



Snowy Days
on
Foxglove
Street

Alix Kelso

SNOWY DAYS ON FOXGLOVE STREET

A FOXGLOVE STREET NOVEL

BOOK SIX

ALIX KELSO

LAKE FALLS PUBLISHING

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For my husband, David.

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MEG MARSHALL SPUNTED along Foxglove Street, slipping and sliding on the snow underfoot and just about remaining upright, her arms pinwheeling with each treacherous step. She was on a mission, and falling on her backside was not an option.

In the kitchen of her house further along Foxglove Street, her Christmas Day turkey was currently being burnt to a cinder. The sooner she got home, the sooner she could assess the extent of the damage done. As Meg pounded along the pavement, she held tight to the hope that the turkey would turn out to be fine, thanks to all those basting juices she'd added to the pan, and that the Christmas Day dinner would be saved.

It was a false hope, she knew. The turkey should have come out of the oven more than an hour ago. Meg had explained all this to Ian before she'd left the house. She couldn't have been any clearer about what needed to be done.

"I'm popping over to visit my Aunt Bridget," Meg had told Ian. "We'll probably have a sherry or two. The turkey needs to come out of the oven at eleven o'clock on the dot, okay?"

"Okay," Ian had replied, his gaze fixed on the PlayStation game he was playing.

"Ian, did you hear me?"

"Yes, I heard," Ian had said with an amiable nod. "Eleven o'clock on the dot. I'll deal with it, love."

She'd known he wasn't listening. She'd *known* it. And yet she hadn't wanted to sound like she was nagging by repeating the instructions again. At forty-seven years old, Ian Clarke was ten years her senior. He was a fully grown man who could understand basic instructions about when to remove a turkey from the oven, wasn't he?

Apparently not. At some point after Meg left the house to visit her Aunt Bridget and before the turkey was supposed to be removed from the oven, Ian had gone home to his own place to feed his aquarium fish and had 'lost track of time'.

This was the explanation he'd given when Meg phoned him ten minutes ago to say she was having one more sherry with her Aunt Bridget before making her way home to deal with the rest of the Christmas dinner preparation. Ian's sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line had been followed by some swearing and an eventual admission that he'd forgotten to take the turkey out of the oven before going home to feed his fish.

Quite how someone could wander out of the house and forget the oven was turned on was a mystery to Meg. Quite how someone could wander out of the house on *Christmas Day*, oblivious to the delicious scents of roasting turkey, without remembering they'd been asked to take said turkey out of the oven, was even more mysterious.

Not for the first time, Meg wondered if she and Ian really had a future together after all.

But that was a problem for another day—for a day that wasn't Christmas Day, for a day that didn't already involve an emergency dash to save a turkey from being burnt to a crisp.

And so Meg had darted towards home, her mind both fuzzy and panicked—fuzzy thanks to the effects of her Aunt Bridget's sizeable sherry servings, and panicked on account of the worst-case scenarios racing through her head about what she might find back at her house.

The closer she got, the more she feared that a burnt turkey might be the least of her worries. What if the roasting bird and the hot pan juices had caught fire in the oven? Was that

possible? Meg thought so. There were always hair-raising stories doing the rounds about people having to call out the fire brigade on Christmas Day because of various culinary catastrophes.

As Meg closed the distance to her house, she thought she smelled burning, imagined smoke billowing from her inferno of a kitchen, was sure she heard sirens wailing in the distance...

She pounded up the garden path, thrust the key into the lock, and flung open the door. The smell of burning turkey hung heavy in the air. Sprinting to the kitchen, Meg noted the thin veil of wispy smoke filling the place. When she yanked open the oven door, a cloud of smoke and steam belched out, making her cough.

Grabbing the oven mitts, Meg hauled the roasting tin from the oven and dumped it on the trivet on the counter. The turkey sizzling inside the tin was black and blistered and listing to one side, like the charred victim of an arson attack.

“Oh, look at this!” Meg wailed, wafting smoke from the smouldering turkey with the oven mitts. “My lovely Christmas turkey!”

