

Library Cards
& Lemon Tarts
In
Lily Vale
Village



IMOGEN PAYNE

Library Cards and Lemon Tarts in Lily
Vale Village

Imogen Payne

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Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty One](#)

[Chapter Twenty Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty Nine](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Books In This Series](#)

[Books By This Author](#)

Chapter One

Plain Jane.

That's what they used to call me at school, and as I stare in the mirror, tugging hopelessly at my limp, mousy locks and fiddling with my glasses, I realise not much has changed in fifteen years.

Sighing, I turn away from my reflection and instead, focus on the wardrobe. I pick out a simple black skirt, white blouse and a forest green cardigan (my fashion sense hasn't changed much since school either), and it's then that I notice the clock on the bedroom wall.

Ten to nine - shoot, I've got to run!

In a mad rush, I grab an apple from the kitchen, fill my to-go cup with instant coffee and head out of the door, my leather satchel swinging. It's a gorgeous day, the sky is bright and clear and there's a whisper of golden sunlight dappling through the trees. The smell of the fresh bread wafting from the bakery makes my mouth water as I cycle past, but there's no time to stop, as I've got to get to work.

Since Lily Vale is such a small village, our library is extremely dinky, so Mrs Geller and I are the only staff members required. She's seventy-two years old and took a part-time job here years ago with the intention of easing herself into retirement, but loved it so much, she just never left. Truly, she's one of my closest friends, I don't have a great many to speak of, but she's a wonderful companion and a great source of wisdom and advice.

The comforting scent of old books washes over me as I stride through the doors into the cool library, and I breathe it in, savouring the essence of *home*. Mrs Geller is in the middle of sorting the periodicals, so I don't call out hello, lest I disturb her. Instead, I head straight to the reception desk and take my seat at the swivel chair, placing the to-go cup carefully on the personalised 'J' coaster that my niece made me in Art class.

It's not a particularly busy morning in the library, but then again, it rarely is. There's a few children with their mums pottering around in the Kid's Corner and a man using one of the computers, but apart from that, this place is a ghost town, and honestly, I quite like it that way. There's something so peaceful about this place (perhaps it's the silence rule all libraries adhere to) and to an introvert like me, it's bliss.

While it's quiet, I reach under the desk and pull out a dog-eared copy of *The Odyssey of the Emerald King* by Matthew Crane. It's the third book in the *Veiled Ocean* series, which chronicles the voyages of a rag-tag band of sailors, commanded by the unjustly exiled heir to the Emerald throne. I *adore* these books, the wonderfully crafted characters, the rich, immersive world that just feels *so* lived in, the twists and turns on every page, they keep me hooked from the very first chapter.

I'm so lost in the story that the sound of someone clearing their throat almost makes me jump out of my skin. Embarrassed, I glance up from the book. Luckily, it's only my big brother Marc, leaning up against the desk, his guitar case slung over one shoulder.

'You okay there, sis?' he chuckles. 'Didn't mean to interrupt.'

'It's fine, don't worry.' I slide the bookmark between the pages and set the book down, giving my brother my full attention. 'What's up?'

'I just wanted to ask if you're free tonight, Mum and Dad invited us all around for dinner. Dad's making his famous casserole - *his* words, not mine.'

As if I have plans tonight - I *never* have plans. Unless, of course, curling up with a novel and a big glass of wine counts as plans, because I do that often enough.

'I'm free.'

'Great! Mum said to be there for six, on the dot - you know what she's like. And you'll finally get to meet my new girlfriend too.'

I force a smile to my lips. 'Great. I - I look forward to it.'

Brilliant. So it seems as though I'm the only single sibling left. Our eldest sibling Joey has been married for almost a decade and has two beautiful children, and Marc has been a solo rider nearly as long as I have. But now he's got someone special, and I'll be turning up at my parent's door alone, as always. No doubt, I'll be subjected to the usual questioning - '*so, are you seeing anyone?*', '*any eligible men on the horizon?*', '*have you been on a date recently, dear?*' Well, at least I have a universal answer for all of those in one go: 'No.'

The moment my brother leaves, I turn back to my book, admiring the sheen of the emerald green dust cover. There's no portrait of the author next to the blurb, he's rather reclusive and very rarely gives interviews. No one knows what he looks like, (I've always pictured him as a wise old man with silver hair and a long beard, very Gandalf-esque) but it hasn't stopped his stories from becoming huge successes.

I was beside myself with excitement when I heard there was going to be a film made of the first story in the series, though I'm sure it will pale in comparison to the book, as is often the case. Still, you can bet I'll be waiting in line for a ticket when it's released in cinemas sometime next year. The word in the blogosphere is that his new book is coming out soon, and I must admit, I'm positively on the edge of my seat for *that* announcement.

'Jane?' Mrs Geller calls out from behind a bookshelf. 'Do you think you could give me a hand tidying up these academic journals? The students who were in here yesterday made a right mess of them.'

Wistfully, I set down the book and push myself up from the chair. 'Coming, Mrs Geller.'

She wasn't wrong, the papers are all pulled out of place, thoroughly flicked through and there's even a few of them on the floor. Sighing, I gather them up and begin to organise them.

'Was that your brother I just heard?'

I nod. 'He invited me for dinner at my parents' house this evening.'

‘Oh, that will be nice!’ She peers at me. ‘Won’t it?’

I gaze down at the scientific journal in my hands, it’s something about phylogenetics, whatever *that* means. ‘I suppose so. It’s just ... well, my eldest brother is married with children, and now Marc has a girlfriend too. And well -’

‘You don’t?’ Mrs Geller offers.

‘Precisely. I know it sounds a bit pathetic, but when Marc was single too, well, I didn’t feel like the odd one out. I mean, I’m *already* the odd one out in my family, I don’t need another thing to make me even more of an outsider.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with being single, you know.’

‘Try telling my parents that,’ I grumble under my breath. ‘The thing is, I’m perfectly happy on my own, but they just won’t let up. Every time I see them, there always has to be a question about whether I’m seeing anyone or not. It’s rather tiring.’

‘Well, I’m certain you’ll survive tonight.’ She pats me on the shoulder. ‘And who knows, you might make a new friend.’

I frown. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, you said your brother has a new girlfriend, perhaps you and her might end up getting along.’

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what she’s getting out, and my face burns with humiliation. My lack of a social life is plain to my colleague and once again, she’s pushing me to get out there and make some connections.

Well, I highly doubt Marc’s new lady friend and I will have anything in common. They probably met at one of Lotus Flower’s gigs (that’s the name of Marc and Joey’s band), meaning she’ll be a fan of loud music, beer and crowded bars. I’m much more into books, cups of tea and quiet little coffee shops.

‘Perhaps,’ I mumble, turning my attention back to the papers. ‘Stranger things have happened, I suppose.’

Although, none so strange as me making a decent first impression on, well, *anyone*. People I’m close with (and let me tell you, there aren’t many) say it took a while for them to

warm to me, mostly because I came across so *cold*. I never intend to, but I guess that's the curse of shyness.

If only I could be as bold as the characters in my beloved books - brave, charismatic and always up for an adventure. Instead, I'm timid, awkward and avoid adventure like the plague.

Not exactly what one looks for in a friend - or a *lover*, for that matter.

Once Mrs Geller and I have everything perfectly ordered and neat, I stand back to admire our efforts, and yet, I can't help but grimace at the sight before me. The journals may look pristine, but nothing else here does. The dull, mauve paint on the walls is stained from wear and tear over the years, the crimson leather chairs dotted around are worn and shiny, and the old shelves sag under the weight of the books.

'Maybe it's time to think about re-decorating.' I suggest as I pick at the peeling plaster on the wall. 'This place could really do with a face-lift, and it might be nice to brighten up the place.'

Mrs Geller scoffs. 'Yeah, *right*. We can't even afford a lick of paint, let alone anything else. There's just no funding being put into this place, I suppose a library isn't really a priority to the local authorities these days.'

Before I can respond, a young teenage girl with windswept hair and a coat that's too big for her shuffles past us, her head ducked down low as she grips the straps of her rucksack tight. She's one of our regulars - every afternoon without fail, she's here, beetling amongst the bookshelves and taking a place at one of the tables, hunched over reading a book. I've spoken to her enough to learn that her name is Leah and she's fourteen, but she's not very talkative. In some ways, she reminds me of me when I was a teenager - and let's be honest, me *now*.

Frowning, I watch her search through the science fiction section, and I spare a glance at the clock. It's quarter to ten, shouldn't she be in school by now?

'Can I help you find anything?' I ask brightly as I approach.

My question startles her and she shakes her head, hunching down inside her jacket like a turtle retreating into its shell. ‘N-no thank you.’

The grown-up in me considers chiding her for playing truant, but the other part of me, the one that remembers all too well how torturous school can be for a quiet, shy girl, decides to let it slide, just this once.

‘Well, just let me know if you need help, okay?’

Leah offers up a wane smile before scuttling over to a desk where she takes root and dives into her chosen book. From behind my computer screen, I watch her for a while, and a strange ache twists in my heart like a knife. I’m glad that she can find sanctuary in the library - I mean, yes, she *should* be in school, but at least she’s in a place of learning where she’s safe, as opposed to loitering in the streets, causing trouble.

In the warm, gentle light I look around, taking in the bowed shelves stacked with books and the cosy, overstuffed armchairs, beckoning readers to sink in and lose themselves in a story.

I’m not the only one who’s found a home here.

Chapter Two

The afternoon has flown by, and I'm utterly engrossed in separating the cookbooks from the DIY manuals when Mrs Geller trots over and breathes a little *oh* of surprise.

'Jane?' She gawks at me. 'You're *still* here? I thought you finished at five today.'

'I do. Wait, what time is it?'

'Well, it's twenty to six!' She laughs, incredulous. 'I had no idea you were still out here, I've been going over the budget in the office for the last half an hour.'

'Oh *no!*' Gasping, I scramble to my feet. 'I'm supposed to be at my parent's house for dinner at six.'

'If you leave right this minute, you should be on time. I suppose you better get a move on, and I best get back to work.' Chuckling, she turns on her heel to leave, then pauses a moment. 'Oh, I forgot to mention, there's a leak in the ceiling over by the travel books, so watch out for the bucket.'

'*Another?*'

'Unfortunately, yes.'

This library is falling apart, and has been for years and years. It's a beautiful old building, built in the 1930s, and I don't think it's had any sort of renovations or major repairs since then.

'Can't we get someone in to fix it?'

'Chance would be a fine thing! Unless the roof is literally caving in, the local council won't be interested in helping us pay for repairs, or anything else, for that matter. I tell you, if we can't get some funds into this place, we're going to have a real problem.'

Anxiety grips at my throat with an icy hand, forcing me to choke the words out. 'What do you mean, a real problem?'

Mrs Geller sighs and shrugs. 'I don't know, Jane. All I know for certain is that something needs to change, and fast.'

Gulping down my fears, I say goodbye to Mrs Geller and head outside to the bike shed. I suppose I hadn't realised just how bad things were ... unfortunately, there's not much time to give it any more thought, as I've got a date to keep!

It's just as well that I decided to bike to work today, as I'd struggle to make it for six if I booked it across the village on foot. Just in time, the brakes of my powder blue bicycle squeak as I park outside number seventeen, Chapel Street.

The sight of my parent's house should bring me comfort, but all it does is fill me with anxiety. I mean, I love my folks, and most of the time, I enjoy coming round for dinner, but tonight is different. Tonight, I'm the only one turning up alone.

As if that wasn't bad enough, I'll be meeting Marc's new girlfriend for the first time, and the idea of that makes me more nervous than I care to admit. Despite what I might have claimed during my job interview many years ago, I'm *not* an outgoing individual and I do *not* enjoy meeting new people. It's not that I'm a bitch or anything (at least, I don't *think* I am!) but it's just that I'm so painfully shy, I always end up either making a fool of myself or coming across as unfriendly. Either way, it's a lose-lose situation.

After locking my bike to the fence, I pull off my helmet and shake my locks free - hoping my barnet doesn't look too awful - and reluctantly traipse through the garden gate and up to the door. I don't even get the chance to knock before the door is thrown open and my mum is yanking me inside.

'Darling, you made it!' she exclaims, her arm around my shoulders like a vice. 'Come in, come in, everyone's here.'

Mum leads me through to the kitchen and sure enough, the whole gang is seated around the table. There's my oldest brother Joey, his wife Nikita and their adorable twins Maisie and Mason. Dad is sitting at the head of the table, already eyeing up the buttered mash, and next to Marc is an attractive brunette with dark eyes and a gleaming grin, clearly his new beau. I have to say, I'm slightly surprised, she doesn't *look* like

the sort of woman who frequents rock shows, and yet, I'm instantly intimidated by her easy, girl-next-door beauty. Suddenly, I begin to wish I'd bothered to put on a coat of mascara or a slick of lipstick.

'Jane, this is Sarah. Sarah, meet my youngest, Jane. I believe you two are about the same age.'

The embarrassing introduction makes me cringe, Mum still treats me as though I'm as young as my niece and nephew - I'm surprised she doesn't suggest I take Sarah upstairs and show her my dollies!

As always, the table is set as if royalty were on the guest list. Mum's best crimson tablecloth has been unfurled and ironed especially for the occasion and her beloved gilded china plates are carefully arranged on top. But there's an addition to the usual display, a colourful arrangement of pink and purple carnations sits at the centre, very much overshadowing the crockery.

'Those are lovely.' I nod toward them. 'Although, they're a bit fancy for a family dinner, are they not?'

'Actually, Sarah brought them,' Mum says. 'She's a florist, you see. Very talented.'

I flush the same scarlet as the tablecloth. If I was worried my appearance had made a poor first impression, well, my sassy, presumptuous comment has definitely hammered the final nail in the coffin!

Mortified, I stumble clumsily through an apology. 'Oh, I - I ... sorry.' Joey sniggers in the background while Nikita elbows him to be quiet, and I just want the ground to swallow me up whole. 'They - they really are beautiful.'

A gracious smile appears on Sarah's lips. 'Thank you, I thought it would be nice to bring something different along, I mean, everyone brings wine, don't they?'

I chuckle awkwardly as I take my place at the table between my niece and nephew.

'Auntie Jane, do you have any new *Mary Mishap* books at the library?' Maisie asks, her eyes wide and inquisitive.

I beam at my niece. At six-years-old, she's a girl after my own heart, curious and eager to learn, an avid reader and unable to say boo to a goose.

'Not yet, sweetheart, but I'll be sure to order some in for next week. How does that sound?'

She nods enthusiastically, her pigtails bobbing up and down on her shoulders.

'What about *Doctor Dinosaur*?' Mason jumps in and leans across the table, almost knocking the bowl of peas over. 'I like the pop-up bits!'

'I'm sure I saw some of those in the Kid's Corner.' I gently try to coax him back into his seat. 'I'll keep an eye out for you.'

When Dad serves the lamb casserole, everyone falls silent as we gobble it all up, seconds and all. He's a fabulous cook and boasts a huge collection of cookbooks stacked along the kitchen windowsill. I read every one of them as a child and memorised each recipe from split pea soup to coq au vin, but somehow, my culinary skills don't stretch past ready meals or beans on toast.

'So, Jane, you're a librarian aren't you?' Sarah looks up from her dinner at me. 'I must say, I'm not much of a reader myself, although perhaps I should be, considering one of my besties is an author. Lucy Middleton, do you know her?'

'Oh yes!' Given the chance to talk about my work, I perk up significantly. 'We stock many of her titles, and we've even had her come in for a book signing and a few other events. One of the benefits of having a local author nearby, I guess.'

'Is that place *still* open?' Joey guffaws, spraying carrot everywhere. 'Who even uses the library these days?'

'Plenty of people,' I argue back, indignant. 'Not just for books, either. We have classes to help beginners improve their computer skills, information on writing CVs for job searchers and we're thinking about putting some crafting events on, like a crochet class or something.'

'Ooh, how *thrilling*,' Joey teases.

‘I think it all sounds great.’ Sarah tells me, ignoring my big brother’s mockery. ‘Do you have any book recommendations? I’d love to get back into reading.’

‘Well, any of the Bronte sisters’ classics are a good place to start, especially if you like Lucy’s work. But my favourite author has to be Matthew Crane, you’d love them if you’re a fan of adventure and fantasy. You know, they’re making a film of his first -’

‘Uh-oh, Sarah, you don’t want to get Jane started on books.’ Dad cuts across, his eyes rolling like marbles. ‘She’ll talk your ear off for hours and hours. Always been a little bookworm, haven’t you, darling?’

As the laughter of my family rings out all around me, I sink into my seat, feeling as though I’ve shrunk to the size of an ant.

‘I’ll have to check Matthew Crane’s stuff out sometime,’ Sarah smiles kindly, but all I can manage in response is a brisk nod.

After dinner, we’re ushered into the living room where we’re offered glasses of rich red wine and our pick of the charcuterie board Mum purchased for the occasion. She might get on my nerves, but when it comes to hosting, she gets an A plus for effort.

The rest of the evening drags horribly, and of course, conversations take the natural turn to relationships.

‘So, how’s your love life, Jane?’ Dad asks as he opens another bottle of wine. ‘Any likely lads on the horizon?’

‘Richard!’ Mum tuts and slaps him lightly on the wrist, but then she looks at me hopefully. ‘But *are* there?’

Loftily, I raise my head high, as though I couldn’t care less about my situation. ‘Sorry to disappoint you both, but no.’

‘Come on, darling, you’ve got to put yourself out there!’ Dad insists. ‘I mean, you haven’t had a boyfriend since you were, what, twenty-two?’

Everyone stares at me and it's a wonder I don't spontaneously combust from the sheer humiliation.

Desperate to summon some saliva, I gulp hard. 'Twenty-one.'

'You see? It's been *way* too long.' Fondly, he rests his hand on my arm. 'We just want to see you settled, darling. I hate the thought of you squirrelled away in that little maisonette of yours, all alone with your books.'

With barely concealed rage, I wrench my arm away. 'I'm perfectly fine as I am, thank you very much. I'm not willing to *settle* for anyone.'

Nikita grins at that. 'Good for you, Jane!' she says as she punches the air. 'And why should you?'

'I have to say Richard, I agree with Jane and Nikita,' Sarah pipes in. 'There's no point getting into a relationship for the sake of it.'

That healthy dose of girl power from my brothers' partners shuts my folks up, and thankfully, the kids prove a welcome distraction from the awkwardness. Well, at least *Mason* does, he's currently showing everyone the latest moves he learned in his jujitsu class (while Mum tries to direct him away from the mantelpiece full of her breakable knick-knacks), Maisie is content to watch.

'Thank you so much again for the flowers, Sarah,' Mum simpers. 'Carnations are my favourite.'

'That's lucky, I had loads left over from an anniversary bouquet this week and I was pleased to have an opportunity to use them.'

Marc swirls his wine around the glass thoughtfully. 'Say, *your* wedding anniversary is coming up, isn't it, Mum and Dad?'

'Oh, that's right!' Nikita claps her hands together. 'Thirty-five years - that's quite an achievement.'

'You're telling me,' Dad snickers and preemptively ducks out of the way of Mum's swatting arm.

'Well, looks as though we're not going to be celebrating it this year,' she whines into her glass. 'All the nice restaurants are

already all booked up, can you imagine!’

‘Oh, you’ve got to do something to mark the date!’ Nikita insists.

‘I suppose I could cook us up a nice dinner at home?’ Dad suggests, though there’s uncertainty in his tone, as if he can preempt what Mum’s response will be. And after thirty-five years of marriage, he probably can. ‘We could have that lasagne you love so much.’

Mum’s grimace says enough, but she can’t resist making her opinion known. ‘No way, Richard. You shouldn’t have to cook on your anniversary. I’d love to do something with the whole family, but there’s not a chance we can get a reservation now.’

‘Tell you what, *I’ll* make your anniversary dinner this year.’ My announcement astonishes everyone ... including myself. ‘It’ll be great, I’ll cook up your favourites, get a cake, you’ll have a better time than you ever would at a stuffy restaurant.’

After an agonising five seconds of silence (which feels more like five *hundred*), Mum smiles at me. ‘That would be wonderful, Jane. Thank you so much.’

Whoa ... I didn’t truly expect her to say *yes*. In a sickly wash of cold water, it dawns upon me what I’ve actually agreed to.

*

After waving goodbye, I cycle home in the dark, the pathway illuminated only by the dim streetlights and the pale moon above. Well, *that* dinner couldn’t have gone any worse. Why must my folks question every choice I make, be it my career, my relationship status or my living situation? Is this a universal thing for women in their early thirties, or did I just get unlucky when it comes to familial relationships? I must be a glutton for punishment, offering to host Mum and Dad’s anniversary dinner - typical me, always chasing my parents’ approval. At least the girls stood up for me, thank goodness for Nikita and Sarah.

Don’t get me wrong, I do love my family, but I wish they understood me better, I wish they would take an interest in my passions, like they do with my brothers’ band. Most of all, I

wish they would stop harassing me over how long I'm planning to remain single. It's not as if I have much of a choice in the matter, as a perpetual wallflower, I don't exactly turn heads on the regular. I simply fade into the background, and I'm happy to do so.

Chapter Three

Wrestling with my broly against the wind and spitting rain, I hurry down the cobblestone street, breathing out a sigh of relief when the antique wooden sign for The Cosy Little Tearoom comes into view.

This place is one of my favourite haunts, I'll often spend hours here reading with a tangy lemon tart and a cup of tea, losing myself in a fantasy world. But this morning there's no time for leisure, I'm already running late for work as it is.

I recognise the woman behind the counter as Rachel, and I approach somewhat warily. She's a nice enough girl, but I find her sharp idea of banter a little confusing, often I can't tell whether she's joking or not!

'Hey Jane,' she greets me with a reassuringly cheery grin. 'What can I get for you?'

I peruse the treats behind the glass display, searching for something that will keep me going until lunchtime. 'Erm, a lavender latte and a lemon tart, please.'

'Ooh, one of my fave combos! Coming right up.'

I smile wanly, wishing I had a clever, witty response on hand. The girls at the tearoom, Holly and Rachel, are friendly and chatty, but I never know what to say back, so I end up saying nothing at all. To tell you the truth, I'm much more comfortable chatting with Bill, Holly's dad - he reminds me of the older folk we get at the library. Still, I wish I was able to converse freely with people my own age too.

As I grab my to-go cup and paper bag, a gorgeous blonde in a fitted teal tracksuit sashays past in a cloud of perfume, hardly taking heed of me.

'Hey Rach, got any cherry macaroons today?' she asks brightly.

'Yeah, we've got a couple. Want a coffee too?'

‘Caramel cold brew, please, and make it a strong one. It’s going to be a busy day at the dance academy, I can feel it.’

‘Ah, well this will keep you on your toes - I hear you ballet dancers are good at that.’

Quietly and to myself, I sigh as I turn my back on their laughter and trudge out the door. Everyone else makes socialising look so easy, so *effortless*. For me, every interaction is like walking on a tightrope, I’m forever terrified I’m going to put a toe out of place and come crashing down.

However, once I’m through the doors of the library, I begin to relax. This is where I feel at home, surrounded by all my favourite characters and stories. Here, I don’t have to worry about impressing anyone, I don’t have to try to be funny or friendly or quick with the wit, I just have to do my job. A job I’m very good at, if I do say so myself.

Mrs Geller and I greet one another in our usual, silent nod sort of way and I make my way into the back office. We’ve just had a big box of donated books come in, so I’ve decided to set myself the task of sorting them into their rightful shelves.

Grunting with effort, I lug the heavy box out of the office and onto the library floor and get to work. One thing I love about our library is that because it’s an old building with domed high ceilings, we’ve an abundance of those old-timey sliding ladders so that readers can reach the books on the highest shelves. They are certainly useful when making room for new stock too, and I ascend one of them, searching for a place for the book in my hand.

It might seem like boring work to some, but for me, I find this to be a wonderfully calming process. It gives me time to think, to reflect, and I personally love these little moments of quiet. The outside world can be too loud and bright at times (even a sleepy village like Lily Vale can be a bit much) I’m fortunate my job allows me plenty of opportunities to retreat from the noise.

After some time, I’ve nearly emptied the big cardboard box. Climbing the ladder once more, I turn the book over in my hand, the dark purple dust cover catching the light. *The*

Starborn Prophecy - I've heard of this one, but not had the chance to read it yet. I've got an ever-growing list of novels to read, piled up beside the couch at home or on my bedside table. I've loved almost every book I've read, I sometimes wish there was some way I could share my thoughts with the world, to somehow start the conversation about stories and what they mean to me ...

The sound of Mrs Geller's heels echoing lightly on the dark wood floors draws me out of my daydreams, and I glance down to see her standing below the ladder.

'Right, I've finished tidying up the Kid's Corner - those little ones certainly know how to make a mess!' She chortles fondly. 'Shall I make us both a cup of tea?'

'Thanks, but I'm still working on my coffee.' I gesture to the take-out cup resting on the shelf I'm currently organising.

'Right-o. I'm just going to sort through the mail. We've had a load come through this morning, and shockingly, it's not all junk!'

She shakes her head to herself as she makes for the office, and I glance over at our freshly tidied Kid's Corner. A warm smile spreads across my face as I spot some regulars, Melanie Waters and her daughter Gracie are crouching in front of the chipped, sky-blue painted shelves, leafing through the books. Like the rest of the library, this little reading nook is in dire need of a make-over. Mrs Geller and I have done our best to keep it nice, we've scattered colourful beanbags over the rug, hand-painted the shelves and set up a small toy box of donated teddies and dolls, though to be honest, they are looking a little worse for wear.

'Excuse me, do you have any more of the *Mansion Manners* books in?' Mel asks as she straightens up and smooths down her pale purple maxi skirt. 'I swear, we must have read all of these a million times over!'

'Not at the moment no.' My mouth twists apologetically. 'Unfortunately, our Kid's Corner relies on donations, and we haven't had much in this month.'

‘Oh, well, never mind. We don’t mind re-reading this one again, do we, Gracie?’

In response, Gracie grasps the pink book from the shelf and begins enthusiastically flicking through it.

‘I wish we had more brand new children’s books to offer readers, but the council isn’t putting much money into the library services at the moment.’

‘I understand, it’s a shame, though. I come here at least once a week, you know, on days when I need to keep Gracie entertained and I haven’t got two coppers to rub together. Which is more often than not, truth be told.’ Though she giggles, she rubs wearily at the fine lines on her forehead. ‘Loads of parents feel the same way, in fact, I’ve met a couple of my mum friends here. Let me tell you, it can be a bit lonely at times doing it all on your own, the library has been a real life-line for me.’

As I listen to her, an idea occurs to me. ‘Well, you know, if there’s enough people interested, we could perhaps organise an official weekly club for the mums and kids in the local area. With tea and biscuits for the mums while the kids have a read and draw, or something.’

‘Oh, that would be *great!* I know plenty of mums who would come along to that.’

‘If you could get me a list of names so we know how many mums and kids we’re dealing with, I can look into getting that sorted out.’

Mel beams, her cheeks glowing pink. ‘Thanks, Jane.’

I leave Mel and Gracie to their browsing and get back to sorting the donations. Lost in a daydream, I imagine walking through each story that I slot into place. One minute, I’m scribbling in my diary and glugging wine on the sofa next to Bridget, the next, I’m on the lonely moors of Yorkshire, waiting for fiery Heathcliff to return to me ...

‘Jane, do you think I could speak with you in the office for a second?’

The fantasy shatters in an instant and anxiety grips my heart like an icy hand. Obediently, I follow Mrs Geller into the back, suddenly feeling like a kid being called into the head teacher's office. Did I do something wrong? Perhaps I messed up the registering system on the computer, I was pretty knackered the other day when I updated the spreadsheet - did I accidentally delete the whole thing by mistake or something?

Desperately trying to keep myself from catastrophising, I twiddle my fingers behind my back as I follow Mrs Geller through into our small office in the back. There's a smattering of letters strewn across the desk, everything from bills to junk mail - but there's one brown envelope, torn open hastily, that draws my attention.

'Sit down, Jane.' Her face is grave and pale. 'I've got some bad news.'

A million scenarios flit through my mind, each more terrible than the last. Swallowing a lump in my throat, I sit at the desk opposite Mrs Geller, studying her carefully for clues.

'What's wrong?' I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

'We got a letter from the council today. They - well, they're considering closing down the library.'

'*What?*' Panic rises in my gut and I have to fight to urge to vomit. I knew things were a bit tight around here, but I've always held the attitude that something would come along and save the day, eventually. But nothing *is* coming along, the library is in dire need of an update and we're seeing less and less money being put into this place. 'No, they - they can't!'

'Unfortunately, they can.'

'Well, we've got to have a fund-raising event, a book sale, a bake sale, *anything*.'

'We could do that, yes. But it's a short-term solution to a *very* long-term issue. What we need to do is prove to the local council just how essential the library is to the community. If we can get more people through the doors, even if all they are spending is time, it will show them that we're worth keeping open. If not, well, I'm not sure what will happen.'

Gnawing at my lower lip, I give a determined nod, though I know as well as my colleague that it's not going to be easy.

If they decide to close this place, I'll be losing much more than a job. In addition to being my workplace, the library is also my *comfort* place, it has been ever since I was five years old and got my first library card.

Reeling from the bombshell, I traipse back to the bookshelves to continue my task, but my mind is in a spin. How can I concentrate on cataloguing the latest donation of books when my very livelihood might be in jeopardy?

Chapter Four

My hair pulled up into a messy bun, I sit at my desk in front of the computer, a cup of tea clutched in my hand as I scour the Internet for inspiration. We're closing in half an hour, but I have a feeling I'm going to be sticking around until the wee hours.

Somehow, I've just got to get some money into our little library. If not, well, then it's fated to become one of the many other local libraries that end up closing its doors due to lack of funding. I've spent every free moment at work today searching the web for ideas, anything that might bring people through the doors and show the local authorities how vital it is to the people of Lily Vale. But so far, I've come up with nothing, at least nothing that I think will work.

Feeling fed up, I click off the search engine and instead log into my social media, deciding to indulge in a bit of mindless scrolling for a while. There's not much to see, I mostly follow authors and their publishers for updates, but I come across a couple of holiday snaps, photos of cute babies and glittering engagement rings posted by people I used to know from school. My chest tightens and a hollowness settles in my belly as I scroll through those pictures, yearning for something I didn't know I wanted. I'm happy on my own - mostly - but when I see other people out there living life, well, it hammers home just how lonely I truly am.

My doom-scrolling is cut short when a post by Quest Publications catches my eye and stops me dead in my tracks:

Matthew Crane fans, get ready!

*The renowned fantasy author is going to reveal himself for the first time ever during a book tour for his latest novel, *The Exile's Empire*.*

Dates and locations are yet to be announced, so stay tuned to see if your home town is on the list!

Open-mouthed, I stare at the words on the screen so hard that they begin to blur. Matthew Crane is doing a book tour? One where he'll *actually* show his face? But he *never* makes public appearances, he's always been super secretive about his identity. I wonder what made him change his mind.

My brain suddenly kicks into gear and an insane idea shoves its way to the forefront - what if I was able to convince the publishers to bring their book tour *here*?

It would certainly bring an influx of local readers to our door, we might even be able to attract some folk from the nearest town, Gladeswood, to come and visit. That would show the local authorities just how important our community library is.

But ... I couldn't. I *shouldn't*. Lily Vale is a tiny little village, it's not important enough to make the cut. If I contacted the publishing house, they'd just laugh in my face - or down the phone, I guess.

With an unbridled yawn, I rub hard at my temples and languidly gaze around the library, searching for some sort of sign. My eyes settle upon a familiar young girl, sitting at one of the study tables with a book clutched in her hands. It's Leah, lost in the grip of a story.

Picking up the packet of biscuits by my side, I leave my desk and make my way over to her. She doesn't look up from her book, at least, not until I hold the biscuits directly under her nose.

'Chocolate chip cookie?' I offer, shaking the packet.

Gratefully, she accepts and scarfs it down like she hasn't eaten for weeks, so I offer her a second without question. She looks surprised when I take a seat next to her, but she doesn't ask me to leave.

'What are you reading?' I keep my voice soft as if I'm speaking to a pony I'm afraid might bolt at any moment.

Hesitantly, she lifts her book from the table, revealing the faded cover of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

'Oh, I had to read that at school when I was your age! Is it for your English class?'

Her cheeks reddening, she slowly shakes her head. ‘No, I - I just like the story.’

‘Well, you have very good taste! It’s a wonderful book, covering some quite serious topics. You must be very mature for your age.’

The scarlet shade of her face deepens, but at least she’s smiling.

I spare a glance at the clock on the wall behind Leah, and I realise how the time has got away from me. It’s six-forty, well past closing time, and it dawns on me that Leah’s been here for the last three hours, only moving from her chair to pop to the loo every now and then. I guess she must have come straight from school.

‘Won’t your mum be wondering where you are?’

‘My mum is at work until eight, and I don’t like being in the house by myself. It gets sort of ... lonely.’

‘I see. Well, if you’re lonely, maybe you could ask a friend if you could hang out at theirs after school until your mum gets home?’

With slumped shoulders, she looks down at her book. ‘Maybe,’ she mumbles sadly, suggesting that isn’t really an option for her.

My heart aches for this young girl, I know what it’s like to struggle to make friends. I wasn’t exactly Miss Popular at school, and I’m certainly not now, either.

‘Well, you know you’re always welcome here.’ I rest a hand on her arm, a gesture that I hope will be comforting. ‘And I suppose you haven’t had your tea yet, have you? Since you’ve been here since about half three.’

‘I’ll get something at home. Though I don’t know if Mum’s had time to go to the shops yet, she’s been working overtime this week -’

‘You know, I’ve got a cheesy pasta bake I was just about to heat up. We can share it, if you like?’

She blinks, her brown eyes glistening. ‘T-Thank you.’

After nuking the ready meal in the microwave, I divvy it up onto two plates and carry them over to our table. The cheese is still bubbling as Leah tucks straight in, I'm surprised she doesn't burn the roof of her mouth.

'Wow, that didn't even touch the sides!' I laugh as Leah scrapes the plate clean, leaving not one morsel behind.

A little self-consciously, she wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. 'I didn't have lunch today, I woke up late and didn't have time to make it.'

My smile wavers slightly. 'Your mum didn't wake you?'

'She did, but it was before she went to work this morning, too early for me to get up for school. I fell back to sleep after she left.'

'Perhaps you need to start using an alarm,' I suggest. 'And just so you know, *I* always have snacks with me, so if you ever get peckish, you can come here whenever you like.'

A tiny smile cracks the corner of her lips. 'Thank you, Jane.'

*

By the time I lock the library doors, it's past seven o'clock, and the once-blue sky is now a silvery twilight canvas, studded with stars. Though she protests, I insist on walking Leah back to her flat, it turns out she doesn't live very far from me, just in the high street above the corner shop.

Within ten minutes, we're at her door, where she shouts a quick thank you over her shoulder as she hurries inside, while I wait beneath a streetlight to make certain she got in okay.

The stroll home is more melancholy than I'd anticipated, the streets are quiet tonight and I'm alone to ruminate over the library's situation.

I don't care if the council are too stuck up their own bottoms to notice, *I* can see it clear as day. People *need* this library. People like Leah, Mel and Gracie ... and me.

Chapter Five

It's late into the night, yet I can hardly sleep a wink, tossing and turning and thumping the lumps out of my pillow. Nothing helps.

What am I going to do if the library is forced to close for good? *Everything* will change, I'll have to get a new job, Mel and Gracie won't be able to pick up their weekly storybook, and where will Leah hang out after school?

The worries scream inside my head like a demented bird call, refusing to give me even the slightest bit of respite. Realising it's futile to try and sleep, I switch on the bedside lamp and pick up the book beside it, hoping that will be enough to distract me from my anxieties.

The one currently resting on my bedside table just so happens to be a Matthew Crane novel, the third one in the series. It's funny, whenever I read his beautiful prose, it feels as though I *know* him. It sounds ludicrous, but as I drink in the story, voyaging across the ocean blue with the characters and experiencing their joys and pains through the pages, I can almost hear his voice (or what I imagine it to sound like) in my ear, as though he's sitting beside me, telling me the story in his own words.

When the alarm blares through the stillness of the morning, my eyes are gritty and sore, as though I barely closed them last night. Knuckling hard at my sockets, I perch my glasses on the end of my nose and head into the kitchen to make myself a strong cup of coffee. I drink it down too fast and the caffeine rush leaves me all jittery and het up.

Deciding I can't just potter aimlessly around the house all morning, I grab my bag and head out the door, even though it's only ten to eight and the library opens its doors to the public at nine. It's a beautifully warm morning, despite the early hour, the sun is shining bright and hot in the pale blue sky.

Once I reach work, I let myself in and hole up behind the reception desk where I switch on my computer. Things start off productive enough - I get on with some admin, send out a couple of emails, update my calendar and so on, but after about half an hour, I find myself drifting over to social media.

Yawning, I flick lazily through the feed, pictures of cats and selfies zooming past in a blur. But my finger halts on the mouse when I come across another post from Quest Publications:

Matthew Crane is coming to a town near you!

Dates and locations of his first ever book tour are below.

My heart pounds furiously in my chest, so much so, I almost expect it to burst through my blouse, splattering my desk scarlet. I'm too late, time has run out - my chance to request for Lily Vale to be added to the tour has gone. Or ... has it? I suppose I've got nothing to lose by asking, and perhaps everything to gain. Opportunities like this don't come around all that often, I should at least try, shouldn't I? All I have to do is call the publishers and ask ... so why does that feel like such a terrifying, insurmountable task?

Gnawing at my bottom lip, I play it through in my head. The worst that can happen is they laugh at me and say no - which admittedly, will be quite painful - but maybe the *best* that could happen is worth the risk.

Sitting up straight in my swivel chair, I come to a stark decision. I've got to do whatever it takes to save our library, and bringing in a best-selling author with a new book *and* a major motion picture coming out is the best chance I've got. Not only will it show the local authorities the library is thriving and busier than ever, but think of the publicity it will bring to the whole village! This could mean big things for Lily Vale, not just its little library.

Besides, meeting one's favourite author is a once in a lifetime event, who knows if he'll ever show his face again after this tour? This might be my one shot, and I've just *got* to take it.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I find a telephone number on the publisher's website and with shaking hands, I dial it. Sweat beads at the nape of my neck as the phone rings, and when someone picks up suddenly, I nearly drop the receiver in surprise.

'Quest Publications, PR department. This is Portia speaking, how might I help you? Though the office isn't officially open yet ...'

'Erm, hello?' I glance down at the corner of my computer screen, my eyes widening in horror as I notice the time. 'S-sorry, I forgot how early it was. M-my name is Jane Reed, I'm a librarian from Lily Vale Village. I saw online that Matthew Crane is doing a book tour?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Well, I -' And in an instant, I begin to lose my nerve. But I fight it, battling against the fear that floods my body in a cold, icy torrent. I *have* to do this. Not just because meeting my favourite author would be a dream come true, but for the library. Resolute, I swallow my fear. 'I'd like for our village to be one of the stops, if there's space available.'

'Well, we've already announced the dates.'

I swallow hard, as if there's a boiled sweet lodged in my throat. 'I saw that, but I wondered if ... perhaps ... you could add us onto the end?'

There's a pause, then Portia *hmms*. 'Well, we *could*, I suppose. There's some time between the end of the tour and the book release, though Matt and the team would need a place to stay for a few nights.' I can hear the scepticism in Portia's voice. 'Lily Vale, you say? I can't say that I've ever heard of the place before.'

'It's a relatively small village, but there are many avid readers and fans of Matthew Crane's work here. We have a bustling, enthusiastic community, and a whole lot of folk who would happily get involved in any event Quest Publications plan to put on.'

‘Hm. Well, we’re mostly visiting towns with busy bookshops and huge libraries, you know the sort.’ She pauses, and I hear the creak of a chair, as though she’s leaning back in thought. ‘Though I’ve got to say, I *do* like the quaint little village angle, and you do paint quite a picture!’

‘Oh, believe me, Lily Vale is the most beautiful village you’ll ever see,’ I tell her with a confidence I didn’t know I was capable of. ‘In addition to our charming library, we have a lovely market square, a large village green and a park, it truly is the perfect setting for a book signing. And of course, the library will help with any organisation and preparations that need to be done. We’d be happy to.’

Once again, Portia *hmms* to herself wordlessly for what seems like an age.

‘Alright, what the hell? It’s the last stop of the tour, we might as well round it off with something a bit different. Besides, if we can get some pictures of Matt doing all sorts of cute village-y things, it’ll be good for publicity.’

My spine shoots poker straight and I clutch the phone in my hand so tight, it’s a wonder it doesn’t break. ‘So - so Matthew Crane is coming to Lily Vale?’ I whisper the words, hardly daring to speak them aloud.

‘Yes, so long as we can iron out the details and -’

With total disregard for the rules of the library or professionalism, I let out a high-pitched squeal. ‘Oh my goodness, Matthew Crane, *here*, in Lily Vale Village! I - I’m going to meet Matthew Crane!’

Portia gives an uncertain chuckle. ‘I take it you’re a fan yourself?’

I’m too ecstatic to answer, short of screaming with delight, at least!

I can’t believe it - Matthew Crane is coming here! I have a chance to save our special little library *and* meet the writer I’ve idolised for years and years.

Pinch me, because I *must* be dreaming!

Chapter Six

By the time my shift is over and I start the journey home, I'm positively buzzing like a bee on steroids.

I could hardly wait to tell Mrs Geller the good news, and the second she walked through the doors at nine o'clock, I leapt on her immediately.

'And he *really* wants to come to our library?' she asked urgently, uttering beside herself with excitement. 'To Lily Vale?'

I nodded eagerly. 'It's the last stop of the tour and the publishers said it would be good for publicity to get some pictures of Matthew Crane in a quaint little village, and I convinced them that Lily Vale would be perfect for that.'

She blinks behind her specs, astonished. '*You* convinced them?'

'Yeah, why?'

'Well, I'm just surprised - pleasantly so - but surprised!' She chuckles and claps me on the shoulder. 'Well done, Jane. This library might live to see another day yet!'

I can't say I blame her for her shock, I'm pretty dumbfounded myself. I'm not the type of girl to call up big companies and beg them to bring their business over this way, I don't exactly have the gift of the gab - at least, I always thought I didn't. But somehow, I've managed to persuade Quest Publications to host an event with their most popular author in our run-down little library.

I don't know how I did it, to be honest, chatting on the phone to Portia was a bit of an out-of-body experience, I could hear the words coming out of my mouth, and yet, I couldn't believe it was *me* saying them.

Deciding today's achievement is a good reason to treat myself, I nip into the local pizza parlour and pick up a large cheese and tomato pizza. The irresistible smell wafts up from the box

with every step home, and once I unlock my front door and stagger through to the kitchen, I tuck in straight away.

As I'm munching through my third slice, the realisation dawns upon me in a terrifying yet exhilarating shiver. I'm going to meet Matthew Crane. I'm going to be in the same room as him, standing before him as he signs my books, and I'll have to actually *spea*k to him! It's a dream come true, and yet, the idea of lifting the veil on my favourite author makes me a little nervous.

What will I even say to him? I'm terrible at conversing with people at the best of times, I can only imagine how awkward I'll be once I come face to face with my all-time favourite writer. No doubt I'll end up stumbling over my words and he'll think me an utter idiot. Well, I suppose I have plenty of time to prepare for his arrival, just over a week, so I'll have to start practising my social skills for then.

I'm in the middle of guzzling down a can of cola when a loud *knock-knock-knock* rings out. It takes me a couple of seconds to figure out that it's coming from the front door. Odd, I very rarely have visitors, unless of course it's the postman, but it's far too late for deliveries.

Placing my can down on the kitchen counter, I creep into the entry hall and gingerly open the door. I don't know who I was expecting to see, but it certainly wasn't Sarah, Marc's new girlfriend, carrying a big bunch of yellow and pink roses.

'Oh!' I gasp in surprise, suddenly rendered speechless.

'Hi, Jane.' With a flourish, she pushes the bouquet into my arms. 'I hope you don't mind, but I got your address from Marc.'

'Oh, well, erm ... come in. Would you like some pizza? I've got a few slices left.'

'Ooh, don't mind if I do!' She shakes out her umbrella on the doorstep before stepping inside. 'Sorry for turning up announced, but I wanted to talk to you.'

'No, no that's quite alright. Erm, follow me.'

Leaving the flowers on the entry hall table for now, I lead her through to the kitchen where we each take a seat at the little mosaic table, the pizza box lying open between us. Sarah helps herself gladly, and I follow suit, selecting a particularly cheesy slice.

‘Thank you for the flowers, by the way. They are beautiful.’

‘You’re welcome.’ Sarah beams at me. ‘Listen, I hope I’m not overstepping boundaries here, but I just wanted to see how you were doing. I felt really bad about the other night, you know, at your folk’s house.’ Through long eyelashes, she throws me a sympathetic glance. ‘They kind of laid into you, huh?’

Stiffly, I shrug my shoulders. ‘I’m used to it.’

‘Still, it must have felt horrible, them making a big fuss in front of everyone.’

I shudder at the painfully raw memory, seriously wishing she hadn’t brought it up. ‘Well, it wasn’t exactly fun,’ I mumble, picking at the crust of my slice.

‘Well, I know how that feels, *believe* me. Before I began dating Marc, I was single for years, and my mum and sister would never shut up about it either.’

I look up from the pizza slice. ‘Really?’

She nods and begins to giggle. ‘Yep, in fact, they made such a song and dance about it, that I ended up lying about having a boyfriend, hoping to shut them up.’

‘You *didn’t!*’

‘I did! And surprise, surprise, the lie spiralled and turned into a complete fiasco. Would *not* recommend.’

The two of us burst into peals of laughter, like old mates reminiscing over times gone-by. What follows is half an hour of surprisingly easy conversation, we chat and chat until there’s no pizza left. She regales me with tales from her florist and I tell her all about the upcoming event coming up at the library.

‘So Matthew Crane is coming *here*? You must be so excited! And ah, that reminds me, there was something else I wanted to

tell you.’ She reaches into her bag and pulls out a copy of the first *Veiled Ocean* book. ‘I started reading this after dinner at the Reed’s, and I’ve got to say, I’m loving it! It’s been ages since I’ve been so gripped by a story.’

‘Oh, I’m *so* glad!’ I bounce excitedly in my chair. ‘You know, I was planning to do a re-read in preparation for the book signing, maybe ... maybe we could start a mini book club and discuss it?’

The moment the words leave my lips, I feel stupid for even suggesting such a thing. I’m about to take it all back but before I can, Sarah nods enthusiastically.

‘That would be great! I’ve actually been on the lookout for a new hobby.’

Shyly, I smile back. ‘Wonderful. Erm, we could meet for coffee every week, perhaps? Though I can’t commit to a specific day, it will have to change depending on my shifts, but I *can* do Wednesday next week.’

‘Works for me! The Cosy Little Tearoom okay? At about sixish?’

‘Of course, they do the best lemon tarts! Shall we aim to read two chapters this week, then?’

Sarah puffs out her cheeks. ‘Well, I’m a bit out of practice when it comes to reading large amounts in a short space of time, but I’ll do my very best.’

I almost tell her that I once read a three-hundred page book in one day, but I decide against it. I don’t want her to think me a total weirdo, or worse, a show-off.

‘Oh, I just remembered, next Wednesday is the day of the book signing, would you like to come along? We could go to the tea room afterwards and begin our discussions.’

‘Oh, that sounds great, I’d love to meet the author, let me just put it in my calendar.’ She reaches in her pocket for her phone, and pulls a face when she looks at the screen. ‘Shoot, I didn’t even notice the time. I’ve got to get back for my dog.’

‘Oh, you have a dog?’

‘Randall, he’s called. A little Schnauzer. I’ll bring him along to our book club sometime, if you’d like to meet him?’

‘Oh, yes!’

I wave Sarah off until she’s out of sight and slowly close the door on the chilly night. My usual extinct is to replay every awkward thing I said, ruminate over whether I talked too much or not enough, mentally punishing myself for my lack of social graces. But this time I fight against the urge, and instead, distract myself by boiling the kettle and making myself a cup of tea.

I still can’t believe Sarah came around to see me, and I *really* can’t believe she started reading the book I recommended! I suppose I made a better first impression than I’d thought.

Chapter Seven

The last week has dragged by in a haze of library cards and anticipation. But after much too much waiting, tomorrow is *the day* - the day I'll finally get to meet Matthew Crane!

Since I was given the news about my favourite author's impending arrival, I've been over-run with preparations for his visit. I've gathered a whole load of decorations so that Mrs Geller and I can transform the library into a scene from the *Veiled Ocean*, all glimmering blue streamers and nautical elements, and I even picked up some green-tinted plastic champagne flutes to imitate the kind of glass the Emerald King might drink from. I want everything to look magical, as magical as Matthew Crane's books themselves.

I've also been prepping myself for the occasion, I've got my collection of books all ready to be signed and a whole list of questions to ask when I meet him. I've been so busy, in fact, that I haven't had the chance to do a weekly shop, and have basically been living on crisp sandwiches and takeaways for the last couple of days.

During my break, I pop over to the little supermarket on the high street and grab the essentials, including a cheese and onion sandwich and a cherry flapjack for my lunch. Our local supermarket has a *take a book, leave a book* box by the tills, and I can never resist having a nose through. I rifle through my bag and place a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* on the shelf for someone else to discover and begin perusing the old, well-loved novels.

To my delight, I happen upon an anthology of Matthew Crane's poems, published before he wrote the *Veiled Ocean* series. What a wonderful coincidence! And quite the rare find indeed, it was released by a small printing house before he joined Quest Publications. As I make a grab for it, my fingers brush against a stranger's hand, and I recoil in shock. The hand in question belongs to a tall man with dark waves and even darker eyes. I stare and stutter out an apology.

‘Oh, sorry. Erm, you go ahead.’

‘Nah, it’s fine, you take it. He’s not very good anyway.’

‘What?’

‘The author. It’s all derivative, uncreative drivel. Total hack, if you ask me.’

Flabbergasted and offended all at once, I puff out my chest like my very own suit of armour. ‘I’ll have you know that Matthew Crane is one of the greatest modern writers of our generation. Perhaps *you* just don’t know good literature when you read it.’

And with that, I storm off and out through the automatic doors, my hands clenched into furious fists at my side. How dare that man criticise Matthew Crane’s work, when I’m sure he knows nothing about the writing craft himself.

It’s only when I’m halfway down the street that I realise I’ve forgotten to take the anthology with me.

Damn that jerk for distracting me!

I had planned to have my meal deal lunch in the park by the duck pond, but I’m so irritated by that rude idiot that I don’t fancy being in public right now, lest I come across him once more. So instead, I march down the street and turn the corner to the library, sending pigeons scattering in my wake. Once inside, I commandeer one of the empty tables by the Science Fiction shelves and start filling in the upcoming dates in my diary, everything from study group sessions with the local school to Matthew Crane’s big event. It’s pointless busy work, anything to distract me from my bad mood.

I’m so lost in my asinine task that I don’t even notice Mrs Geller hovering over me until she clears her throat.

‘Shall we have a tea break?’ She pulls out a chair and places a steaming mug at my side. ‘Since it’s so quiet this afternoon.’

‘Thanks, Mrs Geller, but I should really get this finished -’

I clumsily flick through the pages and promptly knock over the mug of tea. As the brown liquid soaks into my diary and

drips over the edge of the table onto the floor, I stifle a scream of frustration.

Mrs Geller runs off to grab a couple of paper towels and hands them over. I dab futilely at the soggy pages, only causing the ink to run further.

‘Ugh, I’ve made a right mess.’

‘Not to worry, it’s just a bit of tea.’ Mrs Geller peers at me over the rim of her teacup. ‘Are you alright, dear? You seem a tad ... flustered.’

‘I’m fine, really. I just met the most infuriating man in the shops, that’s all.’

Her hearty laugh lights up the library in an instant. ‘Aren’t they all? My Arnold certainly is, anyway.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t know, would I?’ With a sigh, I slump my shoulders. ‘I’m an old spinster.’

‘Jane Mary Reed, you stop with that talk right now!’ Mrs Geller scolds me in her best strict-teacher tone of voice. ‘No one could call a thirty-three-year-old a spinster. For goodness sake, you’re practically still a baby!’

‘Maybe, but I certainly *feel* like an old maid. It’s been ages since I’ve been on anything even resembling a date, let alone had a boyfriend.’

Goodness knows how we got on to the subject of relationships, but before I know it, I’m pouring my heart out to Mrs Geller. And to be honest, my heartsick confession takes *me* by surprise. I don’t often ruminate over my perma-single status, I don’t even *care*. And besides, I get enough grief from my parents, I don’t need any from myself.

I’ve always told myself I’m fine all alone. And I *am* fine. Still, there are times when even a happily independent woman can feel just a *little* lonely.

With warm, motherly comfort, Mrs Geller pats my hand and clasps it in her own. ‘There’s someone out there for you, Jane. Someone very special.’

I give her a small smile, not truly believing her words.

‘Well, I best make you another cup of tea, hadn’t I?’

Mrs Geller takes my empty mug and heads off toward the kitchen in the back, leaving me alone to ponder my thoughts. Frustratingly, the man I met in the supermarket creeps back into my mind’s eye, with his stupid golden brown eyes and his dumb sculpted jawline. Why are the jerks always good-looking?

Well, the only man I’m bothered about right now is Matthew Crane - and that’s purely for his literary prowess.

Gathering up my notes and my damp diary, I head over to the reception desk with a new sense of purpose. I log onto the computer and begin drafting a list of questions to ask my favourite author - after all, I want to be prepared!

I refuse to let one uncultured jerk dampen my spirits. Tomorrow is the day I’ve been waiting for, and nothing - and no one - will bring me down!

Chapter Eight

Our little library is more rammed than I've ever seen it before - who knew there were so many Matthew Crane fans in Lily Vale? I know I talked the talk to Portia on the phone, but I truly couldn't have guessed how many *Veiled Ocean* lovers we had here.

I have to weave through the gaggle of excited folk chattering away as they anticipate the arrival of the man himself, which should be any minute now.

Mrs Geller and I have worked hard to make this place resemble a scene from the *Veiled Ocean* books - we arrived early to festoon shimmery sea blue garlands across the walls and we've blown up about fifty green balloons. I even scattered hundreds of emerald-hued gems over the table where Matthew Crane will take his place and sign his adoring fans' books.

'The place looks great, Jane!' Sarah gushes and she hugs me tight, as if we've been mates forever. 'Did you do all this yourself?'

'Well, I found all the decorations, but Mrs Geller helped to put them up.'

It seems that everyone else appreciates our efforts too, and I can't help but notice the donation box at the front of the library is filling up fast.

I'm in the middle of handing out green goblets of lemonade to our guests when a gasp of excitement cuts through the chatter, along with several others.

'*He's here!*' someone cries out, and everyone rushes towards the door, eager to steal a glance of the elusive writer.

Before we have a stampede on our hands, Mrs Geller and I go into bouncer mode and begin guiding the animated crowd into a somewhat orderly queue in front of the table we've set up beneath a large banner heralding the author in question. But

while I'm doing so, I manage to sneak a peek through the window, and my heart hammers when I spot the gleaming back limo outside. There's no time to stand and stare though, I've got a job to do!

'Right, everyone.' I clap my hands and speak loudly above the cacophony of voices. 'In just a few moments, we'll be welcoming bestselling author Matthew Crane inside. Please have your books ready for signing and no pushing in line, please.'

As everyone gets into place, I clutch my list of questions to my chest. Hopefully, Matthew Crane won't be too tired out after all the signings to answer them, but I suppose there'll be plenty of opportunity to speak with him another time, since he's staying in the village for a couple of days. I spoke to his assistant a week ago and helped to book him and his team rooms at the Cornflower Inn, just a ten-minute drive from the library. Getting to work so closely with my all-time favourite writer is a total dream come true!

Mrs Geller sidles over and whispers in my ear, 'The crowd is growing a bit restless, will you go see if Mr Crane is ready? I think I just saw his assistant get out of the limo.'

I stiffen, every nerve in my body suddenly awakened. 'Erm, yes, of course.'