The smoke alarm starting screeching. Meg winced at the high-pitched racket and threw open the back door to vent the kitchen, then opened the windows, too. Hauling a chair from the table, she hopped up and pressed the button to cut the alarm, then returned to the counter to pout at the ruins of the turkey.

Before leaving to visit her Aunt Bridget, Meg had removed the protective foil from the turkey so the skin would go nice and brown and crispy. Had the foil still been in place, the turkey might have withstood the extra hour in the oven, but in its unprotected state, exposed to the full fierce heat of the oven, it hadn't had a chance. The basting juices in the pan had evaporated, and once the moisture was cooked away, the turkey had simply smouldered.

She'd got up at seven o'clock this morning to prepare the turkey for the oven. It was her little tradition to enjoy a cheeky

glass of bucks fizz while organising the pan, and slathering butter and layers of bacon on the turkey, and adding the lemon and onion and peppercorns and other aromatics.

When her son, Jamie, had still lived at home, they'd always raised a glass together to toast the turkey before putting it in the oven, her with her bucks fizz, Jamie with plain orange juice until he'd been old enough to join her with a splash of prosecco in his glass. Together, they'd made a little ritual out of thanking the turkey for its sacrifice and wishing the roasting process good luck.

For the first time in years, Meg had performed the little ceremony herself this morning. She'd thought of Jamie, off at university now and having too many adventures to come home for the holidays, as she'd wrapped the turkey in foil and raised her glass in a solitary festive salute.

She'd hoped Ian might have joined her in the kitchen, but he'd slept until late and she hadn't wanted to wake him. It was Christmas, after all. Not everyone got up at the crack of dawn to have mad little toasting ceremonies with their turkeys while getting them ready for the oven.

Now, as she looked at the charred remains of the poor turkey, she felt the stab of hot tears at her eyes. The poor creature hadn't deserved this terrible, careless treatment, and her Christmas Day dinner didn't deserve to be ruined like this, either.

She should never have left Ian in charge of taking the turkey out of the oven. That much was obvious. But as she'd done all the rest of the work for the Christmas day meal she and Ian were sharing—prepared the turkey, peeled the vegetables, mixed the stuffing, wrapped the pigs-in-blankets—it didn't seem like too much to ask Ian to do one simple thing while she visited a relative a few streets away and wished her auntie a Merry Christmas.

One thing she'd asked Ian to do. *One thing*. And look how it had turned out.

The front door rattled and Ian hurried into the kitchen. His eyes widened when he saw the blackened turkey slumped in

the roasting pan.

“Oh, love, I’m sorry,” Ian said. “I feel like this is my fault.”

“It *is* your fault!” Meg snapped. “You were supposed to take the turkey out of the oven and instead you disappeared off home!”

Ian wrung his hands together. “I had to feed my fish.”

“You and your bloody fish!”

He spent an awful lot of time working on his aquarium. Meg hadn’t thought much about Ian’s hobby to begin with when they’d started seeing one another during the summer, although she understood that people were passionate about different things. As time passed, though, she’d realised how much work the aquarium involved in terms of cleaning and maintenance, not to mention the time Ian liked to spend chatting with other aquarium enthusiasts online and in person at the Hamblehurst Aquarium Club that met every fortnight in the church hall.

That Ian’s pet fish had taken precedence over her Christmas Day roast turkey was something that would require some quiet reflection on her part when she was no longer seething mad.

“I’m sorry, I really am,” Ian said, looking sheepish. “I should’ve taken the turkey out before I left.”

“Yes! You should’ve! You can’t just leave food cooking in the oven and waltz off. What if there had been a fire?”

“You’re right, I wasn’t thinking.”

It was impossible to argue with someone who already accepted they were in the wrong. Meg realised her pent-up panic and upset had no outlet while Ian was being so reasonable and apologetic.

“Look, I bet we can salvage some of this meat,” Ian said, grabbing a knife and fork and slicing into the charred turkey breast. He peered inside the carcass and gave a speculative grunt. “It might be a bit dried out around the edges, but if we

do a bit of excavation, I'm sure we'll have more than enough turkey meat to feed the two of us."