Shaking like an autumn leaf, I step out into the car park. There's no sign of Matthew Crane - I can't see a thing behind the tinted windows of the limo - but there's a young man in a tailored blue suit standing outside it, and I do a double-take at the sight of him. I can't believe it - it's the guy from the supermarket, the man who *insulted* Matthew Crane's writing. Fine sort of assistant he is!

Biting my tongue on a comment, I raise my head pertly and address him with as much dignity and authority as I can muster. 'Is Mr Crane ready?'

The man raises an eyebrow as a bemused smile dances across his lips. 'Yes, Mr Crane is ready. He'll be inside in just a moment.'

Nodding tersely, I turn on my heel and march smartly back in. I gesture a thumbs up to Mrs Geller and take my place at the reception desk.

A woman with shiny jet-black hair dressed in a crimson pantsuit marches into the library, and I only need to glance in her direction to know she's from the PR department of the publishing house. I've seen enough of them, and they all have the same air of self-confidence and bluster.

Completely taking over the show, she sashays past Mrs Geller and stands before the crowd, a big cheesy grin on her face, and I recognise her voice as the woman I spoke to on the phone, Portia.

'Everyone, please give a warm welcome to Matthew Crane!'

A collective applause and a round of whoops goes up, and the doors open to reveal the man we've all been waiting for. I crane my neck from my unassuming spot behind the desk, vying for a glimpse of my idol.

His assistant strides across the library, offering a small wave and a coy smile to the folks in the queue as he makes his way to the signing table. To my surprise, he sits behind it and gestures for the first person to come forward.

I'm about to storm forward and ask him what he thinks he's doing, but then it hits me ... he *is* Matthew Crane.

Dumbfounded, I watch in stunned silence as he signs books and speaks briefly with each person in line, half expecting the real Matthew Crane to arrive any second now and take his place. But nope, this is the guy. The annoying, uncultured randomer from the supermarket is my all-time favourite author.

Adjusting my glasses, I squint at him from across the library. He's not what I expected at all, I'd always assumed Matthew Crane was an older gentleman - I'd pictured him with a mane of silvery hair and a beard to match. This man - with his chestnut locks and a cleft in his angular chin - doesn't fit my vision one bit.

I'm still studying him from afar when he glances over, those dark eyes of his gleaming. Heat rushes along my neck and across my cheeks and I grab a piece of paper to fan myself, suddenly all flustered and ruffled. I pretend to be deeply absorbed by my blank computer screen, praying he didn't realise I was eyeing him like a hungry dog might a t-bone steak.

As the line shrinks down, Mrs Geller is back at my side, and once again, she's whispering in my ear. 'Aren't you going to go over to him?' she asks furtively.

'Oh no.' Hugging my books tight, I shake my head firmly. 'No, I couldn't.'

'But you've been so looking forward to his arrival! Come on, let's go say hello. We ought to anyway, since we're hosting the event. It would only be right to introduce ourselves.'

I try to protest, but she links her arm through mine and leads me across the room over to the table where he's just finished signing the last book. He looks up as we approach, his dark eyes twinkling with something like mischief.

'Hello, Mr Crane. My name is Ivy Geller, and this is my colleague, Jane Reed.'

A wry smile appears on his lips. 'Charmed, I'm sure.'

'We're really looking forward to working with you, Jane especially.' Much to my dismay, Mrs Geller nudges me forward. 'Let me tell you, she was so excited when she found out you were coming to Lily Vale! She must be your biggest fan.'

And just like that, I'm praying for a bolt of lightning to burst through the roof and strike me down dead.

He quirks an eyebrow in my direction. 'Is that so?'

My spine rigid as a rake, I remain as quiet as a mouse, not trusting myself to speak. Mrs Geller, however, is only too happy to break the awkward silence.

'Well, I'll leave the two of you to get acquainted. I'm sure you will have much to talk about.'

It's hideously silent when she leaves as I hover awkwardly before him, and as usual, my words fail me. I've been looking forward to this moment for days, and now it's finally here, I find I have nothing to say.

Mercifully, he's the first to break the ice, and he points his pen at the stack of books in my arms. 'Would you like me to sign those?'

Lips firmly buttoned, I place each of them on the table. I can't tell if I'm feeling shy, blindsided, angry or all of the above.

'You've got the whole series,' he comments, eyes on the page as he scribbles down his signature. 'You've read them all?'

I give a sharp nod. 'Yes. Despite the fact they're all *derivative drivel*.'

Chuckling, he shakes his head. 'You've certainly got that right, Ms Reed.'

I stare at him in appalled astonishment. How can he talk about his own books like that? Does he truly think they are worth nothing but a pay cheque? Doesn't he know how important they are to his fans?

He lifts his head suddenly and I have to quickly avert my gaze - I only hope he didn't realise I was gawping like an idiot at him.

'What's that you've got there?' He nods toward the list of questions, still clutched in my hand.

'Nothing.' I screw it up and toss it in the waste paper bin.

He tilts his head to one side but thankfully, he changes the subject. 'So, have you picked up a copy of my latest book?'

Confused, I glower at him. 'It's not in stores yet.'

'Ah, of course. That's what this daft book tour is all about, isn't it?' He reaches under the table into a worn leather satchel and pulls out a copy of his brand new book, signs it, and passes it over to me. 'Here, take this. If anyone will find this rubbish interesting, it will surely be my biggest fan.'

I snatch it from his grasp and wedge it under my armpit. ‘I’ll see you soon, Mr Crane. I’d say it was nice to meet you, but it’s impolite to tell lies.’ Feeling a bittersweet sense of pride in my snide comeback, I turn my back on him and make to leave.

‘It’s Matt.’

I pause and glance over my shoulder, frowning. ‘What?’

‘My name. You can call me Matt, if you like.’

With a huff, I spin on my heel and march off toward the back office. Once I’m away from the crowds, I allow myself to breathe. I can hardly believe it - I met Matthew Crane - *twice!* Who’d have thought the horrid man in the supermarket yesterday was none other than my most treasured author?

Sure, he may be the real-life embodiment of the gallant, devastatingly handsome heroes from his books, but his behaviour is anything but chivalrous. How can he sit in front of fans of his work, people who adore the world he’s crafted between the pages of his books, and claim that it’s all a load of rot? He wrote those novels, yet it seems he doesn’t care one bit about them, or what they mean to people.

I guess there’s a reason they say to never meet your heroes.

Chapter Nine

The library closes its doors shortly after the book signing concludes, and thank goodness, I manage to escape without bumping into the world's surliest author in the car park.

Outside, Sarah catches up with me, threading her arm through mine like we're schoolyard chums.

'Hey, guess what today is?' she says in a sing-song voice, her hair billowing on the breeze.

'Erm, Wednesday?'

'Well, yes, but it's also the first of our weekly book club meetings!'

'Oh.' Amid the drama of preparations for the book signing, I'd completely forgotten about our plans.

'It's the perfect starting point, isn't it?' Sarah beams. 'After having met the author today.'

I'm about to argue back, to tell how what a jerk said author is, but instead, I surrender to her enthusiasm. 'I suppose it is.'

Arm in arm, we make our way across the village to our chosen meeting place, The Cosy Little Tearoom. Luckily, it's not too busy this evening, so we easily find a seat by the window. Holly comes over to take our orders - a cherry bake-well tea and a lemon tart for me, a rose macaroon latte and a brownie for Sarah - and the literary discussions begin.

'Wasn't it wonderful meeting him?' Sarah gushes as she flicks through her signed copy of *The Exiled Crown*. 'I told him I was a very new fan who'd just started reading the series, and he was so kind and gracious.'

'Hm. That's not quite the experience I had with him.'

A little line appears between her eyebrows. 'What do you mean?'

I hesitate, wondering how much I should divulge. After all, I don't want to spoil her enjoyment of the books, and if she

knew how little Matthew Crane himself thought of them, it surely would. It has for me, anyway.

‘Well, he was ... a little rude,’ I mumble.

‘Rude? Like how?’

I shrug my shoulders awkwardly under the weight of my canvas book bag. ‘It’s hard to explain.’

‘Try.’

‘No, it doesn’t really matter. Suffice it to say that he wasn’t quite what I expected.’

‘Me neither, but I’m glad about that. He’s much younger than I’d imagined, and so good-looking!’

With a smirk, I raise an eyebrow. ‘Hey, remember you’re dating my brother.’

‘I know, I know, but a girl can look, can’t she?’

Before I can reply, Holly hurries over with a tray in her hands and a smile on her face. As she places our drinks and cakes on the table, she steals a glance at Sarah’s signed book.

‘Oh, did you two go to that book thingy that was on today? Lucy was planning to go along as well.’

‘I think I saw her!’ Sarah says. ‘But it was pretty busy, I didn’t get the chance to say hi.’

‘So, how was it?’ Holly turns to me expectantly.

‘It was ... good. I mean, it was fine.’ I struggle to think of anything else to say, so I simply leave it at that.

Holly pulls a face. ‘Hm, that doesn’t sound very promising. I guess it’s a good thing I missed it!’

Sarah tuts and shakes her head at me. ‘Well, *I* certainly had a good time. That Matthew Crane is seriously charming.’

Although I’d resolved to keep my opinions to myself, I can’t help but scoff. ‘Did we meet the same man?’

Throwing her head back, Holly laughs at our bickering. ‘You know, I’m not convinced you did! How can you have both gone to the same event, spoke to the same guy, and yet, have

such wildly different experiences?’ She nudges me lightly with her elbow. ‘Jane, I thought you were Lily Vale’s resident bookworm, you’re telling me you didn’t enjoy it?’

Horrified to be in the hot seat, I waver over my answer. Of course, it was thrilling to finally meet the author whose books I’ve adored for years, well, at least it *should* have been. I guess I was so taken aback by the *real* Matthew Crane that all my excitement kind of flew out of the window.

Yes, his appearance was a surprise, the sort of surprise that makes one flush a deep shade of red and come over silly and shy, but it’s not just his face that’s got me all hot and bothered. I just don’t understand why an author would speak so negatively about his own books, books that made him a success, I might add. The only thing I can assume is that he writes purely for the money, there’s no passion behind the pen, despite what comes across on the page to the reader.

Somehow, I feel duped, a fool for treasuring those stories. I know it sounds silly, but I’d thought of Matthew Crane as a kindred spirit, someone who’s novels connected with me on a spiritual level. When I lost myself in those books, it felt as though a hand was reaching out to me, into my heart and soul. But now I know he sees them as nothing more than drivel that pays his bills, it’s as if I’ve been slapped in the face, as if he’s insulted me personally.

But I can’t explain all this to Holly and Sarah.

‘It was fine,’ I repeat myself, adding a false grin for good measure.

Neither Sarah nor Holly look all that convinced, but thankfully, I’m not subjected to any more questioning as Puddles the golden Labrador comes traipsing over and lays his head upon my lap, much to the delight of us all.

‘He likes you,’ Holly giggles. ‘Though, to be fair, he likes everyone.’

Giving Puddles a good scratch between the ears, I smile down at his slobbery grin. ‘Still, I’m glad to be one of everyone.’

It's hard to be upset when a dopey dog is gazing up at you with huge sweet eyes, his snout snuffling at your palm.

After we've finished our drinks and every crumb of cake is gone, Sarah and I say our goodbyes to Holly and Puddles, then part ways on the corner on Willow Lane, where our journeys home separate.

'So, next Wednesday?' Sarah keenly prompts before she leaves. 'Same time, same place?'

A little taken aback by her eagerness, I hesitantly nod. 'Sure, I think I'm free. Erm, see you then.'

On the walk home, I mull over this budding friendship with my brother's new girlfriend. *Are* we friends, or is she just being nice to me because I'm Marc's sister? That's the most logical explanation, I find it hard to believe that someone as fun and bubbly as Sarah enjoys hanging out with me simply for the pleasure of my company. Then again, we have more in common than I first thought, especially now she's picked up the *Veiled Ocean* series.

Let me tell you, it's hard finding mates as an adult. It was tough as a child, at least for someone like me, but it was much easier than this. At school, you were forced to work side-by-side with your classmates, so you naturally fell into friendships without even realising it. As an adult, there's all these extra steps to conquer and hoops to leap through. How does one make a casual acquaintance into a close friend? It's a mystery that's always eluded me.

Twilight is settling in the sky by the time I reach my front door and drag my feet over the threshold. My top-storey maisonette may be small and a little over-crowded with books and scented candles, but to me, it's the very definition of snug.

Once inside my mauve living room, I settle into the old patchwork armchair and switch on the side lamp, which bathes my reading nook in a warm glow. I love my little space, none of the furniture matches and it's quite cluttered, but it's my quiet retreat from the world, the place where I can enjoy a cup of tea and a good book. Perhaps I'm getting old before my

time, but in my opinion, there's no finer way to spend an evening.

As I prop my feet up on the dusty pink velvet pouffe, my book bag slides off my shoulder and hits the floor with a clunk, causing several books to spill out onto the floor. Sighing, I gather them up and shove them back inside, though I hold onto one with a teal dust cover and golden lettering. *The Exiled Crown*, this is the first book I read by Matthew Crane, the first in his fantasy series.

It was five years ago when I discovered this series, it was his debut novel, and it was love at first chapter. The story is wondrous and action-packed, but there's nothing fantastical about the characters. Each of them are so raw and fleshed out, they feel like real people, and I've always related to the protagonist, Phineas Emerald. Of course, I'm not an exiled prince, but I do know what it feels like to be on the outside, to feel like the odd one out at family dinners and amongst peers.

I know the story back to front, I've re-read it time and time again over the years, it's always been my favourite comfort book. Sighing, I shove it back inside the bag.

Now I'm not sure I'll ever be able to read it again.

Chapter Ten

Finally, a much-deserved day off.

It's been unusually busy at work lately, the buzz of the book signing has apparently travelled around the village, and even those who have never read a Matthew Crane book have been visiting, asking when the next big event will be. At least his presence has generated fresh interest in the library, which can only be good news regarding the council's decision.

I awkwardly wheel my bike down the rickety metal staircase of the maisonette, taking care with each step. It's no fun getting it up and down these stairs, but I love going for a cycle around the village, so the extra effort is worth it to me.

It's a crisp early morning in Lily Vale, the sky is clear and bright and the gentle warmth on the breeze hints at the promise of sunshine later on. I love this time of the day, when the shops are beginning to open their doors and there's no one but a handful of joggers and dog walkers roaming the streets. It hearkens to the sense of a Brand New Day, where anything and everything might be possible.

As I cycle down the high street, my beady eyes settle upon a familiar figure up ahead, loudly admiring the goods in the bakery window. It's Portia, Matthew Crane's flashy PR lady. Hoping to pass by without being noticed, I hop off the saddle and walk my bike down the narrow street gingerly, my head ducked down low. I think I've got away with it, until she tugs rudely at my sleeve.

'Hi!' Portia grins at me, still clutching at my jacket. 'It's Judy, isn't it? The girl from the library?'

'Jane.' Gritting my teeth into a false smile, I shake myself free from her grip.

'Ah of course! I'm Portia Addams, PR for Quest Publications. You'll remember me from the book signing, no doubt.'

'I certainly do.'

‘Well, I’m glad I bumped into you before Monday, as I wanted to ask a favour of you.’

Bumped into me - an interesting way to describe accosting me in the middle of the street.

‘How can I help you?’

‘Well, it turns out Matt just *loves* this little village of yours, and we were wondering if you might have space for us in your schedule to host a book reading next week. Matt would *adore* the chance to read the first chapter of his new book to his fans.’

‘Oh.’ I try to disguise the surprise that’s no doubt clear on my face. ‘Well, yes, we definitely have time. Would - would Tuesday work?’

‘Perfect! Evening time would be good, I think, though I’ll check my calendar once I’m back at the inn to be sure. We’ll sort out the details on Monday, okay?’

Before I can respond, she perches her designer sunglasses on the bridge of her nose and saunters off, her high heels clacking on the cobblestones.

A little dazed by the unexpected turn of events, I continue cycling toward the local park. I guess I should be pleased - delighted, even. More Matthew Crane means more feet through the library doors, which means more donations, and it will certainly prove what a popular service we are in the village to the local council, thereby hopefully keeping us open. It’s just the idea of spending any more time with *that* man ...

Out of nowhere, a little girl chasing a blue ball dashes across my path, and I have to pull hard on the brakes to keep from colliding with her. My bike screeches and skids along the gravel and I almost topple over the handlebars, but thankfully, no one is harmed.

‘*Gracie!*’ Mel hurries over and grabs her daughter by the shoulders. ‘You need to watch where you’re running, remember?’

‘Sorry, Mummy,’ Gracie mumbles into her chest.

‘It’s alright, no harm done,’ I smile at her reassuringly.

‘That’s fortunate.’ Breathing a sigh of relief, Mel gestures to the guy in the leather jacket at her side. ‘Jane, this is my boyfriend, Josh. Josh, this is my friend Jane. She works at the library.’

Friend? Mel truly considers me a friend?

Grinning like an idiot, I exchange a polite greeting with Josh while Mel pats Gracie on the arm.

‘Go take your ball over there, sweetie. And be careful by the pond!’

‘I’ll watch her,’ Josh offers.

And with that, he and Gracie head over toward the big oak tree, out of the way of the footpath. Mel watches them fondly, simpering to herself.

‘I’m lucky to have found a guy like him, he’s so good with Gracie. She was supposed to be with her dad this weekend, but apparently, something came up, *again.*’ She rolls her eyes. ‘Anyway, how are you doing? I heard through the grapevine that over one hundred people came out to see Matthew Crane at the library.’

‘You heard correct, it was the biggest event we’ve ever had. And I think things are going to get even more crazy around here, as I’ve just found out we’ll be hosting Matthew Crane again next Tuesday for a book reading.’

‘Oh, how cool! I know Josh is a big fan, he was gutted he missed him on Wednesday, so you count us in. Maybe we’ll bring Gracie along, she’s a bit young for his books, but she does enjoy a story-time. Oh, and I just remembered.’ She reaches into her jacket pocket and pulls out a neatly folded piece of paper. ‘This is the list of mums who would be interested in a weekly hangout session at the library. Perhaps we could get a club together!’

‘Oh, this is great, thanks so much for this!’

With everything that’s been going on lately, I’d almost forgotten about the Mum club I was planning to put together.

But even just a handful of mums and their kids will hopefully go some way to proving to the powers that be that the library is still an important part of our little community.

‘I won’t be able to make every meeting, life of a care home nurse, you know, but there’s a lot of stay-at-home mums that would be glad of the chance to get out the house each week, even just once.’ Mel continues earnestly. ‘To be honest with you, some of the mums I’ve spoken to are struggling a little, with loneliness and that sort of thing. They are really excited about the idea of a weekly meet-up where we can just talk openly about what it’s like being a parent and hopefully help each other out.’

There’s a tugging in my chest, a niggling ache as I force a smile to my lips. ‘Well, we’d be glad to help.’

That is, if we still can. The library might be gone soon, and the mums and their kids will have to find somewhere else to connect. It’s true what I said to my brother Joey, there’s so much more to libraries than books.

If only the council thought so too ...

Chapter Eleven

The sunlight pours through the crack in the curtains, and I groan. I'm seriously not looking forward to work today, which is crazy, because I love my job.

Scratching my head, I sit up in bed and yawn as I stare at the date on my phone's screen. *Tuesday* - tonight, we'll have the Great Matthew Crane in to read an excerpt of a book he doesn't even care about.

Still half-asleep, I pull on my clothes and tug furiously through my hair, attempting to comb it into submission. What a total phoney that guy is, if only his fans knew how much disdain he has for his own work, perhaps he wouldn't be so popular.

I have to say, the disappointment of discovering his lack of passion has really got me down in the dumps. Reading his books, you can feel the fire in each word, the love and care he has for his characters, except it's all a lie. He doesn't give one fig about what he writes, just so long as it gets him paid. Sighing, I flick through his latest book, my face twisted with confusion. Still, he's a *very* good liar, because when I lose myself in his stories, I believe every word.

I pick up my usual coffee from The Cosy Little Tearoom, adding a last-minute blueberry muffin to my order, reasoning I probably won't have time to grab lunch today, what with all the preparations for tonight's event. This is the busiest I've been for ages, and I've got to say, though Matt is longer in my good books (no pun intended), I'm really enjoying sinking my teeth into work. Hosting events is challenging and it really forces me to step out of my comfort zone, but I find myself eager to take on every trial.

If only I didn't have to deal with a pretentious, story-snob of an author - that's *one* challenge I could do without.

I wasn't expecting the folk from Quest Publications to be in until later, but as I back in through the library's doors, trying not to spill my coffee, I'm met with the sight of Portia

directing several of her lackeys to move tables and chairs about, ready for the reading later on. Mrs Geller hovers nearby, nervously eyeing the precarious rickety shelves they are swinging a table dangerously close to.

As I spin around to take my place behind reception, another unwelcome sight startles me. It's Matt, leaning lazily against the desk, an infuriating smirk on his face.

'Hey, it's my biggest fan!'

Scowling, I sashay past to my swivel chair, where I sit down with a grumpy thud.

'Hey, I'm only teasing. I guess I didn't make the best first impression, did I?' He stands before me with his thumbs tucked into his belt loops, acting all contrite and rueful. 'Can we start again?'

Against my better judgment, I suppress a smile and give a single, curt nod. 'Fine.'

With a flourish, he holds out his hand in a pantomime of earnestness. 'Hi, I'm Matt. It's lovely to meet you, Miss ..?'

His hammy performance raises an eyebrow, but I decide to go along with our second introduction. 'Reed. Jane Reed.'

'Reed - that's a great name for a librarian. So, do you *Reed* a lot, then?'

I make a big show of rolling my eyes. 'Ooh, I've never heard *that* one before.'

'Hey, I thought we were starting again?'

'Well, it seems like we're going to end up going down the same route no matter what we do. Now, if you don't mind, I'm a little busy.'

'What are you doing?'

'None of your business.'

'Well, it kind of *is* my business, since you're supposed to be putting on this book reading tonight for me.'

God, this guy is *infuriating!*

‘If you must know, I’m drafting the sign-up information for a weekly event for parents and children here at the library, which has *nothing* to do with you or your silly book reading. Now, I’ll ask you again to leave me to my work. Some of us have jobs we *actually* care about.’

My response comes out much sharper than I’d intended, and he abruptly stops horsing around, holding up his hands as he backs away. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to be a pain. I’ll leave you to it.’

Chewing at my lip, I watch him walk off to help the assistants with the furniture, an odd swirling sensation stirring in my tummy. It’s as if a thousand butterflies have awakened inside, and they’re all flapping their gossamer wings in unison.

With a sharp shake of my head, I turn to the computer and get back to work. I don’t even *like* this guy, so where did these butterflies come from?

*

After my outburst, I manage to avoid any interaction with Matt for most of the day, which turns out to be easier than I’d expected. Portia collared him the moment he stepped away from my desk, insisting they needed to get some pictures of him by the duck pond while the sun was out, and she simply *had* to get a snap of him on the high street, pretending to shop for local produce.

I couldn’t help chuckling to myself as she dragged him outside, I bet he’s beginning to regret coming to this place now. If he was expecting a relaxing village vacation, his PR manager swiftly put a stop to *that* dream!

At six o’clock people begin filing in, each of them chattering in excited whispers as they anxiously await the arrival of Matthew Crane. Well, not so much arrival, since he’s actually already here in the kitchen having a quick cup of coffee, but you get the idea. I spot Mel, Josh and Gracie taking their seats and give them a quick wave. Sarah is here too, along with my brother Marc, which is a pleasant surprise, since he’s never really been into books. Even young Leah has stuck around to

listen in. It's great to see how many folks have turned out tonight, it definitely gives me hope for our library's fate yet.

The audience releases a collective hushed gasp as Matt stalks across the room and takes his place on the single chair before them.

'Welcome, everyone! I'm so happy to be here in this gorgeous little village with you all, and I'm so excited to share an excerpt of my new book, *The Exile's Empire*, with you all.'

'Coming out on the fifth of September,' Portia leans in behind him to parrot that vital piece of information.

'Thanks, Portia.' Matt snickers and taps the hardback cover of the book in his lap. 'Without further ado, let's begin.'

While the crowd hang on his every word, I loiter in the background, pretending to busy myself with my diary, but my ears prick up when Matt opens the novel to the first page of chapter one and begins to read.

And it's ... it's *beautiful*. Utterly spell-binding.

The vivid descriptions, the steady pace of the tale, the characters, well-known and new - I've fallen straight back into the world of the Emerald King without even realising it. The way that Matt tells the story is just as enchanting as the words, his voice is soft as velvet, yet deep and commanding attention, I swear, I can feel it reverberating through my bones. Over the heads of the captivated audience, his brown eyes catch mine, holding my gaze for just a second, although it feels as though time has stood still. Flustered, I dart my eyes away, certain I'm tomato red.

I'm not the only one who's enthralled by Matt - every face in the crowd appears to be just as beguiled, completely carried away in the story. When he finally concludes the chapter and closes the book with a snap, he actually receives a standing ovation, something I've never seen before at a book reading.

A gaggle of women shove past everyone else to gush at Matt, each of them fervently declaring how they are his number one fan and they can't wait for the book to come out. Shaking off the inexplicable spell that came over me, I scoff haughtily at

their ridiculous behaviour, rolling my eyes as I begin tidying an already tidy bookcase. I can't believe just a few days ago, I was just as bad as them, gooey-eyed and ga-ga for an author who doesn't give a hoot about writing. That was until I met him, of course.

As Matt mingles with the villagers, I watch from afar, a weird niggling ache making its home in my chest. He's talking to an attractive young red-head with huge green eyes and a dazzling smile, and I have to turn away. *I wonder if he's told her how little he respects his own work*, I think grudgingly to myself, acutely aware of how bitter and petty I sound.

What I'm not aware of, however, is *why* I'm feeling bitter and petty.

As the evening draws to a close and people begin to leave, Mrs Geller makes her way through the waning crowd and sidles over to me.

'Tonight went well, don't you think?' She beams, practically glowing pink. 'Our donation box is overflowing, and did you know someone from the local council popped in?'

I blink in surprise. 'They *did*?' I scan the last of the guests, wondering who it might have been.

'Mm-hm. I had a little chat with her, actually, though I suppose I didn't really need to, I mean, she saw for herself how many people were here tonight! Still, I thought it wouldn't hurt to tell her about all the plans we've got coming up for clubs and events. So, let's keep our fingers crossed that she takes the good word back to the board.'

Never mind fingers, I've got all my toes, legs and anything else I can twist crossed!

Though she tries to disguise it, I catch her yawning. I guess she's not used to the library staying open this late and being so busy - and to be honest, neither am I!

'You go home, I'll wrap things up here,' I tell her.

Mrs Geller takes me up on my offer happily, and she's out the door faster than I can grab the vacuum from the cleaning cupboard. I usher the last of the guests toward the exit,

thanking them for coming along and encouraging them to visit again soon. Portia waves a jaunty hand at me as she swans out into the street, her mobile phone pressed firmly to her ear.

All alone, my sigh echoes through the quiet of the empty library as I get straight to work, plugging the vacuum in at the outlet by the study tables. You wouldn't think a few platefuls of brownies (kindly donated by The Cosy Little tearoom for the occasion) would produce a veritable mountain of crumbs, but the old worn carpet is scattered with them.

'Thanks for all your help tonight.'

I almost jump out of my skin at the sound of the deep voice. When spin around, flustered, I'm met with the smirking face of Matt.

'Sorry, didn't mean to scare you,' he chuckles. 'I just wanted to say thanks. I didn't expect such a huge turnout, and you and Mrs Geller handled it pretty well.'

I bring my attention back to the vacuum cleaner, my nose turned up haughtily. 'Well. You're welcome.'

'Perhaps I can return the favour. By say, helping you tidy up?'

After a moment of hesitation, I relent. 'I suppose. Though there's not that much to do, to be honest.'

I set him the task of putting away the chairs while I whiz the vacuum around. I can't lie, I'm grateful for the help - our furniture, while very sturdy, is extremely heavy and cumbersome. It's true that they don't make things like they used to, and perhaps that's for good reason. Our old wooden chairs might have lasted decades now, but they certainly aren't easy to lug around.

We work side by side in companionable silence, well, excluding the noise from the vacuum cleaner, of course. Though I fight to resist, my eyes are drawn to the subtle flex of Matt's biceps beneath his crisp white shirt, hinting a hidden muscular physique. Distracted, I stumble over the vacuum's wire, very nearly falling flat on my face. Thankfully, my palms break the fall, and nothing is bruised but my pride.

With a clatter, Matt drops the chair he's carrying and rushes over to help me to my feet.

'Whoops!' He hauls me upright, and not only do I get a good glimpse of those strong arms, but I'm also subjected to a whiff of his cologne. It's earthy and kind of smoky, bring to mind the notion of reading an old book by a fireplace. 'Are you alright?'

'I'm fine.' I dust myself off and stand up straight as I wriggle my arm free from his hold. 'But ... thanks. I suppose.'

He helps me cart the vacuum back to the cleaning cupboard and I help him move the rest of the chairs back to their respective study tables, though it's a mammoth of a task. Even though it's getting late and I really ought to be heading home, I switch on the kettle and make us both a cup of tea, reasoning it's only polite to do so, after he lent me a hand.

'I've never seen the library so busy as it was tonight,' I comment over the rim of my mug as I hand him one. 'We hardly get any people in here on a day-to-day basis.'

Matt gratefully accepts his cup and takes a big gulp. 'I suppose there's all these other options nowadays, like buying books online and stuff.'

'But the library is free, and the books are to borrow, so they don't end up cluttering your home,' I tell him, indignant. 'Anyway, there's so much more to a library than just books.'

A bemused twinkle sparks in Matt's eyes. 'How do you figure?'

'Is that a serious question? A library is the hub of a community, it's where people get information about happenings in the village, where mums meet to have a chat and kids first learn to read. It's a haven for elderly folk who just want a bit of company -' When I notice the half-smile materialising on Matt's lips, I abruptly end my speech. 'What?'

'Nothing, it's just - well, you've got a lot a passion.'

My cheeks burn hot and I turn away, squaring my shoulders. 'Yeah, yeah. Make fun of me, like everyone else does.'

‘I’m not making fun at all, I’m *admiring* you. It’s refreshing, it’s been a while since I’ve felt so passionate about anything.’

I shrug awkwardly and glance down at my feet. ‘Yeah, well. Our library is worth getting passionate over.’

The smile he gives me is so smoldering, so skin-shiveringly gorgeous, that I have to look away as I swiftly change the subject.

‘So ... do - do you think your publishers will want to do any more events around the village?’ I ask vaguely, praying my voice comes out nonchalant.

‘I couldn’t say, I’d certainly like to stay a little longer if I can.’ He brings his eyes to mine. ‘It’s so beautiful here.’

I glance down into my mug and tuck a loose hair behind my ear. ‘Y-yes, I have to agree.’

‘I guess it depends on how well tonight went, how many pre-orders we rack up and whatnot. I wonder whether I’ll end up selling *any* copies when it comes out at the end of the month.’ He wanders over to the table where he performed the reading hours earlier and picks up the book. With a humourless laugh, he flicks through it carelessly. ‘I doubt it, the excerpt I read probably sounded stupid.’

Annoyed, I scoff in disbelief. ‘Are you joking? Everyone loved it. Did you not *hear* the applause?’

Matt lifts his broad shoulders, then allows them to slump down. ‘Maybe.’ He looks me straight with those mysterious, dark eyes of his. ‘What did you think of it?’

‘I thought ...’ I dither, trying to keep myself from spilling out my heart’s truth. ‘I thought it was very good,’ I finally respond pertly, my lips pursed tight.

Matt smiles, and a dimple I hadn’t noticed before appears on his left cheek. ‘Thanks, that means a lot. Especially coming from you.’

‘Why me?’

‘Well, as a librarian, you clearly know your books, so I’m game to trust your taste.’ That shy smile on his face grows

even shyer. ‘Maybe that Matthew Crane guy isn’t as bad as I thought he was.’

Despite myself, a little giggle escapes me. Matt might be irritating and self-deprecating to a frustrating degree, but he’s certainly charming. It doesn’t hurt that he’s pretty good looking too. Strike that, *extremely* good looking ...

A rush of heat floods my cheeks and I clear my throat as I glance down at the weathered floor. ‘You better go. I need to lock up, and it can take a while.’

I’m obviously lying through my teeth - I mean, how long can it possibly take to turn a key in a lock - but Matt takes the heavy hint without offence. With one last gulp, he finishes his tea and places the mug down on the table with a clunk.

‘See you around, Jane.’

And all at once, I’m left to my thoughts, ruminating over the unexpected evening in the soft light of the empty library. What a strange few days it’s been, if someone told me I’d meet Matthew Crane and grow to despise him a week, I’d have had them carted off to the loony bin, and yet, here I am.

Still, I suppose Matt isn’t as bad as I had him pegged for, he *did* help me out tonight, after all. But the way he regards his writing as utter rubbish still irks me, how could he even think *The Exile’s Empire* will sell no copies? It’s got to be false modesty or something, and it’s extremely irritating.

Chapter Twelve

Work has been a bit weird lately.

It's distinctly odd that a famous author hosted not one, but *two* events at our humble library, while little did anyone know that we might very well be closing the doors for good. You wouldn't think so, having seen the amount of folk we had crammed in here last night for the book reading, but the threat of closure is hanging over our heads like the Sword of Damocles.

Still, things are ticking along as Mrs Geller and I try to claw back some normalcy around here. We chat about the books we're reading, gossip about our families, and get on with our daily tasks, but beneath the surface, it's obvious we're both putting on a show to disguise our nerves.

Trying to keep myself busy, I scroll through my emails. We were expecting to hear from the local council this week, particularly since one of their members was in attendance at the book signing, but so far, it's been radio silence. I suggested that we might want to phone them up, but Mrs Geller thought it best not to bother them. Truth be told, I think she's just frightened of hearing an answer, which doesn't exactly inspire hope.

'Hiya!'

'*Oh!*' I gasp in surprise at the sudden and unexpected greeting. The source of the interruption is Sarah, who's carrying a large bunch of purple hydrangeas in her arms. 'I didn't expect to see you here,' I murmur after catching my breath.

'I didn't expect to *be* here, but I've got a favour to ask - can we do our book club tonight instead of tomorrow? I've just had an order for a bunch of centrepieces and I'll basically be working late every night this week.'

'That's fine with me. Are we still saying six o'clock? I finish at five today.'

‘Six is great. And I also have a second favour.’ Sarah glances up through her lashes, grinning guiltily. ‘Is it okay if I invite my sister along tonight? I completely spaced and forgot I had plans to hang out with her.’

‘Erm, sure.’

‘She hasn’t read the book, but I’m sure we can catch her up.’

Though I’m not quite sold on the idea, I give Sarah a pale smile. ‘I guess I’ll see you both later then.’

‘See you then!’ Before she leaves, she places the hydrangeas on my desk with a flourish. ‘Oh, and these are for you. Thought they might brighten the place up a little.’

‘Thank you so much.’ I mumble shyly. ‘They’re lovely.’

Unfortunately, we don’t have a vase to put them in, so I have to make do with a plastic pitcher I find at the back of the kitchen cupboard.

‘They’re pretty, shame about the jug, though.’ Mrs Geller comments as she strolls past, her arms full of paper. ‘From a secret admirer?’

I scoff at the very notion. ‘Hardly. No, they’re from my brother’s girlfriend, Sarah. She’s ... well, she’s my friend.’

It feels strangely exhilarating to say that, like I’m a kid who’s telling her mum she’s made a lifelong mate out of the girl she just played Barbies with on the playground. A warm glow settles beneath my cheeks and I can’t help but let my giddiness show on my face, I guess it’s been a while since I’ve made a real friend.

‘Well, if your friend plans to bring round any more flowers in the future, perhaps we better invest in a proper vase.’

Yeah, right. Given our current funding status, we can barely afford a mug, let alone a vase. I manage to bite my tongue on a scathing comment about the local council and instead offer up a cheery nod.

‘Perhaps we should.’

At half three on the dot, Leah scurries through the door, but instead of taking root at one of the study tables, she beetles over to my desk, practically tip-toeing all the way.

‘Erm, excuse me?’ Her voice is so quiet, I have to strain to hear it. ‘Do you have any Matthew Crane books?’

‘As a matter of fact, we’ve got all of them. Well, except the brand new one, since it’s not out yet.’ I kept the secret of my gifted copy to myself as I rise from my chair and encourage her to follow me across the library. ‘So, I take it you liked what you heard at the reading the other night, then?’

Eagerly, she nods. ‘I’ve heard of him before, I mean, *everyone* has, but never thought to pick up one of his books before now. But the excerpt he read ... well, it kinda drew me in.’

I smile gently to myself, seems that the Veiled Ocean has captured another intrepid page explorer. *Matt would be happy to hear that.*

The thought crosses my mind without warning, and I physically shake my head, trying to get rid of it. I must look quite odd, because Leah takes a startled step back.

‘Are you alright?’ she asks in a tone peppered with concern.

‘Yeah, I - I’m fine. Erm, well here’s the complete series.’ I gesture to the shelf before us and take out one of the books. ‘You’ll want to start with this one, it’s the first novel. Would you like to check it out?’

‘Yes, please.’

Once I’ve scanned her library card and put it all through the system, Leah thanks me graciously and gets to reading straight away, cosied up in one of our old leather armchairs. There’s a painful tugging inside my chest as I consider how *she* would feel if she knew how close this library is to shutting.

I wonder if we’ve done enough to prove that the library has a place in Lily Vale Village. It seems inconceivable to me that the council would ever consider pulling our funding and shutting us down, every village *needs* a library. It would be like salt with vinegar, tea without biscuits.

But I guess we'll have to wait and see what happens, tortuous though that is.

*

Once my shift is over, I say goodbye to Mrs Geller and step out into the warm afternoon. Breathing in the fresh air, I collect my bicycle from the bike shed and start the short journey to The Cosy Little Tearoom.

Since I'm pretty early, I expect to be waiting around for a while, but when I arrive, I'm surprised to see Sarah sitting at our usual table by the window, and beside her is a vaguely familiar face. It's the blonde woman from the tearoom the other day, the one who swanned straight past me and ordered the cold brew.

Desperate to disguise how intimidated I am, I lift my head high and stride over to the table, an awkwardly stiff smile firmly in place.

'Hi.' I nod toward Blondie. 'You must be Jess.'

A pearly white grin dazzles me. 'That's me! And you're Jane, the librarian!'

She recites my job title like it's the name of an alien race, and with an uncertain giggle, I sit down at the table, reaching in my bag for the book.

'I suppose that's me.'

'We ordered you a lavender latte,' Sarah says as she pushes the fragrant tall glass mug toward me. 'Rachel said that's one of your favourites.'

That takes me aback, who knew that Rachel behind the counter was keeping track of my coffee order? Even more surprising is that she remembers who I am, I don't exactly make much of an impression when I pop in for my morning latte. Perhaps I'm more memorable than I thought.

'So what is this book, anyway?' Jess picks up my signed copy and thumbs through it carelessly. 'Something like *Lord Of The Rings*?'

I snatch it out of her hands and smooth down the pages. ‘It’s *nothing* like *Lord Of The Rings*. It doesn’t have any hobbits in it, for one thing.’

‘What’s so great about it, then?’ Jessica asks pertly. ‘Everyone at the dance academy has been going on and on about the new book that’s coming out, and the fact the author’s visiting the village. I’m starting to get a touch of FOMO.’

I wrinkle my nose in confusion. ‘FOMO?’

In response, Jess rolls those heavily lined eyes. ‘You know, fear of missing out?’

‘Well, Jane certainly isn’t suffering from *that*,’ Sarah sniggers. ‘She’s gotten to spend a lot of time with Mr Matthew Crane since he arrived in the village.’

Jess gawps at me, open-mouthed. ‘*Really?*’

I give a hesitant nod. ‘I work at the library, and we’ve hosted two events with his publishers.’

‘Ooh, so you know someone *famous*, then!’ Jess leans across the table, a sweet simper on her face. ‘What’s he like?’

Before I can think of an appropriate response, Sarah answers for me. ‘Ah, well that’s the thing. You didn’t think much of him, did you, Jane?’

The question makes me pause for thought. After last night, I suppose I can no longer harbour *too* much hatred toward the guy, I mean, he helped me tidy up the library and it was pretty nice to have a bit of company. All the same, I just can’t get past the disrespect he has for his work, and by turn, his readers. I don’t understand it, those books made his fortune, there’s so much heart between the pages, does he really think they are nothing more than drivel?

‘He’s not so bad, really,’ I murmur into my drink, the beginning of a smile itching at the corner of my lip.

Chapter Thirteen

‘Sorry about Jess,’ Sarah hisses in my ear as we hug goodbye. ‘I know she can seem a bit ... *abrasive* at times, but I promise she’s great once you get to know her.’

‘Don’t be silly, she was lovely.’ I’m playing fast and loose with the term *lovely* there, but my comment seems to please Sarah well enough.

‘Maybe I will give this book a try after all,’ Jess flounces over to our side in a dizzying cloud of perfume. ‘It sounded like silly old-fashioned nonsense when Sarah first described it to me, but our little discussion has me intrigued. I’ll have to pick up a copy.’

I dither for a moment before mumbling, ‘you can borrow mine, I suppose.’

With extreme reluctance, I hold it out and she grabs it eagerly.

‘Really? Oh, thanks, Jane. I’ll take good care of it!’

You better, I think begrudgingly. *That’s a signed first edition!* Though I suppose I shouldn’t be bothered, since I’m no longer the biggest fan of Matthew Crane, or *Matt*, I should say. She can throw it on a campfire and use it as kindling for all I care.

We each go our separate ways, Jess and Sarah on foot and me on my light blue bike. It’s a good job I don’t give two hoots how my hair looks, as after a long day of work and stressing over the library’s finances, you’d be forgiven for thinking I’m smuggling a bird’s nest under my helmet.

The soft breeze is warm as I ride through the village and it brushes pleasantly against my cheek. Late summer as it melts into early autumn is my favourite time of year, when it’s still light at dusk and the warmth of the day lingers long after the sun has begun to set, and yet, the leaves are starting to crisp and the air is fresh. There’s something truly magic about Lily Vale during this season.

Daydreaming, I cycle past The Pheasant's Nest, our local pub, where a handful of patrons are sitting out in the beer garden, enjoying the last hours of sunlight.

'Jane!' A woman's voice calls out as I pass.

It catches me so off guard that my feet slip on the pedals and I almost go tumbling sideways onto the pavement, but I manage to steady myself, just about. A tad shaken, I turn to the source of the sound. It's Portia of all people, enjoying a pint with some of her work colleagues. *Why, oh why do I encounter this woman everywhere I go?*

'Oh, are you alright?' she asks, rushing over to my side, her stilettos click-clacking on the cobbles.

Red-faced, I nod briskly. 'I'm fine. Erm, is everything alright?'

'Well, I should say so!' She flashes those perfectly even white teeth of hers. 'The team and I are just *loving* this place, it's just so sickeningly adorable!'

I offer up a wane smile. 'I guess it's pretty different from the city?'

'Oh, Birmingham is a *world* away! Hey, I bet we're driving you lot mad with our Midlands accents, aren't we?'

'Not at all,' I reply politely. 'I quite like it, actually.'

She laughs loud, flinging her gleaming locks over her shoulder. 'Well, *that's* a first! It's a lucky thing we ran into each other again, I wanted to chat to you about something.'

I study her warily, wondering what she has in mind this time. Another bookish event, perhaps? That's got to be good news for the library. 'I'm all ears.'

'I've spoken to my boss about it - and she agrees - Lily Vale is the perfect place for us to launch the new book. It's got just the right old-timey *vibe*, you know?'

I'm so stunned, I can barely stammer out a response. 'I - I guess so.'

‘So we’re going to be extending our stay here for another week, and we’re going to cram in a couple more signings, perhaps another reading. Would the library be able to accommodate that?’

‘Why, yes of course!’ My grin stretches so wide, my cheeks ache. ‘That - that would be wonderful.’

‘And since Matthew is going to be in your ... *quaint* little village for a while longer than expected, he could do with a guide to show him around. You know, someone to check out the local hotspots with, visit that charming little market square, that sort of thing.’

From miles away, I can see where she going with this. ‘Oh, I don’t think -’

‘We’ll pay for everything, of course, just so long as our photographer can get some pictures. We’re really trying to push the ‘face reveal’ aspect of this tour, and having Matt doing all these cute village-y things should really stir up some excitement with his fans. They’ve never seen him before, you see, so we’re keen to *humanise* him.’

Humanise him? What was he before, a chimpanzee?

Clearing my throat, I attempt to respectfully decline the offer. ‘I’m not sure I’m the right person for the job, Portia.’

‘Nonsense! You’ve got that wholesome, girl-next-door look, very twee and out in the sticks.’

I’m not sure if I should be insulted or not, but before I can come up with a response, Portia is strolling back to join her workmates at the table, calling over her shoulder. ‘So, I’ll pop by the library tomorrow to discuss everything properly, yeah? See you then!’

There’s little point in arguing with her, I doubt I’ll be able to get a word in edgewise. And now it seems I’m stuck with Matt for *another* week, not only for potential library events, but for a spot of sightseeing, sounds like!

Thoroughly irritated by my one-sided conversation with Portia, I cycle on home, reaching my pale primrose door in double-quick time. After locking my bike up in the tiny,

shared garden shed, I head inside and shake the stress of the day from my shoulders. I could really do with a large glass of wine, but when I peruse the larder, I find it depressingly empty. I suppose a mugful of tea and a couple of biscuits will have to suffice, then.

Clutching my favourite 'bookworm' mug, I settle down on the sofa, wondering what I should read tonight. Listlessly, I browse the covers of my 'to be read' pile on the coffee table, but nothing catches my eye. It's then that I glance over at the Matthew Crane book I tossed aside after the signing last week, the brand new one that hasn't been officially released yet.

I'd been ignoring the book ever since Matt gave it to me, perhaps stubbornly. After all, I've been *dying* to read the next instalment of Phineas Emerald's story, it's been a few years since book three came out, and since then, I've been on the edge of my seat waiting for news of a publication date for the fourth book. And yet here it is, weeks before it officially hits shelves, and I've barely even skimmed through the blurb.

That's not to say I haven't wanted to, however. My yearning to follow Phineas' tale hasn't gone away, but it has been somewhat dulled by my first few encounters with Mr Matthew Crane. But after hearing the first chapter at the reading last night, well, my curiosity has been well and truly piqued. Regardless of what I might think of the author, I adore the characters and the world they live in.

I smooth my hands over the glossy dust cover, my heart beating out a tune of anticipation as I turn to the first page. That unmistakable, new book smell hits me and I dive right in.

I devour the first three chapters in just over an hour. It's brilliant - exhilarating and gut-wrenching, and I'm only at the very beginning of the story. I'm so engaged in Phineas and his crew's antics that I let my tea go cold and leave my ginger snaps untouched on the plate.

I clutch the book tight to my chest, as if to allow the words to literally touch my heart. I just can't believe that Matt is so detached to this story - I *won't* believe it. There's no way someone who didn't care about his characters and the story

he's been weaving for years could write something so ... well,
something so *real*.

Chapter Fourteen

As promised, Portia swans in through the library doors at nine-thirty, carrying two coffee cups from The Cosy Little Tearoom on a cardboard tray.

‘Morning!’ She grins brightly as she hands me one of the cups. ‘Thought you might like a coffee. Isn’t that little cafe down the road just *darling*? Hey, that would be a good place for our photographer to get a snap of Matt.’

‘Thank you.’ I toy with the lid of the coffee cup. ‘Listen, about that -’

‘You’re not backing out, are you?’ Portia claps back, a hand placed sassily on her hip.

Backing out? I’m trying to recall when I agreed to the arrangement in the first place!

‘Well ...’

‘Because this isn’t just an opportunity for Quest Publications, you know. It’s a *massive* opportunity for Lily Vale, and all the business owners here. Having a famous author like Matt would bring a lot of attention to this place, more tourism, more shoppers, the whole shebang.’

That gives me pause for thought. I think of Holly and Bill at The Cosy Little Tearoom, Sarah and her flower shop, and all the other small businesses that could benefit from the publicity. Can I deprive all of them the chance to grow their businesses, just because I’m feeling weird about spending extended time around Matt?

‘Alright, alright. I’ll show Matt around the village. I’ve got some time tomorrow, would that work?’

‘That’s perfect!’

Reluctantly, I write down my phone number and all the other little details in Portia’s diary. She waves goodbye and strides out the door just as Mrs Geller is walking through them.

‘Wasn’t that the PR lady from the publishing house?’ My colleague’s face is twisted with confusion as she approaches the reception desk I’m sitting behind.

‘Erm, yes.’

‘Well, what did she want?’ she asks, her voice high with hope. ‘Does she want to put on another author’s book signing here, or something?’

‘No, actually, she’s still focused on Matthew Crane, I guess they’re really trying to push this book release. It seems he’s staying in the village for another week, and ... well, they want to host his book launch at the library.’

‘Oh!’ Mrs Geller gasps in delight. ‘A *book launch*? How exciting! How *wonderful!*’

‘But that’s not all, they want to do some publicity shots around the village. Portia has asked me to show him around for the day.’

‘*Oh!*’ She gasps again, her eyes twinkling bright.

‘And I’m not sure it’s a good idea,’ I interrupt her delight with my reluctant mumblings.

‘It’s a *great* idea!’ Mrs Geller exclaims. ‘We’ve been desperate to bring people into the library, what better way than to have a famous author launch his book here?’

I know she’s right, just as Portia was. But the idea of spending time alone with Matt ... well, to be completely honest, it makes me feel sort of nervous. And the fact a photographer will be following us around all day? Well, I can’t imagine anything more awkward than *that*.

‘What’s going on, Jane?’ Frowning, Mrs Geller leans up against the desk. ‘I thought you were a huge fan of Matthew Crane’s work?’

‘I am, it’s just ...’

‘You aren’t a huge fan of the man himself?’ she suggests, a shrewd smile on her lips. ‘Strange, I thought he was quite lovely.’

‘He’s ... fine. I just - I have reason to believe that he cares very little for his writing and his readers.’

‘You really think so? He seemed incredibly passionate the other night, when he was reading that excerpt from the new novel. And many people who came to the book signing told me how engaging he was.’

‘Well, then that just makes him a phoney. And I can’t *stand* phonies.’

Shaking her head, she sighs wearily. ‘If you say so, Jane. But do you think you can stand him for one afternoon?’

‘I suppose so.’ I grumble into my chest. ‘I don’t really have a choice, do I?’

‘Oh, you always have a choice, dear. But I think missing out on this would be the wrong one.’

She turns on her heel and I sip pensively at my coffee, the sweet caramel flavour soothing my nerves just slightly.

I’m expecting our Mum Club members today, and sure enough, at eleven o’clock, a whole gaggle of women with pushchairs and youngsters holding the handles barrel through the door. In an instant, I leap up from my desk to welcome them and direct them over to the Kid’s Corner. I’ve done my best to make the area comfortable, I added a table and a few extra chairs for the mums and scattered some old patched-up beanbags about, and it doesn’t look half bad, if I do say so myself. The mums and their little ones make themselves comfortable as I bring over a pot of tea and a plateful of biscuits and promptly leave them to it. As I’m walking away, Mel catches my arm.

‘Thank you so much for this, Jane,’ she whispers. ‘It’s going to be so lovely to get together with my mum mates and feel like a *real* person while the kids read and play.’

I smile back. ‘It’s my pleasure. If you guys need anything, I’m just over at reception.’

As I trundle back to my swivel chair, one thought remains. We *need* to keep this place open, for the likes of Mel and her

friends and all the other people who come here to use the library's services.

And if that means spending a day with Matthew Crane, well, then, so be it.

Chapter Fifteen

If someone had told me a couple of weeks ago that I'd be spending my day off showing Matthew Crane around the village, I'd have called them crazy. Yet at nine o'clock sharp, I'm waiting outside my maisonette, tugging at the hem of my skirt and fiddling with my glasses self-consciously. *I wonder if Matt and his entourage will arrive on time ...*

For the occasion, I've donned my nicest dress - a little pink and white gingham number that falls just above my knee. Often you'll find me in jeans and a t-shirt, but just in case I end up on the edge of the PR photos today, I thought it best to dress up ... or at least, that's what I keep telling myself the reason is.

The truth is I'm pretty anxious to see Matt again, especially in such an informal setting. It would be different if we were at the library, I could make an excuse and escape to the back office if things got a bit weird and awkward. But now, I'm being paid to hang out with him all day, there's nowhere to hide, nowhere to run.

Right on cue, the sleek black car glides down my little street and parks up. I almost expect a chauffeur in a hat and white gloves to step out, but instead, it's Matt who opens the back door and climbs out to greet me.

'Hey.' With a ducked head, he glimpses at his feet, seeming as timid as me all of a sudden. 'We've got a bit of a weird one ahead of us today, haven't we?'

I suck at my teeth and nod. 'You can say that again.'

Just as I'm about to climb into the back passenger seat, a large figure leaps out and something impossibly bright goes off in my face, nearly blinding me.

'Whoops, forgot the flash was on.' The portly man chuckles and vigorously shakes my hand, balancing a large camera in the other. 'Hello, darlin'. I'm Frank, I'll be shooting you and Matt. And Pete here's your chauffeur for the day.'

‘Nice to meet you,’ I force the words through gritted teeth. ‘Erm, you know, Lily Vale is much better on foot. It’s not a large village, we could easily walk around without the car.’

‘That sounds kind of nice, actually.’ Matt turns to the photographer. ‘What do you say, Frank? Shall we let Pete have the rest of the day off and let Jane show us around properly? She is the expert here, after all.’

Frank sniffs in disdain at the idea. ‘Nah, I don’t fancy lugging my equipment all over. Come on then, kids, get in the car.’

So Matt and I do as we’re told. Despite it being quite roomy in the back, I feel a little too close to Matt for comfort, once again, I catch a whiff of his earthy cologne, and I turn away, hoping my cheeks aren’t beginning to blush.

‘I’ve got lots of ideas for where we could go,’ I begin hastily. ‘I thought perhaps first we could get a cup of coffee at The Cosy Little Tearoom -’

‘Sorry love, but Portia’s got an itinerary for you guys to follow to make sure she gets the right photos for the press package.’ Pete tells us as we drive through the streets. ‘First stop is the village green.’

I pull a face, but I keep my mouth shut during the journey. I can’t see that the village green will make for very interesting photos - there’s nothing there but grass, a few trees and some benches scattered about. It would be different if the Summer Fair was on or something, but without an event, the green is just that - *green*.

Frank seems to agree, as he grows increasingly more irritated with each shot.

‘Stand over there, will ya, Matt?’ It’s more of a command than a question. ‘And you, girlie, stand next to him and err ... I don’t know, look at the flowers, or something.’

My legs trembling, I walk stiffly over to Matt and stand by his side. I *hate* being on camera, I always feel so cumbersome and out of place, no matter what I do.

With a huff and a curse word or two, Frank decides he’s had enough of shooting on the green after just fifteen minutes.

‘Right, where’s next, Pete?’ he asks our chauffeur gruffly.

‘Next stop is the market square. Portia wants to get lots of pictures with the stalls, all candid and realistic, like.’

I step forward and chime in. ‘But - but the market isn’t on today!’

Pete gives an apologetic shrug. ‘I’m just following orders, love.’

Sure enough, when Pete parks up at the side of the road and the three of us passengers step out onto the pavement, we find the market square decidedly empty.

‘Well, what the bloody hell am I supposed to do now?’ Frank snaps at Matt and I, as if it’s somehow our fault. ‘I’m supposed to get some photos of Matt talking to local merchants and all that crap, but there’s no one here!’

‘I *did* say so,’ I mutter, which only serves to fan the fire.

Frank rants and raves to himself, cursing us, Portia and everyone else involved. Pete attempts to chill him out, but after a while, he gives up and goes off for a cigarette break, which I suspect is much-deserved, considering he’s had to deal with this nightmare of a photographer all morning. Furious, Frank dials Portia’s number and takes his ire out on the poor intern on the other end of the line.

‘Does he always get this angry?’ I hiss in Matt’s ear.

He snickers. ‘Pretty much.’

‘Where’s the next location on the list? Do you know?’

‘I think Portia wanted some photos in the park, and outside the village pub with a pint, that sort of thing. But the market was the thing she was most excited about, she wanted me to be seen chatting with the locals and viewing the stalls. I think we were supposed to spend most of our time here.’