Meg examined the clumps of meat Ian was peeling away from the bone. The outer flesh looked as dry as dust, but there was some hope for the meat that was deeper inside the bird.

"We'll need a lot of gravy to avoid choking to death," Meg said with a reluctant laugh. She was determined to save the Christmas dinner if it was at all possible and knew that if she stayed angry, she'd only be ruining the day for herself.

Ian smiled. "A lot of gravy and a lot of wine and we'll be fine, love. You leave the turkey to me and I'll make up for being a plonker and landing us in this mess in the first place. Why don't you start the roast potatoes? I love your roasties."

Meg sighed again and nodded. It wasn't the Christmas dinner she'd envisaged, but all was not lost. There were some edible bits on the poor turkey, and the trimmings would make up for the incinerated deficiencies. While there'd be no turkey leftovers for tomorrow, Meg could make her peace with that.

Once the potatoes were roasted, along with the carrots and parsnips, things would feel a lot brighter. Meg always cooked the stuffing in a separate tin anyway, so there was that to look forward to, along with the pigs-in-blankets. There were no pan juices to make the gravy, but she could use gravy granules as a fallback. It wouldn't be as tasty as her own signature turkey gravy, but they'd need the lubrication to help force down the rubbery turkey they managed to salvage. Throw in a few compulsory Brussels sprouts and a spoonful of cranberry sauce, and everything would be fine.

Meg had never experienced a Christmas Day dinner disaster before. There was a first time for everything, she supposed. And while the sight of the blackened turkey in the roasting pan made her wince, what mattered was that they could at least salvage some of the poor bird. There were people out there a lot worse off than she was, and she'd do well to be grateful for what she had.

"Look," Ian said, slicing some of the breast meat away and spearing it with a fork. "This looks perfectly fine."

He popped the turkey into his mouth and chewed. And chewed. And kept chewing. He swallowed at last, his eyes bulging with the effort, and then he began coughing and choking.

Meg rushed to the sink and filled a glass of water. Ian gulped at it, his cheeks red from the effort of forcing down the dried-out meat and trying not to choke to death.

“We might need to be more careful choosing which bits of turkey to eat,” Ian croaked, poking again at the charred carcass with a fork.

No kidding, Meg thought, and reached for a bottle of wine on the counter. Only a great big glass of shiraz would stop her from grabbing that fork out of Ian’s hand and stabbing him with it.

She poured a wine glass to the brim and drank deeply. *That’s better*. Bad enough that the turkey was ruined. It would only make things worse if she set about Ian with a meat fork.

Meg turned on the kitchen radio and was immediately soothed by the calming carols playing on Classic FM. She drank more wine and started preparing the roast potatoes while Ian hacked at the blackened turkey carcass.

From the corner of her eye, she watched him work, his brow furrowed in concentration and his tongue poking out the side of his mouth. *He’s not a bad bloke. He’s just a bit...*

A bit what? Meg couldn’t find the right words to finish the thought. She had a sneaking suspicion that if she found the right words, she wouldn’t much like them.

Gulping down more wine, she turned her attention to dealing with the roast potatoes that needed to go in the oven. Christmas Day had already delivered a cremated turkey, and that was enough to be going on with for the time being without allowing her mind to wander into even grimmer territory.

Those darker thoughts fluttering around her mind—dark thoughts about Ian and what exactly she was doing with the man—would just have to wait until some other time.

“THANKS FOR THE FUNNY PYJAMAS, Mum. Everyone here thinks they’re a right laugh.”

Meg cradled the phone at her ear while she filled the kettle at the sink. “I’m glad you like them, sweetheart. I knew you still had a soft spot for *Iron Man*.”

Her son, Jamie, laughed down the line. The bright sound filled Meg with joy—hearing her son laugh always did that—but brought a little stab of pain, too. She missed him terribly. It was the first Christmas they’d spent apart since he was born.

“My mate here, Evan, got a set of *He-Man* pyjamas from his parents,” Jamie said. “Everyone has started calling us the Pyjamas Nerds.”

“I’m sure they’re incredibly jealous.”

“Jealous and endlessly amused.”

Meg grinned and dropped tea bags into the pot while the kettle boiled. “How’s your Christmas Day been? You weren’t working all day, I hope?”

“We spent the morning in the computer lab. Being allowed access over the holidays is too good an opportunity not to milk for everything it’s worth.”

“My hard-working little genius,” Meg cooed.

“Knock it off,” Jamie laughed.

Meg often wondered how she’d managed to produce and raise a son as smart as Jamie. She was no slouch in the brains

department, but Jamie was off-the-charts brilliant. He'd excelled at science and maths at school and was now studying computer science at Cambridge University. The advanced academic and technical environment he now found himself in was apparently so exciting that he'd only come home to visit once since he'd gone up there from Hamblehurst last September.

When Jamie had phoned Meg a few weeks ago to tell her about a special project group he was involved with, led by one of his university tutors and which was being given privileged access to the computer labs over the Christmas break, and saying that he hoped she wouldn't mind if he stayed in Cambridge over the holidays to work with his student friends, Meg had told him to enjoy every minute of the exciting experience. Jamie had tried to explain the project to her, but all Meg grasped was that it had something to do with artificial intelligence. Beyond that, her brain zonked out, even as her son patiently outlined how the work they were doing wouldn't just help his learning and develop his skills, but might contribute to refining the techniques used in the application of artificial intelligence to the analysis of cancer treatments.

The idea that her son was not only a computer whizz but was working on projects that might one day help cure cancer filled Meg with wonder and pride. That her son willingly gave up his university holidays in order to keep working and learning only confirmed what she already knew—that her son was a very special young man.

That didn't stop her missing him, though, and wishing he was here back at home with her on Foxglove Street, instead of all the way across the country in Cambridge. Jamie might be almost nineteen and well on the way to becoming a fully grown adult, but Meg still thought of him as her little boy.

If she closed her eyes, she could still imagine him as an over-excited six-year-old, tearing around the house on Christmas morning in his tiny *Iron Man* pyjamas and playing with the *Iron Man* action figure that Santa Claus had brought him.

The memory brought a rush of love and loss and nostalgia into her heart.

I'm going to be just like Tony Stark when I grow up, Mum! Jamie had declared as he'd performed laps of the sitting room while waving his *Iron Man* figure in the air. Meg had laughed at her sweet, tiny son and his endless enthusiasm. Little had she realised he'd meant every word.

With his genius for science and computers, and his unwavering work ethic, Jamie Marshall was destined for big things out there in the world—Meg knew it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

“So, have you and your computer friends had your Christmas dinner yet?” Meg asked.

“We've ordered pizzas. One of the local takeaways is doing a special Christmas Dinner Feast topping. Turkey, ham, cranberry sauce, the works. They should arrive any minute.”

“That sounds very nutritious.”

Jamie snorted out a laugh. “Have you had your dinner yet?”

“We ate an hour or so ago.”

“Did Ian enjoy your signature turkey gravy?”

“Uh, yeah, he seemed to like it.”

Meg didn't want to tell her son about the turkey disaster, or Ian's role in contributing to it. Regaling Jamie with her depressing tale of Christmas culinary calamity wasn't how she wanted to spend her time talking with him today.

“Mum, is everything okay?” Jamie asked, obviously more than capable of picking up on her tone, no matter how much she tried to mask it.

“Everything's fine. I'm just full up after dinner, that's all.”

In the end, they'd only eaten a little of the ruined turkey. The meat was just too over-cooked to enjoy. The stuffing and pigs-in-blankets had been more than enough once piled onto plates alongside the roasted potatoes and veggies, and a splash

of instant gravy granules had done the business. It hadn't been the Christmas dinner she'd envisaged, but at least they'd been fed.

Meg eyed the blackened turkey carcass still perched in the tin on the counter. She couldn't quite bring herself to chuck it out into the food bin just yet. The ruined food made her feel guilty about the avoidable waste.

"What are you up to for the rest of the day?" Jamie asked. "Are you and Ian going out to the pub or anything?"

"No, I expect we'll just veg-out on the sofa and watch telly."