‘Well, we could try and calm Frank down and head over to the park now, while it’s nice and sunny.’

‘Or we could just sneak off.’

I blink at him. ‘What?’

‘Well, Pete’s gone off for a ciggie, Frank is a bit occupied ... maybe you could give me that tour you planned?’

‘But what about the photos? Portia will be ever so cross if she doesn’t have any.’

‘Let’s take our own. I’ve got a smart phone, you know Lily Vale better than she does, and it’s not like Frank is going to take any pictures now anyway, it looks like his temper tantrum is going to go on for a while. I bet you and I can get some nice candid about the village that will keep Portia and the PR team happy enough.’

I glance over at Frank, who’s still screaming down the phone, his face turning from scarlet to an alarming shade of purple.

‘Okay, let’s go. But hurry!’

While Frank is distracted and Pete is off in the distance enjoying a smoke, Matt and I hasten away not daring to slow down until we’ve turned down two streets and passed the haberdashery on the corner of Magpie Lane. We stop short to catch our breath, Matt leaning up against the brick wall while I double over with my hands pressed to my knees.

‘This is so unlike me,’ I gasp through laboured breaths. ‘I never break the rules, *never*.’

‘What, you never played truant even once when you were at school?’

I snort at the very suggestion. ‘Of course not! I was a good girl, I still am. It’s *you* who’s the rebel, being a bad influence on me.’

‘Believe me, it was not my intent to lead the good girl astray, merely to rescue her from the ogre.’

‘And that would be Frank in this situation, I presume?’

‘Well, if the shoe fits.’ Without warning, he takes me by the hand, his deft, strong fingers laced through mine. ‘Now, where shall we go first?’

Chapter Sixteen

As giddy as little kids, we run through the streets, our hands still clasped. It's a peculiar feeling, his fingers locked in mine, exhilarating and yet sort of ... *natural*, all at the same time.

'Let's go to The Cosy Little Tearoom,' I suggest breathlessly. 'They have the most amazing flavoured teas and coffees, and wonderful cakes.'

Matt treats me to his devastatingly wicked grin. 'Lead the way.'

Before too long, the pale pink building with the big wooden sign is in view. The moment we stumble through the door, we're accosted by a ball of golden fluff with a very slobbery tongue.

'Puddles, get back here!' Holly calls out to the dopey Labrador, and gives us an apologetic look. 'I'm sorry about him, he always insists on greeting guests at the door, in his own unique way.'

'Oh, I don't mind a bit.' Matt stoops to scratch between Puddles' floppy ears, much to his delight. 'This little guy can greet me all he likes.'

The two of us head up toward the counter, and Holly smiles at me.

'Hi, Jane.' She nods at Matt. 'And you must be the big-time author we've all heard so much about.'

I'm slightly surprised to see a hint of pink edge along Matt's cheekbones. 'I guess that's me.'

'Well, welcome to Lily Vale! What can I get for you both?'

Matt peruses the chalkboard menu on the wall thoughtfully. 'What would you recommend?'

'For a newbie? Try a lavender latte, it's got a nice, velvety taste and it's a good, safe introduction to the more unusual

flavours we're known for. I've never had a customer who didn't like it.'

'Okay, let's have two of those, then. And two lemon tarts, please.'

'Coming right up!'

There's a scattering of customers enjoying coffees and cakes around the tearoom, but fortunately, my favourite spot by the window is free, so I lead Matt over. Within minutes, Holly trots over with our drinks and tarts.

'Enjoy, you two,' she murmurs shrewdly, and before she turns to leave, she gives me a not-so-subtle wink I pray Matt doesn't notice.

I'm not sure what she thinks is going on here, today is *strictly* business. I'm only here to help the library, and Matt's here because, well, he *has* to be.

'*Mmm!*' Matt exclaims through a mouthful of pastry and lemon curd. 'This tart is *amazing!*'

'They are my favourite,' I confess shyly. 'The ones here are the best I've ever tasted. Rachel really knows her stuff when it comes to cakes and the like.' Clearing my throat, I reach in my bag for my mobile phone. 'I should take a picture of you.'

Clearly puzzled, Matt creases his brow. 'Come again?'

'You know, for Portia.'

With a hearty chuckle, Matt nods. 'Oh yeah, I'd kind of forgotten about all that.' He raises his coffee mug and grins. 'Go for it.'

I take my time snapping the shot, centring him in the frame while also getting plenty of the charming white and pink background in. When I'm sure I've got it just right, I press the button and capture the moment. I stare at the little Matt on the screen, his eyes sparkling like chips of golden sea glass and his even white teeth bared in a gorgeous smile.

'Did it look okay?' Matt asks casually, seemingly more interested in his tart than how photogenic he is.

‘Yes.’ I swallow as I tear my eyes away from the screen and place my phone back in my bag. ‘It looked fine.’

As we’re sipping our lavender lattes, a young lad in his late teens sidles up to the table, a notebook clutched in his hand.

‘Erm, excuse me, Matthew Crane?’

With a demure nod, Matt smiles warmly. ‘That’s me.’

‘Would - I mean, would it be okay if I got your autograph?’ He asks, sheepishly proffering the notebook. ‘A - and a picture, if you don’t mind?’

‘That’s no problem at all.’

Fascinated, I watch him scribble out his signature on the lined paper and take a selfie with the kid. They have a brief chat about books before the youngster takes his leave, and Matt turns his attention back to me.

‘What?’ he snickers. ‘What’s that face for?’

‘It must be strange,’ I comment, shaking my head in disbelief, ‘having people come up to you like that. Total strangers knowing who you are.’

‘It *is* strange, especially since for the longest time, no one knew who I was. Well, at least what I looked like. I could pass through the busiest town or browse the smallest book store and no one would be any the wiser. Those days are over now, I suppose.’

‘So why did you decide to reveal yourself to the world, anyway?’ I ask, genuinely curious.

Matt sighs and shrugs his shoulder lethargically. ‘It wasn’t really my decision. The publishers thought it would be a good idea for the release of the new book, and I’m kind of beholden to their whims. The joys of signing a publishing contract, and all that.’

‘So you didn’t have a choice?’

‘Not really.’

My eyes cast down at my plate, I play with the lemony crumbs pensively. As someone who values their privacy, I can’t

imagine how it would feel to have it forcefully taken from you for the sake of your career.

‘I’d hate that,’ I mumble. ‘Having to choose between my job and my anonymity, it seems so unfair.’

‘It’s not all bad, though. I’ve gotten to meet fans of mine and it’s nice getting their feedback. They are a lot kinder than the professional reviewers, that’s for sure.’

‘Oh, come off it! Every single one of your books has made it to number one on countless bestseller lists. They’re critically acclaimed.’

‘Not everyone thinks so.’

Yeah, clearly *you* don’t. Thinking about his negative attitude towards his work threatens to get me all riled up again, but I manage to stifle my impending bad mood. After all, I don’t want to spoil today.

We snap a few more pictures of Matt in the tearoom - including some shots of Holly and Puddles, who are both more than happy to pose for the camera - and head off on our merry tour of Lily Vale.

‘Where next?’ Matt asks.

‘I thought we could walk down the high street and get some pics of you in the shops with the owners and stuff, then we’ll go to the pub, and lastly, if there’s time, we can finish off at the village park.’

And that’s just what we do. There’s no denying that Lily Vale looks pretty gorgeous in the photographs, with its cobblestoned streets and its mish-mash of eclectic stores, it’s kind of like something off a chocolate box. Sometimes I forget how lucky I am to live here.

We pop into Sarah’s florist and she allows us to take some photos of the place, making sure Matt is front and centre, of course. She’s a little flustered to begin with, all pink in the cheeks and sheepish around him, but Matt’s relaxed demeanour helps her loosen up and before too long, we’re all laughing and joking away as he poses with the roses.

‘For a celebrity, he’s so down to earth.’ She leans in close to whisper in my ear. ‘So nice and funny.’

‘He’s not a *celebrity*, not really,’ I mumble back, keeping my voice low, lest he hear us gossiping.

‘He kind of is, though you wouldn’t know it, he acts just like a normal guy.’ She frowns at me. ‘What was your problem with him, again?’

I’m not sure how to respond, so I simply shrug my shoulders and shake my head.

After exploring some more of Lily Vale’s unique stores, we stop for a drink in the pub, and when we explain to Barry the landlord what we’re up to, he lets us come behind the bar so Matt can pull a pint for a photo. Then he gladly leads us out into the beer garden, where we pose Matt at a table under the big oak tree.

‘Here, make sure you get the name of the pub in that picture,’ Barry guffaws. ‘I want the world to know that *the* Matthew Crane had a drink here!’

I’m not completely convinced that Barry even *knew* of Matthew Crane before the buzz got around Lily Vale, nor am I convinced that he’s ever read anything more complex than his Sunday paper, but we’re happy to give him the free advertising all the same.

After a couple more pints (and a few packets of crisps), Matt and I stumble out of The Pheasant’s Nest into the warm afternoon sunlight.

‘Pete is blowing up my phone.’ Matt says, pulling jokingly at his collar. ‘And Frank, too.’

‘Oh dear,’ I gnaw at my lower lip, feeling like a school kid who’s about to get a serious telling off by a teacher. ‘Maybe we should go and find them?’

‘Or maybe I should just turn my phone off.’

And with a cheeky grin, he powers down the mobile and stuffs it into his jeans pocket. It’s impossible to not giggle at his

antics, though I cover my laughter with my hand, as if somehow he won't notice my amusement.

The park is surprisingly empty, save for a couple of mums with pushchairs over by the swing sets and a lone jogger in the distance. We make our way to the duck pond to snap a few shots of Matt while the sun begins to set in the sky.

'Hey, give me the phone will you?' Matt beckons with his finger.

Cocking my head to one side, I hand it over. 'What are you doing?'

'What does it look like?' He holds the mobile up before me, his expression one of serious concentration. 'I'm getting some pictures of you.'

'But - but Portia doesn't want any photos of *me*.'

'So?'

Awkwardly, I tug at my dress and drag my fingers through my wispy locks. 'I probably look awful.'

'Nonsense, you look great. The sun is hitting you just right, you're *glowing*.'

At a loss for words, I stare at him. I'm definitely glowing now - glowing *bright red!*

Still, I reluctantly let Matt take a couple of pictures of me - by the pond, sitting under the shade of a tree, tittering like a teenager as he tries to make me laugh - and the experience is actually not as horrific as I thought it would be. Somehow, I forget about what my hair looks like or if I'm showing too many teeth when I smile, and allow myself to just *be*.

Once we're all done, Matt insists on walking me home. It's kind of nice, wandering down the street in the waning sunlight, just chatting casually with him.

'So, do you think after this week, you'll be heading back to Birmingham?' I ask, wrestling to disguise the hope in my voice. Though whether I'm hoping he'll be leaving soon or staying longer, I haven't quite figured out yet.

His shoulders lift uncertainly. ‘Probably, though I’m not looking forward to it. The last fortnight has been such a great change of pace, you know? The city’s fine and all, but it’s so busy, it’s nice to be somewhere quiet and peaceful for once.’

I nod, understanding completely. There are times even a little village like Lily Vale can feel too busy and loud for me, I can’t imagine how I’d cope in a big, bustling city, full of people and noise and confusing train lines. Once, I visited London to see the National Gallery, and that was enough to put me off trains and tubes for *life*.

Once we reach my front door, Matt pulls out his mobile and sucks his teeth. ‘Yikes, thirty missed calls. Most are from Frank, but a couple are from Portia.’

I pick anxiously at my nails. ‘Will you be in a lot of trouble?’

‘Nah. I mean, yes, maybe, but it was worth it.’ His wide grin threatens to melt me on the spot like ice cream. ‘Thanks for showing me around today, I had a blast.’

‘Me too.’ The eagerness slides off my tongue before I can catch it and with a feigned cough, I attempt to dampen my enthusiasm. ‘I mean, that is to say, I had a much better time than I was expecting to.’

A dark eyebrow quirks upward. ‘Well, I’m glad I exceeded your expectations.’

With nothing left to say, I bid him farewell with a curt nod and hurry inside my maisonette, almost tripping over the welcome mat in my haste. I don’t even realise my heart is pounding like mad until I close the door behind me and allow myself a second to breathe.

I don’t understand - my palms are clammy, my pulse is going a mile a minute and I’m sweating profusely out of every pore.

What is wrong with me?

Chapter Seventeen

After the excitement of today, my six o'clock book talk meeting with Sarah completely slipped my mind. Realising I'm running far too late, I rush out into the street, my book bag swinging in the early evening breeze as I sprint all the way to The Cosy Little Tearoom.

By the time I stagger through the door, I'm out of breath and slightly sweaty under the arms. I scan the tearoom for Sarah, but there's no sign of her. Jess, however, is sitting at our usual table by the window, and she looks up as I approach, her head tilted to one side.

'Oh, hello Jess.' I glance awkwardly behind her, as if expecting her sister to appear miraculously out of thin air. 'Is Sarah in the loo?'

'Nope, she can't make it today. Something to do with corsages or centrepieces or whatever. Either way, she's stuck at the shop all evening, sounds like.' She gestures to the chair opposite her and throws me a sharkish grin. 'So you've got me all to yourself tonight.'

I return the smile, though it's much tauter and more strained than hers. 'Great.'

'Shall we get some coffee then? A cinnamon cappuccino sounds good to me.'

Her fingers steepled beneath her chin, Jess watches me expectantly, and it takes me a couple of seconds to realise she's waiting for me to go and order.

'I'll just go and get that for you, shall I?' I mumble, more irritated than I care to say.

'If you would.'

Scoffing under my breath, I dump my book bag onto my chair and stamp over to the counter.

'Ooh, *someone's* having a bad evening.' Rachel teases as I approach. 'What can I get for you?'

‘A cinnamon cappuccino for the Duchess, please.’ I jerk my head in the direction of our table, where Jess is checking her French-manicured nails. ‘And just a flat white for me.’

As Rachel begins to foam the milk, she shakes her head and snickers. ‘She’s a character, that Jess, isn’t she?’

‘You can say that again,’ I grumble.

‘She can be a bit ... *funny* to begin with, but once you get to know her, she’s a right laugh.’

I raise an unconvinced eyebrow. ‘I highly doubt that.’

Rachel shrugs as she places the cups on a tray. ‘She’s not for everyone, I grant you that. But give her a chance, she might just grow on you.’

‘Yeah, like a fungus.’

Still feeling huffed, I storm back to the table with our drinks. When I sit down, Jess says something that forces me to do a double-take.

‘So, I made a start on the book you lent me.’

‘Oh. Erm, what did you think?’

She takes a demure sip of her cappuccino, her eyes flicking up to the ceiling in thought. ‘It was very good. I ended up reading three chapters in one sitting. I’m onto chapter twelve now.’

My eyes widen of their own accord. Who would have guessed she was such a fast reader? ‘Wow, Jess. I - I’m quite impressed.’

A knowing smile passes over her red lips, one that says *you’re right to be impressed, peasant*. ‘So, have I caught up with you and Sarah yet?’

‘Actually, you’re *ahead* of Sarah.’

Her platinum blonde curls bounce on her shoulders as she cackles aloud. ‘Ha! She’ll *love* that.’

I decide it’s best to keep our discussions to the first five chapters so that we’re not pages ahead of Sarah, and the two of us have an unexpectedly thought-provoking conversation. I’m

astonished by how well considered Jess' insights and observations are, she's incredibly articulate and astute in a way I couldn't have predicted.

'And when Phineas found out that he'd been betrayed by Mariam since their childhood, gosh, I really felt that,' she says, clutching her chest as if the pain of the main character is her own.

'Yeah, it was a really shocking reveal. I remember the first time I read it, I literally gasped out loud.'

'I would have too, if I hadn't been surrounded by dancers in the break room! Anyway, enough of books now, I'd rather talk about the author.' Her green eyes gleam with mischief. 'Sarah said you and he came into the florist earlier today. Buying you flowers, was he?'

'Of course not! It was a *business* outing, we were taking PR shots for him around the village. And I thought it would be a good idea to bring him to my favourite local spots, so they could get some free publicity.'

Jess nods approvingly. 'Smart move. But tell me more about this Matthew Crane, Sarah said he's ever so handsome, and funny *and* friendly. Is it all true?'

I dither over my response. 'Well, sort of.'

'Sort of? Care to elaborate?'

Swallowing the burgeoning lump in my throat, I glance down at the book in front of her. How can I tell Jess that Matt has no passion or pride in his work, when she is enjoying the series so much? I can't spoil it for her, not the way it's been spoiled for me.

'It's ... it's nothing,' I murmur into my chest.

She gasps theatrically. 'You *like* him, don't you?'

'What? No!' I laugh a little too loudly. 'If anything, it's the complete opposite. I find him irritating and cocky and - and -' I grasp for a third insult, yet I come up short. 'And I don't like him, at least not in the way you're presuming.'

Jess leans back in her chair and studies me closely. ‘So, how long is he in Lily Vale for? Surely he must be leaving soon.’

‘I imagine he’ll be gone by the end of the week, he’s got a reading at the library to launch his new book and that’s all that we have planned.’

‘Ooh, when is the launch?’

‘It’s tomorrow, actually. At six thirty.’

Jess taps her long nails on the table one by one, playing out a little tune. ‘Maybe I’ll come along, I’d like to meet this famous author.’

‘By all means, come! We need all the interest we can get in the library right now.’

Jess’s arched brows meet in the middle. ‘Why’s that?’

Yet again, I find myself hesitating to respond. ‘Well, our funding has been cut recently, and there’s the concern that the local council might ... close down the library.’

‘Close down the *library*?’

‘Shh!’ Mortified, my eyes dart across the tearoom, praying that no one heard Jess’ outburst. Fortunately, everyone else seems much too occupied with their cream teas to notice. ‘I don’t want the entire village to know.’

‘Wow, I can’t believe it.’ Jess shakes her head. ‘I drive past it every day on the way to work, it’s been such a constant in Lily Vale since ... well, since *forever*.’

‘I know,’ I look down into my mug sadly. ‘And I’m trying my best to keep it around forever.’

‘What can I do to help?’

The question leaves me stunned, particularly since it came from Jess, of all people. She doesn’t seem like the charitable type, but perhaps I’ve got her all wrong.

‘Just come tomorrow night,’ I urge her. ‘Support the library by attending our events, starting with tomorrow.’

‘I’ll be there.’ A wicked grin spreads across her face. ‘If only to meet this gorgeous author I’ve heard so much about!’

My eyes rolling like marbles, I lift my mug and sip my coffee, musing over the day I’ve had. It’s odd, I didn’t think much of Matt or Jess when I first met them, but after getting to know them, I don’t know, things have shifted, somehow. I suppose I can see things in them that are a *little* appealing, like Jess’ eagerness and Matt’s carefree, devil-may-care attitude.

I guess that’s why they tell you not to judge a book by its cover.

Chapter Eighteen

I wake up with a headache and *The Exile's Empire* tangled up in my bedsheets. I must have fallen asleep reading it last night. I've been struggling to put it down, always telling myself I'll read just one more chapter before bed, knowing full well it's a lie. At this rate, I'll have finished it before it's officially launched tonight.

Groaning, I sit up in bed and pick up the book, frowning at the cover. I just don't get it - the story is so rich and thoughtful and deep, how can it be that the author himself finds it *derivative*?

I'm still pondering over the paradox as I brush my teeth. On the surface - at least when I first met him - Matt seemed snarky, cynical and just plain rude. But the more I'm around him, the more I find him to be sensitive, eloquent and intelligent, just like the voice I hear when I read through his books. And yet, he has such a negative view of his work that he dismisses any praise in a way that can't simply be just modesty. I *have* to believe there's more going on here, it just doesn't make any sense.

There's a cool breeze in the air as I bike to work, and I'm grateful for it waking me up. Still, by the time I lock up my bike and plod through the library doors, I'm knackered once again. Deciding to make myself a cup of tea, I drop my bag at the reception desk and go off in search of my favourite mug.

When I traipse back from the kitchen, yawning loudly, the phone on my desk is ringing insistently. Placing my steaming cuppa down on the coaster, I pick up the receiver and hold it to my ear.

'Hello?'

'Jane? It's Portia, from Quest Publications.'

My heart halts for a beat and I freeze in my swivel chair. 'Oh, hello,' I say awkwardly, willing myself to remain calm.

She could be calling about anything, I frantically try to convince myself I'm not in trouble, it's not necessarily about Matt and I ditching our photographer and the chauffeur.

'Listen, I need to talk to you about these photos. Matt sent them over last night, and I've got to say -'

'I'm *so* sorry!' It all spills out of me like milk from a split carton. 'We had some trouble at the market square, you see, and Matt and I, well, we thought -'

'Jane - take a breath. I just wanted to let you know that I loved them!'

'You - you did?'

'They were so natural and *real*, I'm totally digging the candid, just-snapped-a-quick-pic-on-my-phone style. It wasn't *quite* what I had in mind, granted, and I've had an earful off Frank, but you can't argue with results!'

Relief washes over me in a tidal wave. 'Oh, well, that's wonderful.'

'I especially liked the selfies of you and Matt together, so adorable. And those ones of you under the tree were just *darling*.'

My face burns fiery hot. I only took those pics with Matt for fun, I didn't expect him to forward them on to his publisher!

'So I'll be along later on with Matt for the launch. We're so looking forward to it, we've all had such a blast being in this lovely village for the last two weeks, we'll be sad to go!'

And despite everything, I discover there's a pit of sadness deep down in my gut, too.

'I'm glad you've had a great stay. I'll see you tonight.'

'See you then!'

I'm still suffering from heart palpitations when I shakily place the phone down. Thank goodness for that! Not only did we have a surprisingly good time together, but it seems that the pictures Matt and I took were a huge hit too. I giggle to

myself, recalling how silly he was, messing about with the flowers in Sarah's shop and mucking about in the pub.

He's really not what I expected him to be at all ...

I'm just finishing my last gulp of tea when a man in his early fifties tiptoes sheepishly over to the desk. 'How much would it be to use the computer for an hour, please?' His voice is barely above a whisper and I have to strain to hear him properly.

'It's free,' I tell him brightly as I look up from my own computer screen. 'Just log onto one of the computers using your library card number.'

'Thank you,' he gives me a goofy, nervous smile. 'I'm working on my CV today, and I kind of don't know where to begin.'

'Oh, well, you're in luck! If you can hold on until noon, we're actually putting on a little session where we help out folks with CV and cover letter writing. Normally, you have to sign up to be a part of the class, but there's enough room for you to join today's if you like?'

'Really?' His eyes shine with hope. 'Wow, well, that would be grand!'

'Can I just take your name, Mr?'

'Alan. Alan Farry.'

'Okay, Alan. In about half an hour, we'll be beginning the session over there by all the computers.'

With a grateful nod, Alan hurries over to bag a computer, uttering a furtive 'thank you' over his shoulder.

Carrying an unwieldy pile of papers, Mrs Geller trots past my desk, then doubles back to pause before it. 'Are you ready for the CV session at twelve, Jane?'

'Yep, just finishing up a few things here, then I'll be right onto it.'

'Great, we've got quite a few people signed up for the session today' Eyes eager, she leans up against my desk. 'So, how did things go with Mr Crane yesterday?'

‘Well ... it didn’t go *quite* according to plan, but we managed to get some photos for the publishers, and it sounds like they are pleased with our offerings.’ I beam up at her. ‘And I had us visit plenty of local businesses in the village, just to give them a boost of publicity.’

‘Ah, how wonderful! Way to kill two birds with one stone, Jane.’

As she walks away, a ember of pride ignites inside me and the warmth of it rises to my face, colouring it pink. Normally, I do my job from behind a desk, hidden away from the village in my little secluded corner, but now I’m stepping out into the sunshine, and dare I say, I kind of like the spotlight.

*

The day drawls into early evening, and before I know it, it’s time for the big book launch. We’ve set the scene for the reading just as we did the first time around - luckily, I’d stored away all the decorations, so Mrs Geller and I have no trouble transforming the library into our own little fantasy world.

Tonight is especially important as *The Exile’s Empire* is being officially released to the public, so I’ve got all my fingers and toes crossed that we’ll have a lot more people in tonight, including a few journalists Portia has invited along. I’m desperate to prove to her that she made the right choice to stick around in Lily Vale and launch the book here, and I want Matt’s latest novel to be as much of a success as the last three. Most of all, I need to show the world (namely, the local authorities!) that our library is a bustling hub of activity, an essential part of the community where events from prestigious to everyday take place.

Just before the reading is set to begin, Portia arrives with her little minions, and my heart leaps into my throat when Matt strides in shortly after, carrying a copy of his new book under his arm. He looks super sharp, dressed in a slim-fit black shirt and dark blue jeans with his chestnut curls tumbling over his forehead. Though I try not to, I end up staring - there’s something particularly mysterious and intriguing about him tonight.

Our guests seem to think so too, judging by the gasps of awe and moony eyes he elicits as they file in. As she promised, Jess has turned up, and she looks stunning as ever in a silver wrap dress with her blonde curls freshly blow-dried and coiffed. I glance down at my own simple outfit, consisting of a burgundy blouse and a pair of black tailored trousers, and instantly feel like Plain Jane once again. Still, I'm pleased to see her, and she's brought Sarah and local author Lucy Middleton along too.

Jess swans ahead of her sister and Lucy and air kisses both my cheeks. 'Well, I'm here!' she announces, holding out her arms as if to present herself to me.

'Yes, you are.' I beam at her, my self-consciousness beginning to melt away under her warmth. 'Thanks so much for coming, it really means a lot.'

She joins the others sitting before the table where Matt is waiting, his book open in front of him. As I did before, I loiter in the background, though this time, I don't pretend to be busy with something 'more important'. This time, I wait with bated breath, my ears pricking up the moment Matt opens his mouth.

'Welcome, everyone, and thank you all for coming along to the launch of *The Exile's Empire*.' He stares over the heads of the crowd, straight at me. 'And I want to give a special thank you to Miss Jane Reed and Mrs Ivy Geller, the librarians of this fabulous place, who have worked tirelessly with my team to make our stay in Lily Vale so wonderful.'

To my absolute horror, everyone turns around to look at us, and it gets worse when they actually begin to *applaud*. At my side, Mrs Geller smiles graciously, and I do my best to copy her, though I suspect my smile is much more awkward, and I can tell by the heat rushing along my neck that I've turned the same colour as my blouse.

Mercifully, the crowd swiftly turns their attention back to Matt when he starts talking again. 'So, without any further ado, I'd like to read chapter two of my new book to you.'

The crowd settles down into silence, and from then on, Matt - once again - has them in the palm of his hand. I've already

read this chapter, in fact, I've already read *four* chapters of the unreleased book, but hearing Matt read it aloud is a totally different experience. He's a truly emphatic reader, speaking the words with such verve, it's like a performance of sorts. For someone who wasn't keen on becoming a public-facing figure, he's sure got a hold over this audience, *and* over me.

After the reading, Mrs Geller and I pour sparkling wine into green goblets and offer them to the guests. I sneak one for myself, allowing myself a big gulp for courage before I go off in search of Matt. Through the sea of people, I spot him and Jess, the two of them clinking glasses of wine and chatting animatedly. I feel sort of funny approaching, as if I'm invading on something I shouldn't, though my tense shoulders relax considerably when Matt turns and smiles at me.

'Hey, you.' He lifts his glass to mine. 'What did you think of chapter two?'

I open my mouth to answer, but Jess gets in there first.

'Oh, it was just *amazing!*' she gushes in this weird, breathy voice I've never heard her speak in before. 'So exciting - I can't wait to read it when I get home tonight.' She clutches a shiny new copy of the book to her chest.

Clearing my throat, I make an cumbersome attempt to join the conversation. 'So Matt, I suppose you'll be leaving Lily Vale, now that the book tour and launch is all wrapped up?'

'Actually, I'm going to be staying a couple more nights. A local restaurant, Ripples, very kindly gifted me a dinner for two tomorrow evening, now I just need to find someone to go with.'

'Oh, I'd *love* to go!' Jess announces, stunning Matt and I into silence. 'You mean that lovely little bistro overlooking the canal, right? I've always wanted to try that place out, but just never had the opportunity.'

'Well, Jess -' Matt begins, but I can't bear to hear anymore.