Meg peered through the kitchen door to the sitting room, where Ian was snoring on the sofa with the *TV Times* Christmas special edition open on his lap. Meg had suggested popping out to the pub for a festive drink, but Ian hadn't seemed keen.

"I missed you today, Mum. You do know that, don't you?"

Jamie's tender voice made Meg smile. "I missed you, too. I'm so glad you've got this fantastic opportunity to do extra work over the holidays, but that doesn't mean I don't wish you weren't here tucked up with me at home."

"This might sound sappy, but I missed our Christmas Day afternoon walk together."

"Me, too."

Every year, once the presents were opened and the Christmas turkey dinner was eaten, they'd gone out for a bracing walk around Hamblehurst—down the high street and then around past the church and then a loop through the market square and along the winding cobbled lanes towards Peartree Park, where they'd walk around the duck pond before heading home. Enjoying the fresh air, no matter the weather, and taking in the festive features of the quaint Hampshire town they called home was one of their many Christmas traditions.

Along with hanging their Christmas stockings, devouring their first mince pies of the season, and toasting the turkey before it went into the oven.

Meg felt a lump in her throat at not having her lovely son here this year to enjoy those traditions with.

“Did you go out for a walk with Ian instead?” Jamie asked.

“No, but I popped round to visit your Auntie Bridget earlier and got my fresh air then. She plied me with sherry and told me to wish you a happy Christmas.”

Jamie laughed. “She sent me a gift in the post. Woolly socks and a cheque. I didn’t realise cheques were still a thing.”

“Don’t forget to thank her.”

“I already sent her a text earlier today.”

Of course he had. Her son knew his manners.

There was a beat of silence on the line before Jamie spoke again. “Are you going to visit Dad tomorrow?”

Meg let out a soft sigh. “Yes, tomorrow, as always.”

“Sorry I won’t be there.”

“Don’t be sorry. There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

Meg heard the sound of a doorbell ringing down the line and someone calling Jamie’s name.

“Our Christmas feast pizzas are here,” Jamie said. “I’d better and go and grab my share before everyone else here eats the lot.”

“Enjoy your dinner. And merry Christmas, kiddo.”

“Merry Christmas, Mum.”

They hung up. The kitchen felt suddenly quiet and empty. From the sitting room, Meg heard the television murmuring along with the sounds of Ian’s snoring. The kettle had finished boiling while she was on the phone and she filled the pot, stirring the tea around and around.

She glanced out the window to where darkness was already falling across the back garden. Christmas Day usually rushed by so fast, leaving Meg desperate to cling on to each lovely moment spent with her son.

This year, though, she couldn't wait for the festive season to be over.

This year, she just didn't seem to have the heart for it.

“CAN you believe another Christmas has come and gone? I can’t get my head around it, Johnny. I must be getting old.”

The cemetery was quiet and still beneath a slate grey sky. The sun was obscured behind thick clouds, and although it was almost ten in the morning, the day was dark and gloomy. Meg was the only person in the cemetery as far as she could tell. High up in a nearby tree, a crow cawed, its throaty call mournful in the damp December air.

Meg reached out and ran her fingers over the words etched on the headstone before her. *Johnny Marshall 1986-2005. Beloved husband, father, son. Missed forever.*

“You’ve been gone now almost as long as Jamie’s been alive,” Meg whispered. “It feels impossible, but it’s true.”

She looked down at the small bouquet of white roses in her other hand, the petals soft and creamy against the deep green leaves. After unwrapping the flowers from the cellophane, she arranged them inside the metal vase beside the headstone.

Every year since Johnny’s death, she’d come here on Boxing Day to lay flowers. In the early years, there had been many tears shed with each Christmas visit. Now, there was just the dull ache of loss and the flickering memories of the man she’d loved.

She stood quietly for a moment, remembering Johnny’s smile, the wry twinkle in his eyes, the soft brush of his fingers across her cheek. He’d remain forever the handsome nineteen-

year-old he'd been when he died, young and vibrant and filled with energy.

They'd thought they had a lifetime ahead of them. And then life had played its cruel trick.

"Jamie stayed at university for Christmas," Meg said after arranging the white roses in the metal vase. "He's working on this amazing computer project and sounds like he's having the time of his life. You'd be so proud of him, Johnny."

I'm more proud of him than you could ever imagine.

Meg heard the words inside her head, and heard Johnny's voice, too. She knew it was just her imagination and knew it was just wishful thinking that she could still have a conversation with the love of her life. But it brought such comfort to imagine him talking to her, even after all these years.

Of all the things she'd mourned losing in the years since Johnny's death, talking to her husband about their son was the one that still cut like a knife.

And so whenever she came here to the cemetery, she allowed herself the indulgence of a conversation with a man who'd been gone for almost two decades, and allowed herself to pretend he was responding to her updates about their son who she'd raised alone.

"I sent him *Iron Man* pyjamas as a silly Christmas joke present," Meg continued. "Just something to open on Christmas morning, along with the usual chocolates and Lynx gift set and whatnot. He and his brainy university friends ordered a Christmas dinner pizza yesterday. I can only imagine what that must've tasted like. Actually, I bet it was delicious."

Sounds like exactly what a bunch of nineteen-year-old students should be eating.

"Yeah, you're right. I'm so glad he's making the most of things at uni. I miss him like mad, but he deserves to have a brilliant time there. I'm sure he won't miss me smothering him at home."

You never smothered him. You loved him. Big difference.

“Maybe.”

The crow cawed again up in the tree. From somewhere across the cemetery, another crow replied. Meg watched the crow lift up from the branch, its black wings beating and carrying it off in search of its companion. She followed the path of its flight until it swooped down into the distant tree beside its waiting feathered friend.

The two crows shuffled closer on the bare branch until their bodies were pressed together. The gesture of companionship touched her, and yet made her feel utterly alone, too.

“Damn it, Johnny, I wish you were here.”

I'm sorry.

Meg closed her eyes against the tears that were threatening. People said time was a healer, but that was only partly true. Even now, so many years since Johnny's death, Meg still felt his absence like a dull pain inside her heart, a pain that never, ever went away.

They'd met when they were only seventeen. They attended different sixth form colleges and met through mutual friends. Meg had been madly attracted to the tall, handsome boy with sparkling blue eyes and cheeky smile. From their first date, they'd been inseparable.

Inseparable and unable to keep their hands off each other.

When Meg realised she was pregnant just two weeks before her eighteenth birthday, she thought her life was over. She'd been terrified of her parents' fury, terrified of what it meant for her future, terrified of the choice she'd have to make, terrified of what Johnny would say when she finally plucked up the courage to tell him.

She'd imagined him shrugging her off, telling her to get rid of the problem, telling her he wanted nothing to do with it. After knowing him for only a few months, she couldn't be sure of his reaction, given the circumstances.

But when she'd told him the news, her voice and hands shaking, Johnny's eyes had lit up with pure joy. He'd pulled

her into his arms and spun her around and around until she was dizzy, telling her this was the best news he'd ever heard in his life.

Until her dying day, she'd never forget the look in Johnny's eyes when he'd yelled, "I'm going to be a father!"

Never in a million years had she imagined such a reaction from an eighteen-year-old lad. But Johnny Marshall was no ordinary boy. At the moment Meg realised that truth, she fell in love with him and with the baby she was carrying inside her.

Johnny asked her to marry him. They might only be eighteen, he said, but he wanted the baby they'd made, wanted Meg to be his wife, wanted them to become a family and live happily ever after. With the cash he earned at his part-time factory job, which he did outside of college hours, he bought an engagement ring with a diamond so tiny it was barely even there, but no gemstone could have been more beautiful to Meg.

They married on a bright November day at the registry office, where Meg wore a soft pink dress and flowers in her hair, and Johnny wore a suit and tie and a smile so bright it was almost too dazzling to look at. Their stunned parents watched on, alarmed and devastated and excited in equal measure at this staggering turn of events in their children's lives and dumbfounded at their inability to get either of them to see sense.