'That sounds wonderful.' My grin is so tight, I'm surprised my lips don't split. 'I'm sure you guys will have a lovely evening

together. Erm, if you'll just excuse me, I think Mrs Geller is looking for me.'

Before another word is spoken, I make a swift escape, dodging in and out of the crowd until I make it to the back office, out of sight of them all. I collapse into the chair, burying my hand in my hands, hoping the world will stop spinning around me.

Okay, so Jess is going out for dinner with Matt, a *date*, that's great. It shouldn't come as a shock, after all, I got the impression she was interested in getting to know the guy when we chatted last night - and while she was incredibly presumptuous, inviting herself to Matt's gifted meal without a care, there's no crime against being forward.

So why do I feel just so *awful* inside, as if someone has punched me in the gut and laughed in my face while I'm reeling on the floor?

Chapter Nineteen

I sip the last dregs of tea from my mug, hoping to siphon a smidgen of caffeine to keep me going.

At ten to five on a Friday, we don't get many people in, right now, it's just me and Leah. As usual, she's been here since about three thirty, holed up in the corner on a weathered old armchair, her nose buried in a book. Normally, I'd be keeping a watchful eye on her to see if she looks like she could do with a snack or a simple chat, but admittedly, I'm a little distracted.

Okay, strike that, a *lot* distracted.

Tonight, Matt and Jess will be dining at Ripples, Lily Vale Village's most romantic restaurant. No doubt, they'll request a seat outside where they'll sip champagne by the canal, and Jess will look even more beautiful than usual in the glow of the moonlight. They'll laugh the night away, and then they'll start dating, and fall in love and ...

I shake my head so hard that I swear my brain just shifted inside my skull. Why do I care so much? I shouldn't, I *don't*.

Crrrrr-aaack!

An ear-splitting shatter from across the library jerks me right out of my reverie. Leaping so swiftly out of my chair that I trip over my feet, I sprint over to the source of the sound, and my eyes almost burst out of my skull.

'Leah!'

The young girl gawks at me like a deer in the headlights. The donation box lies in splinters across the floor, but what's more shocking is the fact I've caught Leah in the middle of hastily gathering up the notes and coins, along with a few errand shards of glass. For a moment, I think she's about to make a run for it, but big fat tears start rolling down her cheeks.

'I - I'm so sorry,' she whispers, her voice thick with despair. 'I had to.'

My hands are quivering and I feel like crying too, but then I remember *I'm* the adult in this bizarre scenario, and I need to take control. 'Come with me.'

After locking the front doors, I beckon her to follow me into the back. Leah obediently traipses after me, still snivelling. Her fingers are a little cut up from the glass, so I have her wash her hands and I do my best to bandage them up with the first aid kit in the office.

Finally, I have her sit down with a sugary cup of tea at the desk and a packet of chocolate digestives, and I ask her one simple question. 'Why?'

Silent, she gazes into her mug, as if searching for the answers in the tea leaves.

'You need to tell me, Leah.'

When she looks up, her brown eyes are brimming with tears. 'My mum ... she lost her job. The factory laid off loads of workers, and she was one of them. We weren't doing great for money anyway, but now, I ... I don't know what we'll do.'

I pat her shoulder, hoping the gesture will be somewhat comforting. 'I understand, I do. But you know it's not right to steal, don't you?'

She nods shamefully. 'I didn't want to, I didn't *plan* to. I was just worrying about everything and I saw the box in the corner of my eye and I ... I just did it. Are - are you going to ban me from the library?' she asks, her voice wavering.

I sigh, deep and weary. 'I probably should. In fact, I *definitely* should. But I'm not going to.' I meet her horrified gaze and smile. 'This is a safe space, somewhere you can come when you're feeling stressed and need to escape, even just for an hour or so. I'm not going to take that away from you.'

'T - thank you.'

While she shakily gulps down the rest of her tea, I log onto the computer and print out a document.

'This is a list of local charities that can help you and Mum.' I tell her as I hand it over. 'They are really lovely, never

condescending or judgmental, they're just there to help people.'

She wipes at her eyes and nods as she stuffs the sheet of paper into her school bag. When I proffer her the packet of digestives, she gladly takes one.

'So, how's Mum coping?'

'Not well. Mum's worked there for ten years, she hasn't had an interview since then, and she's never filled out an online application before. I think she's scared.'

'Ask her to come in, I'll help her with her applications, and I'll give her some pointers on interviewing, too. I'd be happy to.'

Leah shuffles in her chair, playing with the handle of her empty mug. 'It might take some convincing, but I'll ask her.'

After we chat for a little longer, I let Leah out, with the rest of the biscuits and teabags in her rucksack so she and her mum can sit down with a cuppa tonight. Once she leaves, I have to make myself another cup - extra strong with plenty of sugar - just to give myself a moment to process what just happened. Never mind Leah, *I'm* pretty shaken up myself, yet, I'm oddly proud of how I dealt with such a crazy and awful situation. I know Leah would never do something like this unless she felt she had to, and the thought of her struggling, not only at school but at home, breaks my heart. A teenager shouldn't have to worry about money, she should be fussing about fashion trends, getting down to her studies and crushing on boys in her class. She certainly shouldn't feel as though she has to take on her family's financial burdens.

If I wasn't already adamant that somehow, we'd keep our library going, well, I definitely am now. That young girl needs a friend, someone who can offer advice and support when she feels she has nowhere else and no one else to turn to. I may not be the socialite of Lily Vale Village, but I'm more than happy to extend my friendship to her, and I'm determined to keep these doors open for her.

Suddenly, all my petty worries about Matt and Jess seem so ridiculous and minor. I need to focus on what's really

important - this place, and the people who need it.

Chapter Twenty

Stifling a yawn, I rub hard at my eyes, inadvertently smearing my glasses with fingerprints as I click through my emails. Last night, I could hardly sleep. So many worries were swirling around my head like a crazy whirlpool - Leah, Matt, the library, it was all too much.

I tossed and turned until I couldn't stand it any longer and hurled myself out of bed to brew a cup of chamomile tea. It soothed my nerves some, but still, I was unable to shut off my brain. I couldn't even read any more of *The Exile's Empire*, it only made me think of Matt and Jess.

But now, at work in front of my computer, I feel like an idiot for getting so het up about the whole situation. I can't lose sight of my goal, my mission to keep the library open and thriving. I invited Matthew Crane to Lily Vale for one purpose and one alone, and he's fulfilled that. Thanks to the events we've hosted with his publishers, our little library is more popular than ever, and we've seen an influx of donations too.

Speaking of donations, coming up with an excuse as to how the box got broken was no easy feat. In the end, I gabbled out some silly story about how I knocked into it while whizzing the vacuum round. I'm not sure Mrs Geller bought the tale, but she didn't question it, she was just relieved to know that the money was securely stashed away in the office safe.

Now that Matthew Crane's book tour is over, the most important thing right now is finding a way to keep our library open. In my sleepy stupor, I begin to craft an idea - what if I were to tell the council all about our library directly? About the people who use it, the people who need it, and the staff who pour so much love into it.

Inspired, I start typing out a letter, one that chronicles all the good we do for the community and how important it is to the people of Lily Vale. It's a last-ditch attempt to convince the council to leave the library be, and it might end up being an utterly futile endeavour, but at this point, I'll try anything.

Halfway through, I read through the last couple of lines, frowning. Heartfelt words are one thing, but solid numbers are what will tip the scale in the library's favour. I need a *petition* alongside my letter, something tangible to add substance to the sentiment.

The sound of giggling kids draws me from my typing, and another light bulb sparks in my head. I print the petition and march over to the mum's club over by the Kid's Corner.

'Hi, how are you getting on over here?' I keep my tone bright and breezy as I try to summon the courage to ask the *real* question.

'Oh, we're great,' Mel beams back, shaking a loose black strand out of her eyes. 'How are you, Jane?'

'I'm okay, but there's something I wanted to ask you guys. Do - do you think you could sign a petition I've put together? And maybe - maybe you could write up some testimonials for this letter I'm working on? It doesn't have to be much, just something to show the council how much this place means to you and your little ones.'

'We'd love to!' Mel exclaims, and her mum friends all nod in eager agreement. 'Just tell us where to sign.'

All the mums gather around to write their testimonials, and I glow with pride at my newfound bravery. If nothing else, trying to save the library from closure has forced me to put myself out there and talk to people whom I would have otherwise avoided. In the last few weeks, I've made more friends than I have in years, and it's been nice. I've always considered myself something of a loner, content to read my books in solitude, and while that's still true, I've realised I actually enjoy the company of others just as much as a good story.

Refreshed and renewed by the mums club and their kids, I throw myself into work for the rest of the day, updating our user system, re-organising the shelves, tidying up the computer lab and whenever I find myself with a spare moment, I work hard on the letter to the council.

I'm just updating it when Sarah hurries over to my desk, a bouquet of sweet-smelling lilies in hand.

'Bought you some more flowers.' The gorgeous scent hits me as she places them on the desk. 'So, how's everything going?'

'Thanks, and it's going great. I'm drafting a letter to the local council and trying to get signatures and comments from people who want to keep the library open.'

'Ooh, I'll add my name to that list!'

I get out my petition and direct Sarah to the section where I've begun to include testimonials. Instantly, she scribbles away, leaving her kind comments and a signature, boldly in biro.

'So, I hear Jess went to Ripples with Matt last night,' she says, her head bent over the letter.

'Yes, I heard that too.'

'Well, are you okay?'

My face twists into something between a scowl and a frown, though I can't quite get my eyes to meet hers. 'Why wouldn't I be?'

'It's just, well, when you and Matt were in the florist the other day, I thought I saw ... a *spark* between you two.'

'A spark?' With a snort, I turn to my computer screen, typing out a couple of nonsensical words into a document to appear busy. 'There's no spark. Believe me, I find the man irritating and - and dispassionate.'

'Dispassionate?'

My cheeks flame. 'About his work, I mean.'

'He seemed pretty passionate to me the other night, during the reading. *Both* of them.'

'That's just for show. He couldn't give a toss about his books, or his readers. He told me himself.'

At the devastating bombshell I've just dropped, Sarah's eyes grow large. 'He did?'

Hesitating, I retreat into my chair. ‘Well, not in those words, but pretty much.’

‘Wow. Well, he’s very good at pretending, then.’

Tersely, I stick out my chin. ‘Yes. He is.’

‘So, you’re alright, then?’ She studies me warily. ‘You’re not upset?’

‘The only thing I’m upset about is that I need to get this letter finished and sent to the council and this silly gossip is hindering me.’

Stunned by my snappiness, Sarah blinks for a few moments before her face turns cold as stone.

‘Fine. Sorry I came by.’ She pivots on her heel, her bag swinging behind her. ‘See you around, Jane.’

Guiltily, I call out a weak goodbye as she heads for the door. ‘See you.’

Not two seconds after Sarah’s departure does Mrs Geller sidle over. ‘I swear I wasn’t eavesdropping, but I couldn’t help but hear a smidgen of that ... *altercation*.’ She gives me a stern stare, and suddenly, I feel about three inches tall. ‘It’s unlike you to be so cold, Jane.’

‘I know ... it’s just, well, I guess I’m not feeling myself lately.’

‘Care to talk about it?’

I sigh. ‘It’s my friend, Jess. She’s done something that’s ...’ *Devastated? Betrayed?* I search for the right word, but they all sound too dramatic and silly. ‘*Annoyed* me,’ I settle for, though I feel lame and petty as I say it.

‘I see. Well, have you tried telling her how you feel?’

‘No ...’ *Mostly because I can’t work out how I feel, all my emotions are muddled together.*

Shaking her head in exasperation, Mrs Geller chuckles. ‘Well, perhaps that might be a start.’

It's a fine idea, but I can't tell Jess how upset I am about her going to dinner with Matt, because then I'll have to admit to her that he's got inside my head and my heart. And I'm not even sure I'm ready to admit that to *myself*, let alone anyone else.

'It's been so nice to see you with friends these last couple of weeks, dear. You've really come out of your shell, I'd hate for you to slink back inside over a little spat.'

I'd hate that too. The grip I have on my budding friendships is tenuous enough without me going off on them for basically no good reason. I hope I didn't hurt Sarah's feelings too terribly, I guess I owe her an apology text and a bunch of flowers of her own, too.

But at the same time, I can't worry about mates and dinner dates now, I've got to focus. The library is counting on me, and so are all our users.

I have to make this work, I just *have* to.

Chapter Twenty One

Lunchtime can't come soon enough, and the second the clock hits twelve, I'm straight out the door. On top of worrying about getting this petition signed by a decent amount of folk and the general stresses of the daily grind, I really could do with a break.

Naturally, I make my way across the village to The Cosy Little Tearoom, and Rachel greets me cheerily from the counter.

'Hey, Jane! What can I get for you?'

Puddles lifts his head from his soft bed to acknowledge my presence, but it seems as though the poor pooch is all tuckered out. No doubt, Bill took him for a run across the park this morning, judging by his muddy paws, at least.

'A caramel cold brew and a lemon tart please, Rachel.' I rub hard at my forehead, as if trying to scrub away the niggling thoughts plaguing me. 'I'll need an extra shot of espresso in the drink, too.'

'You got it. But I should caution you, caffeine is not a replacement for a good night's sleep and forgive me for being blunt, but you don't look as if you've had one of those for a while.'

She's not wrong, between worrying about the library, stressing about Leah and ruminating over Matt and Jess' dinner date, I've barely stolen a wink of sleep.

'Thanks for noticing,' I reply with a roll of my eyes, but I soften the sarcasm with a small smile. 'Caffeine is the only thing keeping me going right now.'

While she's brewing the coffee, I tentatively ask Rachel if she wouldn't mind signing my petition.

'Of course!' She slides the pencil from behind her ear and writes her name on the sheet. 'If you leave it here, I can get Bill and Holly to sign it this afternoon when they're in, and our customers, too.'

I thank her, but as they often do, dreadful doubts begin to creep in. I can't help but fear that this is all too little, too late. It won't matter how heartfelt or persuasive my letter is, if I can't get enough signatures, the council aren't going to pay any attention.

Ignoring the concerned look Rachel is sporting, I take my drink and tart over to the table by the window. I suspect *my* expression is telegraphing my anxieties, but I'm in no mood to get into a discussion about it all.

In need of a distraction, I rifle through my bag and pull out *The Exile's Empire* and begin to read the very last chapter. I'm a pretty fast reader, so it only takes me fifteen minutes to absorb every word. It's every bit as wonderful as I'd hoped it would be, heart-wrenchingly bittersweet with a satisfying conclusion that still leaves a plethora of questions to be answered in the next book, whenever that will be.

Pensively, I finger the gold lettering on the cover. I suppose Matt will be leaving Lily Vale soon. A chill clutches at my chest and I snuggle beneath my thin cardigan, despite the fact the sun is shining outside. It shouldn't bother me, I mean, I got to meet my favourite author, how many people can say that? Sure, he's not quite what I'd expected and he holds an arrogant disdain for his books that I just can't stand, but I guess he isn't as bad as I first thought.

Besides, I should be happy, having an author like Matthew Crane host his prestigious book launch at our little library has given us a massive boost. Let's hope it's a big enough one to convince the local authorities to keep us open, but time will tell, I suppose. To be honest, I feel stupid for not coming up with the petition idea during the events we held for *The Exile's Empire*, I could have gotten a ton more signatures that way! How am I ever going to gather that many people in one place again ...

'Hiya!' The lilting voice startles me and I glimpse over the pages to see Jess flouncing up to the table, my copy of the first *Veiled Ocean* book wedged under her arm. 'I've been looking all over for you! And by that, I mean I just came from the

library and Mrs Geller said you were on lunch, so I assumed you'd be here, and you are!

'What incredible insight you have.' My tone comes out much more snippier than I'd intended, though Jess seems unperturbed by it.

'I know! Anyway, I just wanted to return the book you let me borrow.'

My jaw practically hits the floor. 'You - you finished it already?'

'Oh, I couldn't put it down! I've purchased the rest of the series and I'm going to start on book two tonight, unless you're free, of course. I was wondering if you might want to hang out tonight. I've got a bottle of rosé at home and a chick flick calling our names!'

I'm *desperate* to ask her what happened the other night with Matt, but my tongue is all tied up. Come to think of it, why hasn't *she* told me how it went? Knowing Jess, I'd have expected her to phone me up and brag about how wonderful it was the minute he dropped her off at her door, but she's keeping stum. How can she simply ignore the massive stonking elephant in the room?

Haughtily, I sit up straight in my chair, turning away just slightly. Well, if she's not going to mention it, *I'm* sure as hell not going to.

'No, thank you.'

'Oh.' She purses her lips and sticks out her chin, very much resembling a defiant little kid. 'Got other plans?'

'Yes.'

'What is with you today?' She tosses her gorgeous curls over her shoulder crossly. 'Why are you being all huffy with me?'

'I'm not. I'm just busy.'

'Busy with what, exactly? Sipping coffee and eating your little lemon tart all alone? Come on, why don't you want to hang out tonight?'

‘Because I just don’t want to, Jess, alright?’ I spit the words out like venom on my tongue. ‘I don’t want to come to your house, I don’t want to drink wine and I don’t want to watch some daft film with you.’

She looks if as I’ve slapped her across the cheek, and suddenly, I wish I could turn back time.

‘Fine. Whatever.’ She slams the book down on the table so hard, the lemon tart on my plate jumps up and falls in my lap. ‘You know, Jane, I thought you were nice, I thought we were friends, but I guess not.’

There’s no time to fix my mistake as Jess storms out of the door, flinging it shut behind her and startling Puddles awake from his nap.

I know I should go after, I should apologise and explain to her that it’s not her, it’s me. But something inside is tethering me to the seat, stopping me from swallowing my pride and admitting what’s inside my heart. I can’t even figure that out for myself, so how on earth am I supposed to tell Jess what it is that I’m feeling?

And now I’ve just lost another friend.

Chapter Twenty Two

The afternoon ends up being busier than usual, and honestly, I could have done without the added stress. A gaggle of about fifteen students were in here after school, and they've left a total mess in their wake - papers scattered all over the floor, textbooks piled up on numerous tables, sweet wrappers carelessly tossed here and there. Honestly, I don't mind youngsters coming in here, in fact, I actively encourage it, but I do wish some of them would learn to clean up after themselves!

I was disheartened to see - or rather *not see* - that Leah was not among them. She hasn't been back to the library since the donation box debacle, and it's hard to not be concerned. This place was her safe space, her retreat from the strains of real life, a means of escape in a chaotic world for a couple of hours. I hate that she might be too afraid to come back, even though I told her she was still welcome. Still, I can't say I'm surprised, I mean, if *I'd* been caught stealing, I'd be considering moving across the country.

Half in, half out of her big purple coat, Mrs Geller hurries over from the back office. 'I've heard it's going to rain soon, so I better get cracking if I want to make it home without getting soaked.'

'I keep a broly in the back for emergencies if you want to borrow it?'

'Thanks, dear, but I'll take my chances.' She frees her silvery curls from the collar of her coat. 'Oh, I forgot to ask, how is the petition going? How many signatures have you managed to get so far?'

'Not nearly enough.' With a dejected sigh, I rest my chin in both hands. 'I've done my best to get people interested, I've collared everyone who walks through the door, but I doubt the council will take notice.'

‘You’ve tried so hard, Jane, but now we have to leave it up to the fates. Or, in this case, the local authorities.’ She chuckles, but behind her facade, I can see she’s just as worried as I am.

‘Maybe you’re right,’ I sigh for the second time, flicking listlessly through a textbook on the biology of plant life.

Mrs Geller glances at the shelves beside me and puffs out her cheeks. ‘Boy, those students must have pulled every book on the shelf out! Do you want me to help you tidy those up before I go?’

‘Nah, I’ll sort it out, you go on home.’

‘Thanks, dear.’ She squeezes my shoulder as she passes. ‘See you tomorrow.’

The moment she closes the door, I groan at the mess I’m left to deal with, it’s going to take forever to get these back into order!

I sort tirelessly for about ten minutes and only manage to get halfway across the shelf. Once again, I climb the ladder with an armful of books, searching for their rightful place. Without warning, the door clicks open behind me, and I’m so startled that I nearly topple off the ladder.

‘Mrs Geller?’ I call out, my heart racing.

The dark figure standing in the doorway edges into the light and Matt’s face is illuminated, his hair damp from the rainy spell.

‘I - I thought you were leaving,’ I whisper, not trusting myself to speak too freely, lest I say too much.

‘I am. But I wasn’t about to go without saying goodbye first.’

Pertly, I raise my head high, playing the part of the confident, un-bothered girl, a persona I borrowed from Jess. ‘Well, it will have to be a quick goodbye, as I’ve got to tidy the entire library, and currently, it looks as though a bomb has hit it.’

‘I’m happy to lend a hand.’ Before I can protest, he grabs a load of scrap bits of paper from a desk and carries it over to the recycle bin. ‘It looks as though you need one.’

I'm about to argue back, but I decide to hold my tongue. I really *could* do with the help, and despite everything, I'm rather pleased to see Matt. While he's cleaning up the desks, I steal a swift and wistful glance at him, admiring the sharp edge of his jaw and the way his glossy hair flops carelessly over his forehead. He sort of looks like a hero from a fantasy novel himself, chivalrous and strong, dark and oh-so-mysterious, it's no wonder Jess fell head over heels for him the moment she set her eyes on him ...

The pit in my stomach burrows down deeper. I really wish Jess hadn't entered my mind, I've been trying to put our lunchtime encounter aside, but it crawls its way back into my thoughts like a beetle, ensuring its presence is both painful and unignorable. I'm practically chomping at the bit, longing to interrogate Matt and find out how their dinner at Ripples went, but I know it's a bad idea to go down that road. I'll either hear something I don't want to, or I'll end up saying something I really shouldn't.

'So what's next for Matthew Crane?' I ask, my voice cracking just slightly. 'Back to the city to start work on the next book in the series?'

'I don't know, maybe I'm done with the *Veiled Ocean*.' He shrugs his shoulders, as if that devastating statement is no big deal at all. 'To be honest, *The Exile's Empire* might be the last one.'

'It *can't* be the last one,' I bark at him, appalled. 'The ending leaves so much open!'

Matt pauses, a reference book poised mid-air in his hand. 'You - you finished the book?'

Shyly, I nod. 'To be honest with you, I could hardly put it down.'

There's a moment of stillness between us, but it's not awkward at all. It's peaceful, *tender*, a fleeting connection between two souls. But then Matt breaks the silence with a joyless chuckle and turns back to the task at hand.

‘Well, I hope the people who picked up a copy at the launch like it as much as you do.’ He nudges me gently in the side. ‘And I hope it helped the library out, too.’

Instead of cheering me up, his comment only serves to dampen my mood. ‘It did, but I don’t know if it will be enough. Having you do the reading and the book launch here was great, but I don’t think it will mean much to the local council.’

‘You don’t reckon those things are enough to make them stand up and take notice?’

‘I don’t think so,’ I sigh sadly. ‘Unfortunately, they were rare occurrences, and even if they did get the locals visiting the library again, the council wouldn’t see them as anything more than a fluke. We need signatures, testimonials from villagers, that sort of thing. I’ve been doing my best to gather them, but I don’t think it’s going to be enough to save this place.’

‘Well, you can’t give up!’ Matt insists, his face awash with outrage. ‘You have to keep trying. You said so yourself that this place was worth getting passionate over.’

‘Yeah, well, forgive me if I don’t fancy taking advice regarding passion from someone who cares nothing for his craft.’

Matt flinches and blinks as though I’ve slapped him. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean that you called your own work drivel, you said it was uninspired and derivative.’

‘So?’ he claps back, his arms folded defensively across his broad chest. ‘Why does it matter so much to you?’

‘Because your books are everything to me!’

The room falls so quiet, you could hear a mouse skittering across the floorboards. When Matt turns to me I look away, embarrassed.

Finally, he summons the courage to shatter the tension. ‘You really love them that much?’

I dare to glance up at him, my voice soft and sincere. ‘I really do.’

Muttering under his breath, he starts pacing up and down before me, tousling his hair and shaking his head at the ground.

‘I should have revealed myself to my readers earlier in my career, maybe if I’d met you a few years ago, I wouldn’t be feeling so jaded about the industry.’

‘What happened?’ I don’t know what’s come over me, but somehow, his vulnerability makes me bold - bold enough to stand before him and gently press my palm into his chest to halt him in place. ‘What happened to make you feel this way?’

‘It wasn’t just one thing, it was a lot of stuff that built up over the years. Mostly reviews, bad ones. They got in my head. After a while, I started to believe the world I’ve created will never be as good as the greats and that my writing isn’t worth reading.’

‘But that just isn’t true!’

‘If you hear it enough, it’s hard not to pay attention. One particularly scathing article came out just before the book tour and it almost made me want to quit altogether. I told Portia *The Exile’s Empire* will be the last in the series, but she’s still trying to convince me to go on.’

‘You have to go on!’ I implore, clutching at his hand. ‘The story isn’t finished yet.’

‘Phineas is back on the throne.’

‘Yes, but Mariam is still lurking, biding her time, waiting for the opportunity to strike.’ I squeeze his hand tight. ‘Your story isn’t over yet, Matt. Not by a long shot.’

‘And neither is this library’s.’ He smiles down at me. ‘Somehow we’ve got to find a way to save it.’

‘But how?’ I throw my arms out in despair. ‘I’ve done everything I could think of, and I still haven’t got enough signatures. I can’t very well drag people through the door and force them to check out books and sign the petition, can I?’

‘Maybe not, but perhaps we can bring the books *to* them.’

Puzzled, I cock my head to one side. ‘What are you getting at?’

‘I’m not quite sure yet, but we need to come up with a plan. Are you free tomorrow?’

‘Well, yes, but ... but aren’t you supposed to be leaving?’

That wicked grin of his makes an appearance. ‘I could convince Portia to stick around for a little longer, if we do something she can work into a PR stunt, that is.’

With a dubious scoff, I raise an eyebrow. ‘And what exactly would *that* be?’

‘Hey, you’ve got to give me some time to plot out the next chapter! Tell you what, let’s sleep on it and we’ll meet tomorrow for lunch.’

It’s not quite dinner, and yet, the idea of having lunch with Matt forces my heart to leap into my gullet. Gulping it down, I croak out a response. ‘Alright.’

Just what exactly am I getting myself into?

Chapter Twenty Three

The next morning, I take my sweet time getting ready. Ordinarily, I'd simply hop in the shower, brush my teeth, throw my hair up in a ponytail and be done with it, but today, I feel like making an effort.

I don't have a huge array of clothes to choose from, but I found a decent pair of skinny jeans and a navy chiffon blouse that I think looks quite chic. Autumn is definitely on its way, so I team my outfit with brown ankle boots and a light jacket in case the wind picks up, and then it's off to The Cosy Little Tearoom.

I'd normally cycle, but I spent half an hour curling my locks and I don't want my bike helmet to muss up my efforts. It's strange, I've never taken much pride in my appearance, I didn't think there was much point, but it's actually quite therapeutic, selecting a fun outfit and taking time over one's aesthetics. It does wonders for your confidence, too - I feel almost as glam as Jess with my bouncy waves and (kind of) hip ensemble.

I set off half an hour before our meeting time to allow for my walking pace, but I still arrive *way* before twelve. Realising I'm embarrassingly early, I order two drinks and two lemon tarts and commandeer the table by the window. My hands shake as I lift the cup to my lips and my teeth chatter against the rim. I very nearly spill coffee down my front, but thankfully, it drips onto the table instead of my blouse. I've *got* to pull myself together!

I can't quite put my finger on what's got me in such a tizzy. Maybe it's because I feel as though I'm betraying Jess somehow, even though I've no idea if she and Matt are an item or not after their dinner date. If that *is* what's bothering me, well, it shouldn't. It's not a crime to meet up with a man, Matt and I are just friends - hardly even that - and who knows what's going on between him and Jess? Either way, it's none of my business.

In dire need of a distraction, I riffle through my bag and unearth the first book in the *Veiled Ocean* series and turn to chapter five. I wonder how far Sarah has gotten, and whether she'll even want to meet up for our weekly book club after I was such a cow the other day. I have since sent her a brief apology text, but somehow, I don't think a few little words on a mobile screen are going to earn her forgiveness.

Right on time, Matt strides through the door and over to my table, his nose wrinkled as he nods toward the book in my hands.

'Ugh, you're not reading *that* rubbish again, are you?'

A couple of weeks ago, a remark like that would have gotten my back up, but I know Matt better now. His self-effacing manner is just a defence mechanism, a way to protect himself and the writing he poured his heart and soul into from the less-than-stellar reviews and opinions he's had to endure as a published author.

'Ah, ah, ah!' I wag a finger at him. 'Remember, no more negative self-talk.'

'Right, sorry.'

He sits down opposite me and I push the floral-patterned plate toward him.

'For you,' I tell him. 'I've already scoffed mine. You might want to order another drink too, yours is probably cold.'

'Cold?' He chuckles and digs into the tart. 'How long have you been here?'

'Oh, just ten minutes or so,' I lie vaguely, knowing it's much closer to twenty.

Instantly, we get down to business, discussing ways we can bring awareness of the library's sorry situation to the people of Lily Vale.

'I guess I could stand in the market square and ask passersby to sign the petition?' I suggest hesitantly. 'Though I don't really like to bother people when they're busy shopping.'

Luckily for me and my social anxiety, Matt shakes his head at that idea. ‘No, it’s got to be something bigger than that. Something more exciting that the folks of Lily Vale simply can’t ignore.’

‘Well, what on earth could *that* be?’

Neither of us can come up with an answer. I’m about to give in and tell Matt that we should just throw in the towel and leave it to fate like Mrs Geller said when a familiar face plops down at a table near us. It’s Lucy, Lily Vale’s resident romance writer, and she gives me a jaunty wave.

‘Hello, Jane.’ She pauses when she takes a good look at the guy sitting with me. ‘Oh my, you’re ... Matthew Crane, right?’

‘In the flesh.’

‘Oh wow! I saw your reveal pictures on social media, I had no idea you’d be so - so -’ She clears her throat awkwardly and tucks a hair behind her ear. ‘You know, I’ve been hoping to meet you before you left Lily Vale, but I’ve been so busy these last few weeks, I couldn’t make it to any of the events at the library.’ She practically curtsies as she stands up and approaches our table. ‘I’m - I’m Lucy Middleton, I’m an author too.’

‘I know, I’ve heard a lot about you in the short time I’ve been here. Seems your historical romance novels are popular with the locals, I’ll have to check them out.’

Lucy’s eyes double in size and her cheeks glow prettily pink. ‘T-thank you! That’s so kind of you to say.’ She feigns a cough, clearly trying to compose herself. ‘So, erm, what are you guys up to?’

‘We’re trying to figure out a way to get more people to sign our petition, one that might just save the library from closure,’ I tell her, my face in my hands. ‘So far, we’re coming up short.’

Eager to help, Lucy shuffles her chair over to our table and the three of us put our heads together, though we struggle to come up with any brilliant ideas. That is until Matt suddenly gasps, causing poor Lucy and I to leap straight out of our skins.

‘I’ve got it!’ he announces proudly. ‘What about a book mobile?’

‘A *book mobile*?’ Lucy and I chorus in unison.

‘Exactly.’

‘What’s that, Bookman’s car?’ I offer a pithy scoff. ‘Like Batman and the Batmobile, but nerdier?’

‘No, smarty-pants, I’m talking about a mobile library. We could go all around the village and bring books to the public, while letting them know the library needs their help.’

Swirling my half empty mug round and round, I mull it over. ‘It’s a great idea, but where are we going to get a book mobile from?’

‘I guess we could use your bicycle?’ Predictably, Matt begins spluttering with laughter before he’s even finished the sentence. ‘Though I doubt you could fit many books in the basket.’

‘Well, you know, my boyfriend Alex has a van,’ Lucy chimes in. ‘I’m sure he could help you out with that.’

‘Really?’ I dare not get my hopes up, though truly, they’ve already begun to skyrocket, straight through the atmosphere and into the stars. ‘Do you think he would?’

‘Of course! In fact, I’ll ask him right away.’

And not a second later, she dials the number on her mobile and begins to explain the plan to her - no doubt, very confused - boyfriend on the other end of the line.

Matt edges nearer, leaning in close so his breath tickles my neck. ‘Seems like we’ve got work to do.’

I blink at him quizzically. ‘We?’

‘Well, you didn’t think Bookman was going to let Bookwoman save the world all alone, did you?’ He flashes that irresistible, startling white grin that makes the little hairs on my skin stand to attention. ‘I’m doing this with you.’

Chapter Twenty Four

This is the busiest Saturday I've had for a lo-o-o-ng time. I normally spend them lazing around the house reading, yet here I am, paintbrush in hand, sweating profusely under the early afternoon sun.

With the permission of Alex, Matt and I are getting to work on his van, kitting it out with shelves of books and painting the side with the words 'Lily Vale Book Mobile.' It was Matt's grand idea to paint the lettering black and yellow like the Batman logo, and I've just gone along with it.

As we stencil in the letters, Alex hovers over us, bouncing from foot to foot. 'So, you're sure this paint isn't permanent?' A nervous gulp bobs at his throat.

'It's water-based paint, I promise it will come off with a bit of scrubbing,' I assure him. 'I'll be happy to clean it up myself.'

Alex chuckles nervously, still looking a little unsure. 'Well, let's hope it doesn't rain tomorrow, then.'

'Thanks so much for letting us do this, Alex. I really appreciate it.'

'It's no problem, I'm glad to help out.'

Despite the niggling fears circling my mind like a toy train on a circuit, I must confess, I'm looking forward to tomorrow. The plan is in place and everything is all go, good old Alex has agreed to play the part of the dutiful driver, carting us and all the books around the hot spots of Lily Vale where we'll surely get some attention. I've told Mrs Geller about our idea and she's totally on board, though she's out of town tomorrow, she'll be with us in spirit!

But of course, the first thing I had to do this morning was call Portia. I didn't want to give too many details away, lest take over and spoil the project, but I knew I had to let her know what was happening, for the sake of Matt's career.

‘Hi Portia,’ I swallowed the bubbling nerves and forced myself to be courageous. ‘You’re still going to be in Lily Vale tomorrow, right?’

‘Yes, just for a couple more days though, and then back to Brum. Why?’

I breathed out a sigh of relief. ‘Just be at the market square at eleven o’clock.’

A mixture of confusion and intrigue peppered her voice. ‘The market square? Why?’

‘Trust me. And bring Frank, you’ll want to take pictures.’

Thankfully, that was enough to pique her interest, and she agreed to bring the full PR team along tomorrow to our surprise stunt.

‘Hey, you know where we should take the book mobile?’ Alex pipes in. ‘To Lavender Fields retirement home.’

Matt looks up from his painting. ‘Retirement home?’

Alex gives an eager nod. ‘My mum and a few of her friends host a weekly book club, they just love to read, but it’s difficult for them to get down to the village library since a couple of them have mobility issues and the bus isn’t that convenient. They would be over the moon if the library could come to them.’

I smile at him. ‘We’ll add Lavender Fields to our list of stops, then!’

Although he still looks a tad nervous, Alex wisely decides to let Matt and I get on with painting, citing that he’s going to make a pot of coffee and bring out some snacks for us. He’s such a great guy, there’s not many handymen I know that would allow the local librarian and a random author from Birmingham to paint his white van like the Batmobile!

Matt and I work companionably in comfortable silence, which is a rare thing indeed. As an avid reader, I treasure peace and quiet, and often, I find people are much too keen to fill silence with inane chatter, but not Matt. One sneaky glance at him

shows a man who is focused, deep in thought with a crease between his dark brows.

We both reach for the same brush, our fingers touching for just a second, but it's enough to send a shot of lightning over my skin. I recoil, glancing down at the floor, certain my cheeks must be burning red.

'Oh, you go ahead,' I mumble.

'No, it's fine, you take it.'

'No, you. I insist.'

'Well, if you *insist*, I guess I'd better.' Matt laughs and picks up the brush. 'This kind of reminds me of how we first met, you know, in the supermarket by the book exchange?'

I remember that moment all too well. It's strange, not too long ago, I'd have called it a bad memory, an unpleasant encounter with a rude and arrogant man that I'd very much liked to forget. But now, I look back on it through a different lens, now I *know* Matt, and I know the truth behind the blasé and callous attitude he has toward his writing. It's not that he doesn't care about it, it's that he cares *too* much.

After a couple more hours of painting, assembling shelves and stacking novels and huge, non-fiction tomes into boxes, the book mobile is finally finished. We stand back to admire our handiwork, and despite his earlier misgivings, even Alex has to agree that the van looks pretty great.

'You guys did a fantastic job.' He nods his approval, taking in our efforts. 'It'll definitely turn heads around the village tomorrow!'

'That's what I'm banking on!' I hold up my crossed fingers.

'I'll go stick the kettle on, I think you two deserve a good, strong cuppa.'

Alex heads back inside, leaving Matt and I alone in the front yard. I dare to edge closer and elbow Matt playfully in the ribs. 'It *does* look pretty good, doesn't it?'

'Are you kidding? It looks flipping fabulous! The cat's pyjamas, the bee's knees!'

Taken aback by his childlike enthusiasm, I choke on my laughter, tears rolling down my cheeks. ‘Wow, what a true wordsmith you are, Mr Matthew Crane. No one can spin a phrase quite like you.’

He takes an over-the-top, theatrical bow. ‘I aim to please.’

‘Perhaps Mrs Geller and I could make this a regular thing, I could take the book mobile to schools and even offices!’ I gabble excitedly. ‘I’m sure people would love that.’

‘Sounds like a good plan, that is, if you can convince Alex to let you paint his van again,’ Matt snickers.

I chuckle along with him, until a freak jolt of nerves strikes me in the chest.

‘But ... but what if it *doesn't* work?’ I gnaw at my lip and wring my hands before me. ‘What if no one is bothered about our books and I don’t get any signatures? You said so yourself, people have more options for entertainment nowadays.’

Matt pulls a face and shrugs his shoulders. ‘Well, that’s a possibility, I won’t lie. But all you can do is try, Jane.’

‘I’ve *been* trying everything,’ I glance down at my feet, scuffing them against the gravel driveway. ‘Mrs Geller is counting on this, all the people who come to the library for help and a sense of community are counting on this. *I’m* counting on this.’

Unexpectedly, Matt places a hand upon my shoulder, and a surge of electricity ripples up and down my spine so suddenly that I have to stifle a quiver.

‘Look, if my time here has taught me anything, it’s that you can’t give up on something you love, even if the world around you is telling you otherwise.’ His brown eyes gaze into mine and I couldn’t look away if I tried. ‘*You* taught me that, Jane. Just like you believe in me and my writing, I believe in you.’

Silent, I stare up at him, unable to find the words to speak. There’s so much I want to tell him, how meeting him has been truly life-changing, how he’s helped me find my confidence, how I shouldn’t have judged him on first appearances, but my tongue won’t cooperate with my brain.

‘Tea, anyone?’

We jump at Alex’s voice and turn abruptly toward the front door, where he’s standing with a tray of steaming mugs and chocolate biscuits, oblivious to the magical moment he’s accidentally shattered.

‘Thanks, Alex,’ I grin at him as I grab one of the stripey mugs, whilst Matt goes straight in for a biccy. ‘You’re a great friend.’

‘I try.’ He shrugs his shoulders modestly, as if allowing us to paint his van is no big deal at all.

Life is a funny thing, just a couple of weeks ago, if you’d asked me who my friends were, I’d have simply cited my brother Marc and Mrs Geller, but suddenly, I have a plethora of new names to add to the list. This mission to save our library has forced me to come out of my shell, and I’ve met some wonderful people because of that. I’ve always kept to myself and liked it that way, but maybe it’s time to let others in.

Maybe, just like the library, I need to foster a sense of community in my own heart.

*

I don’t get home until it’s almost six, we ended up hanging out at Alex’s place for a while after we’d organised the books into shelves. I giggle to myself as I turn the key in the lock, recalling the funny stories from the city Matt regaled Alex and I with today. Damn, why does that guy have to be so charming? I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, I mean, he *is* a writer, of course he’s going to have a silver tongue.

Since we only had a couple of snacks for sustenance today, I head straight to the kitchen, in search of something easy to eat for supper.

Tap-Tap-Tap.

Is that the front door? I pivot from the cupboard and my brows meet in perplexity. Who on earth would be visiting me now? Perhaps it’s my neighbour Mr Briggs, who lives in the maisonette downstairs and often complains I’m ‘stomping around’ on the floorboards.

But it's not grumpy old Mr Briggs who's waiting on my doorstep but Sarah, much to my surprise.

'Oh, Sarah! What - what are you doing here?'

'Well, I went to meet you for our book club, but you weren't at the tearoom.'

I clasp my hands to my mouth, realising the grave mistake I've made. 'I'm so sorry, I totally forgot!'

God, I've been such a terrible friend lately. In just over a fortnight, I've made mates for the first time since school and I'm losing them just as quickly, all due to my own actions.

'And ... and I owe you another apology.' I hang my head low, utterly ashamed of my behaviour. 'I'm sorry I was so snippy the other day. I've just ... got a lot on my plate right now.'

'With the library potentially closing, you mean?'

'That, and a few other things.'

'Well you know, they do say a problem shared is a problem halved. So, are you going to invite me in?'

I fumble backwards to allow her entry, my woolly socks skidding on the mat and almost sending me flat on my bum. Fortunately, Sarah grabs hold of my elbow, saving me from a painful fall.

'Thanks,' I murmur. 'Please, come in.'

She follows me through to the living room and takes a seat on my mauve sofa, while I go to make a pot of tea.

I clear my throat, striving to make my next question come out casually. 'Is ... is Jess not coming?'

Sarah averts her gaze, twisting her mouth awkwardly. 'Well, she ... she's busy tonight.'

Steam billows from the kettle as I pour boiling water into the teapot, and my face feels just as hot as I nod at Sarah, my lips pursed tight. I know exactly what *that* means, it means Jess is still cross with me, and she has every right to be.

Sarah and I spend the next hour discussing prose and plot twists, but I'm finding it hard to concentrate.

I wish Jess was here. I wish we weren't quarrelling. I wish I knew how to make things right.

Chapter Twenty Five

A shiver rolls through my body like a wave, and I can't quite discern whether it's one of excitement or anxiety. Perhaps it's a little of both.

I'm so looking forward to venturing out into the village and getting people interested in books and their local library, but I'm also *terrified*. Terrified no one will look twice at our book mobile and just walk on by, terrified in case it *does* attract a crowd and I'll have to talk to loads of people at once, terrified of, well, *everything*.

I'm halfway through my coffee when the *beep-beep* of Alex's van outside my window beckons me down to the street. Matt is already in the passenger seat, and there's just about enough room for me to squeeze into the middle.

'Lucy is meeting us at the market square, she's gone down to drum up interest before we get there,' Alex explains as I clamber inside the van, which is no easy feat, as it's much higher than your standard vehicle.

'That's really kind of her.'

'Well, the library means so much to Lucy, she'll do anything to keep it open.'

At my side, Matt smiles and nudges me. 'It must be encouraging to hear how important the library is to people.'

'It is,' I mumble back, 'though it remains to be seen whether their sentiment can translate into action.'

'Well, let's find out!'

Our first stop is the market square, which is bustling with busy shoppers and sellers flogging their various wares. Lucy is the first to greet us, rushing up to the door and waving madly.

'Hey, guys!' She beams as bright as the morning sun. 'Look how busy it is! You're sure to get plenty of signatures here.'

We open up the side door of the van, revealing rows of neatly stacked shelves, each one labelled and meticulously organised by yours truly, with a little help from Matt, of course. He came up with the wonderful idea of placing some of the books inside brown envelopes with a short synopsis of the story written on them, so that browsers can't literally judge the books by their covers and instead, must choose their next read purely based on its contents.

Those turn out to be wildly popular so far, with streams of villagers heading straight to the Mystery Shelf to have a nose through the curious brown envelopes. There's many people I recognise, such as Abe, Joanie and their niece Tabby - the local farmers. Big grins plastered on each of their faces, they approach the van with intrigue.

'My, my, a book mobile!' Abe chortles and leans back with his hands on his hips. 'Why, I haven't seen one of these for decades.'

'What a great idea!' Tabby claps in delight.

While Tabby and Abe are perusing our selection, Joanie edges up to me, speaking out of the corner of her mouth. 'I don't suppose you have any of those historical romance books, do you?'

'As a matter of fact, we do!' I sift through the shelves and present her with a Lucy Middleton special. 'I think you'll love this, and it's by a local author.'

Joanie stuffs the book into her bag before her niece or husband can take notice and treats me to a wry little smile. 'Thank you, Jane.'

'There's plenty more where that came from too, at the library!' I reach into the van's passenger seat and dig out my clipboard. 'We're on a mission to save Lily Vale's library from closure, and we'd love for you to sign our petition.'

Tabby turns away from the shelves, a frown creasing her brow. 'Wait, the library is *closing*?'

'Maybe, if we can't prove to the council that it deserves a place in the village.'

Instantly, all three of them sign the petition, and they check out seven books between them.

After some time, Alex, Matt and I pile back into the van and our journey through the village carries onward.

‘I feel like we should be playing a jingle, like an ice cream van,’ Matt suggests jovially.

We stop off near the park, and sure enough, our book mobile soon draws a crowd of inquisitive folk. I recognise a couple of women from the Mum Club at the library, and their little ones who happily explore our shelves with excitement.

There’s someone else I know loitering by the bushes, too shy to come over and join in the fun. I excuse myself and leave Alex and Matt to the customers, and I hurry over to Leah before she runs away.

‘Hey, how are you doing?’ I ask, my voice soft and gentle.

She stares at the ground, her cheeks shining crimson. ‘I - I’m fine.’

‘I haven’t seen you at the library since ... well, since the incident.’

The poor girl shrinks into herself, and I didn’t think it was possible, but her face turns even redder. ‘I sort of felt like I couldn’t come anymore. I know you didn’t ban me, and I’m so grateful for that, but I’ve been feeling very ... ashamed.’

An icy, aching shard stabs me in the chest and I rest a hand on her arm. Leah flinches at my touch and turns away, as if she doesn’t deserve such affection from me.

‘Please don’t feel like you can’t come, I love having you around,’ I insist. ‘And I forgive you for what you did, you know I do.’

Although she still won’t meet my eye, she nods and whispers, ‘I know.’

‘Why don’t you come and check out our book mobile? We’ve got some really cool Mystery Reads, you might find your new favourite book.’

It takes a bit of coaxing, but I manage to convince Leah to come and have a look through the shelves. I hope she'll feel welcome enough to come back to the library, it's not been the same without her.

We spend an hour or so at the park before driving just out of the village to Lavender Fields Retirement Home. No sooner do we pull into the car park do two women dressed in blue uniforms march out of the revolving doors, no doubt to tell us off for trespassing. A sinking sensation settles in my gut as I realise that perhaps we should have phoned ahead to warn the staff of our arrival and check that everything would be okay.

I stick my head out of the passenger window, and I'm taken aback to see that one of the nurses' is Mel. She's just as shocked to see me, and our brightly painted van.

'Jane?' She blinks in astonishment. 'What is this?'

'It's ... it's a book mobile,' I tell her sheepishly. 'We thought we'd bring the library to your residents.'

'Oh, how *fab!*' Mel's co-worker claps her hands excitedly.

'Sorry we didn't phone ahead,' Alex apologises as he climbs out of the van. 'But I know my mum and her mates will just love this.'

'Well, who are *they?*' she points toward the black limo that's just pulled in beside the van.

'That's my fault, I'm afraid.' Matt holds up his hands with a guilty grin. 'My PR team have come along to take pictures of me. I promise we won't take any photographs of residents or staff if they don't want us to, but for those who don't mind, they'll have some release forms they can fill out.'

'What do you think, Mel?' I nibble at my lip, nervously awaiting her answer. 'Is it okay for our book mobile to set up camp here for the afternoon?'

We all look to Mel pleadingly - me, Alex, Matt and her colleague, who is practically begging, her hands pressed in comic prayer. Mel sighs and smiles, a hand on her hip.

'Right, you better check in then. *All* of you.'

The boys and I open up the van's sliding door and set up the shelves, while Frank snaps a few pics.

'This is going to be great for our socials, Matt!' Portia exclaims as she directs Frank with a point of her finger. 'We'll just *have* to do cute little things like this with the other authors on our roster.'

It doesn't take long before an organised stream of residents spills out into the car park, and the nurses on duty come to have a gander at the books, too. I meet the ladies of the Lavender Field book club, Alex's mum Phyllis, Alison, Rose, Winnie and Abigail - or Mrs Higginbottom, as she prefers to be called. Matt turns out to be *very* popular with the ladies, and it's hardly surprising. That guy could charm his way out of a cobra's nest.

'It's been so long since I've been to the village library,' Phyllis tells us. 'With my wheelchair, it's hard to get about without someone driving me, so this is wonderful.'

'And will you be visiting us again soon?' Mrs Higginbottom asks.

'We certainly hope to.' I search inside my bag for the trusty clipboard. 'But to make that happen, we need your help.'

I'm stunned by the amount of signatures we receive from residents and staff alike. Many choose to write up comments as well, citing how much they loved having our mobile library visit the home.

As the residents continue to pick out their books, I sidle ruefully over to Mel. 'Thanks so much for agreeing to this, I know I sort of put you in a difficult position.'

She shrugs and laughs. 'You did. Normally, we're supposed to have things like this planned weeks in advance, but since it's to save the library, I'll make an exception.' She nudges her colleague in the side. 'Let's just hope the big boss Trisha never finds out about this, or she'll have my skin. Keep your lip buttoned, Petra.'

Petra mimes buttoning up her mouth. 'I won't breathe a word.'

*

After two more hours of scribbled signatures and checking out mystery books, we begin to close up shop, and say goodbye to our newfound friends at Lavender Fields. I've always been terrible at socialising, but today, I've stepped out of my comfort zone and astonishingly, I've had a really wonderful time. Maybe I'm more confident than I thought I was, maybe I really *do* like being around others, instead of holing up at home with a novel and a cup of tea. I mean, I *do* like doing that, sure, but perhaps there's other things I enjoy even more, like spending time with great people.

Whilst I'm packing a stack of heavy fantasy books into a cardboard box, Matt stands close to me, so close that I catch the scent of his earthy cologne.

'Well, today went well, don't you think?'

I nod enthusiastically, beaming with pride. 'I feel as though we've made a real difference. Not just for the library, but for these lovely folks here.'

This afternoon has made me realise how important accessibility is, and how, if we can save the library from closure, it really would be a good idea to continue the book mobile.

'I think you're right.'

There's a pause, a tense moment of silence where we both steal a glance at one another, then quickly look away.

'I - I guess you'll be leaving soon, won't you?'

With a heavy sigh, Matt nods. 'I can only convince Portia to stick around for so long. There's a couple of things she wants to wrap up, but after that's done, we're out of here. I've got about two days of Lily Vale left.'

A lump rises to my throat and I struggle to swallow it down. *Two days*. In two days' time, Matt will be on his way back to the city, back to his busy life, gone forever. In two days' time, I'll never see him again.

'Well, I ... I just want to thank you for ... well, *everything*.' With my shoulders hunched, I offer up a tiny, coy simper. 'You

may have just helped up save our library and ... and it's actually been quite nice getting to know you.'

My stilted, lukewarm speech of appreciation must have touched his heart, because he reaches out and squeezes my hand. 'It's been great getting to know you too.'

And there it is again, that tension, thick as a wall between us. I could try to break through, try to express how I truly feel ...

'I've got to go,' I blurt out, yanking my hand away. 'Good luck back in the city, and don't give up writing, yeah? You've still got plenty more to say.'

His brown eyes twinkle. 'Okay, I won't give up. For you.'

My mouth opens and closes as if I'm speaking silent words, but nothing comes out. Instead, I give him a curt nod and turn on my heel, marching stiffly away with my fists clenched at my sides.

Today was a total success, it couldn't have gone better if William Shakespeare himself showed up and helped us peddle books to the villagers.

So why do I feel so ... *empty*? Like a puzzle that's missing the last piece?

Chapter Twenty Six

As I walk up to the bright red postbox on the corner, I feel as though I'm holding a live grenade in my hand as opposed to a brown envelope, addressed to the local council.

I draw in one last deep breath then drop the envelope through the gap before I can second guess myself. It's done. I've officially sent off the letter, all the testimonials and of course, the petition to the local council. There's nothing else I can do but wait for the verdict ... and who knows how long *that* will take?

Oh well, I've tried my best, I've done everything I could think of to change the fate of our beloved library, no one could ask for more than that.

On the way to work, I pick up a cappuccino for myself and Mrs Geller, striving to take my mind off the council's impending decision. It's a brisk, autumn day, the smell of crisping leaves and the promise of rain is in the air, and the moment I stride through the doors of the library, the heaven's open and the world outside is drenched in the downpour.

'Thanks, Jane.' Mrs Geller takes her coffee gratefully. 'How did everything go yesterday?'

'It was pretty amazing, to tell you the truth. Everyone was so intrigued by the book mobile, and we got a ton of people to check books out and sign our petition. I'd love to do it again sometime -' I catch myself mid-gush, and promptly correct the course. 'That is, if we can.'

With a forlorn smile, Mrs Geller nods her head. 'It certainly would be something to look into, if the powers that be allow.'

After the mention of the library's tenuous future, the once-sunny atmosphere is as dour as the weather outside, and so Mrs Geller and I part to our separate tasks and sip our coffees alone. There's a lot to sort out this morning, the first thing I have to do is digitise the list of books that were checked out yesterday - and there's a lot of them!

I'm halfway through the list when someone flounces up to the desk. 'Hiya!' Portia croons, flicking her jet-black hair over one shoulder.

'Oh, hello, Portia.' I swivel away from my computer screen to face her properly. 'How are you today?'

'Well, I'm pretty fantastic! Matt's book launch was a great success, don't you think? You should see the sales reports!'

Unadulterated joy courses through my veins, Matt will be so pleased to know how well the novel is doing already. 'Yes, everything went smoothly.'

'And the book mobile idea? A stroke of *genius!*'

'It was Matt's idea,' I confess, my head bowed modestly. 'I'd have never come up with a plan like that on my own.'

However, Portia isn't listening, she's far too busy singing my praises. 'Honestly, we've never had such a helpful team of librarians or bookshop owners on a tour before, you and Mrs Geller have been such a wonderful breath of fresh air.'

'Oh trust me, Portia, the pleasure has been all ours. You guys might have just saved our library.'

'Well, I just wanted to pop in to say goodbye before we leave tomorrow.' With a pearly grin, she slides her business card across my desk. 'It was lovely working with you, Jane. We'd definitely be interested in visiting your village for another book tour in the future, so let's keep in touch.'

Stunned, I struggle to speak. 'That - that would be wonderful. Thank you so much, Portia.'

'No, thank *you*.'

My heart swells as I watch her leave and I clutch the business card tight in my hand, hardly able to believe it. As if I didn't have enough reasons to pray our library remains open, this big-time PR executive just handed me another!

These past few weeks sure have been eye-opening, and I've grown more in that time than I have my whole life so far.

Morning turns to afternoon, and at three-thirty, a sheepish figure in a lilac raincoat sneaks in. I can't tell you the relief that floods my body as Leah pulls out a chair at her usual desk and hunches over her book, instantly engrossed in the story. She peers over the pages and catches my eye, just for a moment, but that small second of connection is enough.

I'm so glad she has a place at our library, but it's all very bittersweet. Who knows how much longer it will be here? Only time will tell, I guess.

When my shift ends, I breathe in the sweet, earthy scent of autumn. I finished earlier than usual today, and I'm gagging to get home and relax with a cool glass of rosé and the new romance novel I checked out. I've not read much in this genre before, but for some reason, I'm in the mood for a book that's going to give me butterflies.

Today has been a bit emotional, and it's forced me to picture what life would be like without Lily Vale's library. Maybe it will be replaced by a soulless petrol station, or another corner shop? Either way, the village will suffer without it, no matter what the council thinks.

My train of thought is knocked off the rails by my phone ringing. I fumble in my bag for it and press it awkwardly to my ear. 'Hello?'

'Hey, it's me,' my brother Marc responds. 'Just checking you don't need any help for tonight?'

'What's tonight?'

The silence on the line deafening. '... don't tell me you've forgotten?'

My mind races through my mental diary, frantically flicking through the pages searching for today's date. 'Wait, is today the thirteenth?'

'Yes!'

Oh my gosh!

'No, of course I haven't forgotten,' I laugh off my brother's concern, though inside, I'm freaking out. 'I'll see you all later,

yeah?’

The very second I hang up the phone, I race down the street, dodging inelegantly out of the way of my fellow pedestrians and splashing through the puddles collecting on the cobblestones.

I’ve only forgotten my parents’ wedding anniversary.

Chapter Twenty Seven

My breath hanging misty in the air before me, I continue my impromptu sprint through the village, thoughts rushing through my mind just as fast at my feet on the pavement.

I can't believe I let my parents' anniversary dinner completely slip my mind!

This is so unlike me, I'm always meticulously organised, every appointment and event is written down in my diary and I'm *never* late to anything. Yet here I am, running around like a headless chicken to gather everything I need to host a memorable evening. I make a mad dash to the shops and grab the party essentials along with the ingredients for a lasagne. As I stagger under the weight of two shopping bags, I recall the last - and perhaps most important - thing I have to get ... a cake.

Another marathon across the village sees me stumbling through the doors of The Cosy Little Tearoom, and poor Puddles and Rachel leap up to the rafters in shock as I cry out, 'I need a cake for tonight!'

A blank expression flickers across Rachel's face. 'Huh?'

Wheezing over to the counter, I attempt to catch my breath. 'A cake for my parents' anniversary. I know it's a long shot, but do you think you can help me?'

Rachel chews her lip in thought, eyes cast upward to the ceiling. 'I don't have any cakes, per se, but I've got five cherry and chocolate brownies and five vanilla cream blondies left over, I could place them on a foil tray and ice them like a sheet cake?'

'That would be perfect! Thank you so much. My mum will have my guts for garters if I don't have a fabulous cake for the occasion.'

Rachel shakes her head as she squiggles the lettering out in icing, giggling.

‘What?’

‘I was just thinking about how much you’ve changed, you’re so different to the shy woman who used to come in every morning for a lemon tart and coffee. It’s a good change, though.’

Her comment makes me pause to consider, and I realise she’s right, I’m a completely different person than I was a few weeks ago. Perhaps it’s because I’ve had to step up to the plate and spearhead efforts to save the library, or perhaps it’s the new friends I’ve made, but somehow, I’m not the same Plain Jane I was. I’m Just Jane, and that’s okay.

The make-shift sheet cake looks wonderful, iced in pure white with *Happy Anniversary Cheryl and Richard* piped across it, complete with fondant flourishes around the border. I thank Rachel again for her ingenuity and sprint out the door, just as it begins to rain again. The moment I hurry inside my house and shake the water from my hair, I get straight to work.

In double-quick time, I manage to construct a hasty lasagne and while it’s baking in the oven, I run the vacuum over the floors and hide any clutter away in the cupboard under the stairs. Next, I hang banners and balloons around the living room, hoping to make the place look festive. I’m just laying the table with a lacy cloth and all the party bits I picked up from the shop when the oven dings to indicate the lasagne is ready. I must admit, it *does* smell pretty delicious as I lift it out with my oven mitts, with its cheesy topping bubbling away invitingly. I cover the dish and place it on the counter next to the cake, and stand back to assess my last-minute party organisation. It looks great, no one would know I knocked it together in just under three hours.

My family arrive in small groups, Marc and Sarah are the first to turn up, followed shortly by Joey, Nikita and the kids. And lastly, the guests of honour make their appearance at quarter past seven, and we all wish them a happy anniversary with party poppers as they walk through the door.

‘Whoa!’ Dad clasps a hand to his chest in a pantomime of shock as the kids surround him and shoot their poppers over

him. 'I'm getting too old for surprises!'

'My, I didn't expect all this.' Mum chuckles as she pulls colourful streamers out of her hair. The smile quickly disappears when she looks at me. 'You might have dressed for the occasion, Jane!'

Self-consciously, I smooth down my outfit - a simple maroon dress with a ditsy floral pattern teamed with plum tights. I didn't have time to change after the mad rush, but I figured today's work wear would suffice - I suppose not.

'I think you look great, Jane,' Sarah says, and I give her a grateful grin.

When I lead my guests through to the kitchen, Nikita gasps in delight at the carefully laid table and the selection of food across the counters. 'Wow, what a lovely spread!'

Mum surveys my efforts, her nose wrinkled. 'I thought you were making the cake yourself?'

'I was going to, but I thought, hey, I'm no baker, so I left it to a professional.'

It had nothing to do with the fact I completely forgot about your special anniversary dinner, honest!

'Can we have some now?' Mason asks, his nose resting against the edge of the table as he eyes up the cake.

'Not yet,' Nikita says gently. 'After dinner.'

Everyone serves themselves from the selection and we each take a seat at the table.

'A toast,' Joey lifts up his glass and we all follow suit, even Maisie and Mason with their twin cups of Ribena. 'To Mum and Dad. Here's to thirty-five years of marriage.'

'To Mum and Dad!' We all echo and clink our glasses together.

'And cheers to Jane, who organised tonight especially for our parents,' Marc adds, shooting an encouraging nod across the table.

'To Jane!'

I burrow into my shoulders like a turtle escaping into its shell. I expect the discussion to revolve around Mum and Dad and their wonderful thirty-five years together, but to my horror, it stays on me.

‘Speaking of Jane, we heard all about your mobile library thing.’ Mum looks up from her plate, a wry gleam in her eyes. ‘It sounded as though it was very popular.’

‘Yeah, I guess more people are into reading than you guys thought,’ I murmur into my wine glass, trying to hide my smug smile.

Dad clears his throat and rubs at his grey beard, the way he always does when he’s feeling a bit awkward. ‘Well, we’re proud of you, Jane. Whatever happens with the library, you did a good job.’

I’m stunned by the praise, ordinarily, my parents can’t criticise me enough, yet here they are, figuratively patting me on the back.

‘Still, I can’t believe you didn’t tell us about all this business with the library closing down, I had to hear it from the ladies at the hairdressers,’ Mum pouts, her arms folded across her chest. ‘In fact, I’ve hardly heard anything from you at all these last few weeks.’

‘Don’t take it personally, Cheryl. I think Jane’s been a bit *busy* lately, and I don’t just mean with the library.’ Sarah’s raised eyebrow leaves no doubts as to what she’s referring to.

Mum stares at me. ‘Is it true, Jane? You’re seeing someone?’

Sarah kicks me under the table, and mouths ‘*go on!*’

The not-so-subtle gesture catches my mum’s attention, and immediately, she starts grilling me. ‘So there *is* someone! Ah, how exciting! Who is he?’

‘He’s no one, because I’m not seeing anyone,’ I reply through gritted teeth as I give Sarah a death glare.

‘I’d hardly call Matthew Crane *no one*.’

Nikita and Joey gasp in unison, causing poor little Maisie to flinch in fright.

‘Matthew Crane? The author?’ Joey chokes out.

‘As in the famous writer who’s doing a book tour in the village right now?’ Nikita interrupts excitedly.

‘The very same,’ Sarah nods pertly.

Guffawing, Dad throws an arm around my shoulders. ‘Ah, I knew being a little bookworm would pay off in the end! Nice one Janey, you’ve bagged a celebrity!’

Furiously, I shrug him off. ‘No I haven’t! Matt and I are just friends.’

‘Ooh, *Matt!*’ Nikita turns to wink at Sarah. ‘On a nickname basis, are we?’

‘Hardly.’ I roll my eyes, though my pulse is beating out a crazy tune under my skin. ‘We simply worked together during events at the library and the launch of his new book. Of course we were going to get somewhat ... acquainted.’

My family exchange amused glances but mercifully leave the matter alone. After all, tonight isn’t about me, it’s about my parents.

With every plate practically licked clean, it’s time to bring out the cake. It’s an absolute hit, deliciously rich and decadent, and no one even suspects that it was hastily put together by Rachel just hours earlier.

‘Congratulations, Mum and Dad!’ I raise my freshly filled glass, directing the others to do the same. ‘You two are the very definition of soul mates, and I wish you many more happy years together.’

As Mum and Dad share a sweet kiss to a chorus of *awws*, I ponder the notion of true love, and I can’t help but feel like I’ve missed my shot. I know I’m still young, thirty-two is hardly over the hill, but all this talk of soul mates has got me thinking - what if there *is* someone out there for me who is my perfect match, right for me in every way, and I’ve let him go?

Chapter Twenty Eight

I'm supposed to be working, but I can't seem to keep still this morning, I'm bouncing up and down in my swivel chair like a toddler stuffed full of sweeties.

At regular intervals, I catch myself glancing up at the clock on the library wall, counting down the minutes until Matt leaves Lily Vale. According to Portia, they're departing at noon, less than two hours away. Then Matt will be out of here, out of my life, and I never told him how much meeting him has changed me.

Deciding I can't take any more torture, I set myself to worrying about something else instead - the fate of the library. Of course, it's way too early to have heard anything from the council - I only posted the letter yesterday - and yet, I can't stop myself from obsessively checking the mail, just in case. Deep down in the pit of my stomach, something tells me the whole endeavour was a lost cause, the council have likely made up their mind and nothing me or a famous author can do will change it.

'Expecting a love letter?' Mrs Geller quips as I flick through the junk mail for the thirtieth time this morning.

'Not exactly.' Feeling foolish, I place the envelopes down on the desk. 'I'm just a little antsy, I suppose, about the library and all.'

Mrs Geller peers at me with her head cocked to one side. 'Are you sure that's the only thing that's bothering you?'

'Of course!' I bluster, suddenly all itchy and hot under the collar of my maroon turtleneck. 'W - what else would be bothering me?'

A quirked eyebrow is all the answer I get as she walks on by, leaving a fresh cup of tea on my desk as she does. The mug is warm to the touch as I raise it to my lips and I gaze out over the library, admiring each crowded shelf and every cracked leather chair. *I'll miss this place ...*

While it's quiet, Mrs Geller sends me on a brief mission to get stamps, and I treat myself to a cheeky ice lolly in the post office, though it's chilly out and the grey clouds overhead suggest that rain is on the way. I suspect the errand was a little ploy to get me out of the library and into the fresh air, but I don't mind, as I could do with clearing my head.

As I turn the corner by the bakery, I collide with something that shrieks.

'Oh, my new leotard!' The mystery obstruction whines, and when my starry vision shifts into focus, I realise I've walked straight into Jess. 'You've stained it!'

Sure enough, there's a bright red blob marring the pale pink silk of her top, no doubt the fault of my ice lolly.

I dig into my bag and offer her a tissue by way of apology. 'I'm sorry, I've got to get going.'

Without any further explanation, I stride off, my shoulders squared beneath my coat.

'Wait!' Jess calls out, and despite myself, I halt in the middle of the street and allow her to catch up to me. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

'Yes, there is! You were ever so rude to me last time we met up, and you haven't even given me so much of an apology since,' she insists, hanging off my arm like an incessant little monkey. 'Come on, tell me.'

'It's *nothing*.'

She narrows her eyes, studying me carefully. 'Is this about Matt?'

'N - no.'

'It *is* about him!' With a huff, she plants her hands on her hips, her chest puffed out. 'But *what* about him? Is it because we went to Ripples together?'

I don't breathe a word, but I don't have to. Jess knows what's up.

‘You said you didn’t like him!’ She shakes her head in exasperation. ‘I asked you and you assured me you felt nothing for him.’

‘Yeah, well, maybe I lied.’

Defeated, I sit down on the pavement, my shoulders hunched up to my ears. Though she wrinkles her nose, Jess still sits down beside me on the path, smoothing down her dance leggings.

‘That’s why you’ve been all mardy with me?’

Now that she’s said it out loud, my issue sounds so childish and silly, and it dawns upon me what a jerk I’ve been. When I was at school, my fake friends used to play this game where they’d suddenly stop talking to me, without rhyme nor reason, leaving me to stress over what I could have possibly done wrong. It made me feel awful, but what feels even worse is that *I’m* the mean girl now, and poor Jess has been my victim.

‘I truly am sorry, Jess, and I’m sorry it took this long for me to tell you that,’ I gabble. ‘None of this was your fault, it - well, it was mine.’

‘If you’d have just *told* me from the beginning, I never would have pursued him.’ Her green eyes shine with sincerity. ‘I’m your friend.’

I reach out and squeeze her hand tight. ‘I know you are, Jess. I’m sorry I haven’t been a great friend to you, at least not right now.’

‘I get it. You might find this hard to believe but until recently I ...’ She swallows hard and picks at her nails. ‘Well, I didn’t really have any friends.’

I don’t find that as difficult to believe as she might think, but I feign surprise. Unfortunately, she sees right through me like a freshly cleaned window.

‘Oh, you can drop the act!’ She shoves me hard in the ribs, but then she starts laughing. ‘I know I’m a bit of a diva, and not everyone can handle that, but I’m getting better. I’m *trying* to be a good friend, I might not always get it right, but you need to talk to me. I’m not a mind reader, Jane.’

‘I know, I should have told you everything, how I felt about Matt. I guess ... I guess I’ve sort of been in denial.’ I glance down at my feet. ‘I suppose I’ve got a lot to learn about friendships, too.’

‘Well, we can be rubbish friends together.’ Jess links her arm through mine. ‘*Best* rubbish friends.’

I smile up at her, my heart glowing warm beneath my jumper. I don’t think I’ve ever had a best friend before, there were a few girls at school I sometimes hung around with at lunch and my hall mates at uni were okay, but we never kept in touch. I’d have never imagined a glamorous, elegant woman like Jess would be interested in being my friend, but that’s the thing about first impressions, they are often wrong.

‘If it makes you feel any better, the meal with Matt wasn’t exactly a romantic night out.’ Jess sighs, though there’s a smirk tugging at her mouth. ‘I *tried* to flirt, I gave him all my best moves, but he wasn’t responding to any of it. And if I wasn’t sure how he felt about me, well, he made it pretty clear at the end of the night when we hugged goodbye and he said “I’m glad we’re mates, Jess”. *Mates!* I’ve never had a guy call me a *mate* in my life!’

She’s so aghast that I can’t help but chuckle.

‘Well, I’m glad you think it’s so funny! I must be losing my touch.’

‘Don’t be daft, you’re gorgeous, you’re interesting, you’re effortlessly charming. This was a him problem, not you.’

‘Yeah, the problem being that he’s just not that into me.’ A cheeky grin stretches across her painted lips as she waggles her eyebrows. ‘But he *might* be into someone else.’

I breathe in shakily, knowing exactly what she’s implying, but I’m not prepared to consider that. The thought that Matt might possibly share my feelings only makes his leaving more heartbreaking, so it’s best if I don’t dwell on it.

Side by side, we walk back toward the library, and despite several attempts to change the subject, Jess just won’t shut up about Matt.

‘Come on, why are you fighting this?’ she whines as we step through the double doors to the scent of old books. ‘You’re into him, he’s into you, you’re a bookworm, he’s a writer, it’s a match made in heaven!’

‘That may be, but it doesn’t matter anymore, he’s leaving. He’s out of here *today*, Portia said they are setting off at twelve o’clock.’

‘So?’ Jess scoffs, as though Matt’s impending departure is of no consequence whatsoever. ‘That means you’ve got a whole hour to stop him.’

Now it’s my time to scoff. ‘*Stop* him? You can’t be serious.’

‘I’m deadly serious. Look, you can’t just let this great guy who you’re totally nuts about walk out of your life. You’ve got to at least tell him how you feel about him.’

I turn away and stare at the bookshelves, considering it. I couldn’t, I *shouldn’t*. Although, I suppose I *could* phone him, ask him to wait a moment longer before leaving. My heart in my throat, I dial in his number and wait ... only to receive his voice mail.

Sighing, I stuff my phone back in my pocket. ‘No answer.’ I guess that’s it, I’ve missed my shot.

‘Well, what are you waiting for?’ Jess demands. ‘Go and get him!’

‘You mean like, go to the hotel?’

Jess rolls her eyes. ‘Of course! *Go!*’

‘What, now?’

‘Yes, *now!*’

And for a second, I want to do just that. The beat of my heart hammers out a crazy tune, sweat breaks out on my neck and a surge of sheer adrenaline courses through my veins. Could I truly summon the courage to go to Matt’s hotel and spill my heart out to him? The notion both terrifies and excites me, yet at this moment, it’s what I want to do most in the world.

But, as it inevitably does, reality settles over me like a dark rain cloud.

‘I can’t,’ I tell her, my shoulders slumping. ‘I have work.’

‘No you don’t.’ I spin around to see Mrs Geller behind me, her arms folded firmly across her chest. ‘You’re taking the rest of the day off. Consider it a bonus holiday day for all the work you’ve put in recently.’

‘Are ... are you sure?’

‘If cataloguing textbooks is what stands between you and happiness, then they can wait for another day.’ A genuine, earnest smile reaches her bright blue eyes, setting them all a-twinkle. ‘But love can’t.’

Chapter Twenty Nine

With Mrs Geller and Jess cheering me on, I dash out into the streets ... and straight into an ankle-deep puddle.

Groaning, I wrench my neck skyward, and it seems the grey clouds that predicted the rain were correct - it's pouring down with a vengeance, I'm soaked to the bone, but I couldn't care less.

I *have* to find Matt, I have to tell him everything.

Just my luck, I walked to work today, so I have to book it across the village to the inn. By the time I stumble over to the perturbed receptionist behind the desk, I'm a sweaty mess.

'Excuse me.' My lungs are so ravaged by the cold air and the frenzied sprint, I have to wrestle to get the words out. 'I need to speak to Mr Matthew Crane. It's urgent.'

'I'm sorry, Mr Crane and his team already left.'

I swear for a moment, time stops still and my heart shatters like glass hitting a concrete floor. 'What? But - but it's only half eleven, they weren't supposed to be leaving until twelve o'clock.'

The receptionist can't do much but hold out his hands in commiseration. 'I suppose they decided to leave early.'

Dejected and defeated, I mumble a half-hearted thank you and start towards the exit. And yet as I take hold of the door handle, something inside urges me not to give in, to keep fighting.

'What time did they leave?' I ask, turning back to the desk.

'About ten minutes ago, I'd say.'

They can't have gotten *too* far ... not yet.

'Thank you!' I leave the baffled receptionist behind as I carry on my epic journey, as determined as Phineas Emerald.

Frantic, I scan my surroundings, trying to figure out the best route to take. I could follow the roads, but those country lanes aren't so safe for pedestrians, and I'm likely to get held up by a herd of cows *as well* as traffic. There's only one thing for it, I'll have to go off-road.

I'm fairly sure the fields behind the canal are private property, but they're the quickest way out of the village on foot, and there's no time to lose. Praying that the farmer who owns this land doesn't have a shotgun, I stumble through the bushes as branches tug at my clothes and squelching mud threatens to suck the Chelsea boots clean off my feet.

I run across the clearing, staggering with each step, but refusing to give in. It's as if every fantasy book I've ever read has been preparing me for this moment - I'm on a quest of my own, an epic adventure through the treacherous woods, unforgiving marshlands and insurmountable cliffs and precipices.

Cows moo quizzically as I invade their fields, but I don't stop, I just keep running, glancing at the road that's only partially visible through the thick foliage. No sign of the car, or *any* car, for that matter. Surely I haven't missed them? I suppose it's possible, even with my shortcut, I can't rival the speed of an automobile, I bet Matt and his entourage are already well out of Lily Vale already ...

Then I see it - a sheen of black through the leaves. *Matt's limousine*. I'm right next to it, if I leap through out onto the road now, I can stop them. But that's crazy, I can't run out through the foliage like a mad woman, what on earth will he think of me? But if I hesitate, wait a moment longer, they'll whiz past and I'll have no chance of stopping them. It's now or never.

'WAIT!' I blunder through the bushes, sending leaves and branches scattering as I wave my hands above my head. 'Please, *stop!*'

With a final push, I break through the hedge and stagger into the road like a drunk, just as the car passes by. Devastated, my

stomach drops to the ground, the rain patters down on my head and I watch the car speed away.

I've missed it. I've missed my chance.

Tears sting my eyes, clouding my vision and I hang my head low, my chin touching my chest. If only I'd been braver, bolder, who knows what could have happened? But what might have been is a faded dream, a wistful fantasy I'll hold on to forever.

The sudden screech of brakes on wet tarmac has me jerking my head upwards. I choke out a sob to see the car halting in the middle of the road, and the back passenger door flings open. Out steps Matt, and he runs through the rain and muck, right to my side.

'Jane?' he laughs incredulously, utterly flabbergasted by my actions, and no doubt, my bedraggled appearance. 'What - what are you doing here?'

'I came to find you.' Self-consciously, I wipe my grubby hands on my mud-splattered jeans. 'There's something I had to tell you before you left.'

'What is it?'

I'm acutely aware that Portia, her intern, Frank and Pete are earwigging in the background, but I can't chicken out now.

Did Phineas give in when his nemesis Mariam conspired to have him exiled from the kingdom? I remind myself as I dig deep inside for courage. *No, he didn't, and neither can you.*

'I have a confession.' Breathing deeply, I force myself to look Matt in his eyes. 'Over these last few weeks, working with you, getting to know you, hearing about your craft and how you've overcome your difficulties, it's been truly wonderful. I - I haven't connected with anyone on such a deep level since ... well, since forever.'

For a terrifying second, there's nothing but silence. Matt stares at me, seemingly astounded by the revelation, but then that tiny, shy half-smile begins in the corner of his mouth.

‘I feel the same way, Jane,’ his voice is softer than a summer breeze, barely above a whisper, but I hear it loud and clear. ‘Before I met you, I was ready to give up writing, throw in the towel and let my critics win. But seeing how much my work meant you, and how *passionate* you are, well, you ignited my passions too.’

Heat surges to my face and I brush my wind-tangled hair out of my eyes. ‘You’ve ignited mine. And well, Matt ...’

‘Just *kiss*, already!’ Portia yells out, causing us both to jump. She’s grinning from ear to ear, as is Pete, and even grumpy old Frank is showing his teeth. It’s clear they’ve been waiting for this moment too, perhaps nearly as much as I have.

Giggling awkwardly, Matt and I turn back to face one another. It’s not the first kiss I had in mind, covered in mud and with Matt’s colleagues watching, but I’ll take it.

My lips are chilled from the run, but his are warm as they touch mine, and that warmth spreads through my entire body. I wrap my arms around his neck as he grabs me by the waist, drawing me close to his chest. And suddenly, we’re the only two people in the world. The raindrops cascade over us like liquid crystals, gentle and cool against the heat of our embrace.

This kiss is the treasure at the end of my quest, more magical than any story I’ve ever read.

Epilogue

Two Months Later ...

Lily Vale's library is full to the rafters - it often is these days - and though I relish the rare quiet moments, I couldn't be happier.

As I pass by Leah's desk, I give her a quick nod and she returns the favour before getting back to her book. She was able to convince her mum Karen to come down to the library a few weeks ago so I could help with her CV. As promised, I spent some time with her one-on-one to search for jobs online and prepare her cover letters. She had an interview at the local haberdashers and absolutely nailed it, securing the position of sales representative. Her new hours are more sociable too, so she's able to spend a lot more time with her daughter. Things are looking up for Leah and Karen, and I'm delighted for the both of them.

Our Mum's Club is still going strong, and we've had loads of new members, including Nikita. Mason and Maisie adore coming here once a week to hang out with the other kids - well, Mason does, Maisie mostly sits in the corner and reads her *Mary Mishap* books, but she's growing in confidence day-by-day. I see so much of myself in her, and I'm determined to help her navigate the maze of socialising much better than I did when I was her age. We just need to take it one step at a time.

I brave the cold to fish out today's letters from our postbox, and an icy foreboding hand clutches at my chest as I flick through to one particular letter, enveloped in brown. The official red stamp on the back confirms my suspicions - it's from the council.

I walk stiffly back into the library, and Mrs Geller and I exchange furtive glances. I catch the fear in her eyes, the gulp at her throat, and I know she's just as scared as I am of what lies beneath the manila envelope.

‘What’s that, Auntie Jane?’ Mason hurtles over to my side and tries to snatch it from my hands.

‘It’s a letter.’ I swerve out of his reach and swallow hard, trying and failing to summon some saliva. ‘A letter from the council.’

You could hear a pin drop. The kids stop playing, the students on the computers stop typing, even Leah looks up from her book, her eyes nervous and wide. We all know what this means, and we’re all terrified.

‘Open it, Jane,’ Mrs Geller urges, although it’s clear that, like me, she’d almost rather not know the answer.

Right now, we’re in limbo, a sort of ‘Schrödinger’s library’, where our beloved community hub is both safe from closure and already gone for good. Once this letter is opened, we’ll have our answer, and there will be no going back.

With trembling hands, I edge a thumb along the flap and slowly tear it, exposing the stark white letter within. All eyes are on me as I pull it out and scan through the contents silently, praying for good news.

‘Well?’ Mel leans forward, though she’s already on the edge of her seat. ‘What’s the verdict?’

‘We’re staying open!’ I announce, waving the letter in the air like a victory flag.

The mums and the kids cheer and clap, the students whoop and woohoo, and Mrs Geller gives me a huge, lavender-scented hug. Our precious little library will live to fight another day, *many* more days, if I have anything to do with it!

These last few months have truly been a roller coaster, with ups, downs and *way* too many things that have thrown me for a loop. And as for Matt and I, well, we made it official. Long distance isn’t easy, but we’re doing all we can to make it work. I’ve travelled on the train to Birmingham to stay with him a couple of times, but most weekends, he drives down to Lily Vale.

Who knows what the future will hold for us? I can’t see myself moving to the city - though I suppose stranger things

have happened - and I think Matt is tiring of the hustle and bustle too, so maybe I can convince him to move down this way. But there's no need to think too far ahead, we're still on chapter one of our story, and we're happy to savour it rather than rushing things forward.

After work, I text Sarah and Jess the good news and instantly receive messages back.

That's amazing, and all thanks to your hard work! Sarah writes, while Jess types back, *Woohoo, let's celebrate tonight! Drinks at The Pheasant's Nest?*

I'm just about to respond when someone steps out in front of me, someone scented like cedar wood and book ink.

'*Matt!*' I gasp in delight at the surprise sight of my boyfriend. 'I thought you weren't coming down until tomorrow?'

'I wasn't.' He lifts me into his arms and spins me around. 'But I couldn't stay away any longer.'

'Give over,' I giggle, setting my feet back onto solid ground. 'Seriously, you didn't need to see Portia at the office today?'

'Nah, she cancelled the meeting last minute, told me to relax and enjoy a long weekend.' He flashes that gleamingly white smile. 'So that's exactly what I'm doing.'

After calling Jess to confirm it's cool if Matt comes along for drinks tonight, he and I take a stroll around Lily Vale while it's still light. The fallen leaves dance around our ankles as we head toward the park.

'How's the new book coming along?' I ask, swinging his hand in mine.

'Alright, though it's probably going to go a lot better after spending a weekend here. This place inspires me so much,' he says as he drinks in a breath of fresh, autumn air. 'Honestly, Jane, I haven't felt such a surge of motivation in years.'

Charmed by his enthusiasm, I nod in agreement. 'Lily Vale is indeed a magical little village.'

'It's not just Lily Vale, it's you.' His brown eyes find mine. 'You inspire me, Jane. You're my muse.'

‘Is that so? Well, if the next book happens to have a hideous crone character pop up, I’ll know where the inspo came from.’

‘What about a bookish hedge-witch who has a penchant for healing tinctures and helps Phineas get rediscover his strength after a losing battle?’ He brushes a lock of hair from my face. ‘I think maybe it’s time Phineas found his queen.’

Under the dappled sunlight, I steal a kiss from his mouth, reaching up on my tiptoes as I coil my arms around his neck. He holds me tight, as if he cannot bear to let me go. The gentle breeze caresses our cheeks and golden leaves swirl around our intertwined bodies, encapsulating us in a secret spell. Even when our lips part the spell is not broken, our eyes meet and our hearts beat in unison, speaking words only we can hear.

Like a novel, life is unpredictable, full of twists and turns on every page, but when I look up at Matt I know one thing for certain.

This story is only just beginning ...

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[A Summer Fair In Lilly Vale Village](#)

[Mistletoe and Wine In Lilly Vale Village](#)

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