Any lingering ill-will towards the headstrong young couple evaporated on a warm April night when Meg delivered her son into the world after fifteen hours of exhausting labour. When the tiny bundle of baby uttered his first cry as he was placed in Meg's arms, she felt a rush of love that filled her entire world.

"Our son," Johnny murmured, pressing a kiss against Meg's cheek as she cradled their child. "Our beautiful, perfect son."

The grandparents gathered in the waiting room melted the moment they met the seven pound and three ounce baby boy named James Carter Marshall. Unplanned pregnancy and a

teenage wedding weren't what any of the grandparents had expected, but the unexpected had brought a beautiful baby boy into their lives and for that they declared themselves forever grateful.

For six blissful months, Meg and Johnny and baby Jamie led a wonderful life. They were young and strong and Johnny convinced her that they could do anything they put their minds to—get married, have a baby, find jobs, pay their way, build a family. Becoming a mother so young had never been part of Meg's plan, but not for one second did she regret the path her life had taken.

She was madly in love with her husband and her son. They might struggle to make ends meet, but who didn't? They'd find a way together. If Johnny had taught her anything in the year and a half they'd been a couple, it was that there was nothing he couldn't do if he put his mind to it, including providing for his wife and child.

And then one terrible night, Johnny died.

Even now, so many years later, Meg still struggled to think of that awful night when her world was ripped in two.

Johnny was driving a van when it happened, working for a delivery company, and had taken overtime in the evening to earn a little extra money. It was late October and he told Meg that with Christmas approaching he wanted to make sure they could buy lots of lovely presents for their son and spoil him the way he deserved to be spoiled.

Meg had tried to remind him that their tiny baby wouldn't have the first clue it was Christmas, but the argument didn't wash with Johnny. It was their son's first Christmas. It was special and he would make sure little Jamie didn't want for a single treat or present.

And so he'd taken the overtime and gone out in the delivery van. There was stormy weather that night, the wind howling and the rain lashing. On a winding back road eight miles north of Hamblehurst, a lorry took a corner much too fast and too sharp and the driver lost control. His vehicle veered into the opposite lane and straight into Johnny's van.

In the head-on collision, Johnny hadn't stood a chance in the much smaller vehicle. He died instantly.

Later, much later, Meg remembered a bolt of fear that had ripped through her at precisely the moment when the police said the accident had happened. She'd been washing dishes at the sink after spending most of the evening comforting baby Jamie, who was fussy that night and unable to settle. When that cold ripple of anxiety had rolled through her, Meg had rushed to check on her son, worried that her mother's intuition was trying to tell her he was coming down with something, but when she reached his cot, she discovered he'd drifted off to sleep at last. Meg had been relieved and chalked up her irrational worry to the fact that she was simply a tired new mother at the end of a very long day with a grumbling and out-of-sorts baby.

The knock on the door later that night and the sight of the two police officers standing on her doorstep had brought back that icy fear in an instant... and then her world had shattered.

Now, standing beside her husband's grave, Meg let out a soft sigh. That night was so long ago, but every terrible minute of it was still clear inside her mind. Although the trauma and shock of losing Johnny had long since melted away, that didn't mean that the memories of that heart-breaking time didn't still cause pain.

Meg's life had changed forever on the night Johnny died. Without him by her side, she'd come close to falling apart, and her grief had been all-consuming. She'd faced questions she'd never imagined facing. How could she raise her tiny son without her husband to help her? How could she face the future without the man who'd brought her such joy? How could she survive without Johnny's irrepressible energy and enthusiasm to keep her going?

Johnny had always said that things would work out for the best in life and Meg had believed him. Yet, look at what had happened.

With a baby son to care for, there hadn't been much time to shake her fist at the heavens and scream about how none of

this was fair. She had no choice but to get on with the business of living. Her own parents were there to lend a hand, and so too were Johnny's parents, although her in-laws were so devastated by the loss of their son that Meg didn't like to ask them for too much help.

What mattered was looking after her baby and making ends meet. An insurance pay-out from Johnny's employer helped keep the wolf from the door and Meg's part-time office work meant she could cover the basics, if not much more than that.

She focused on one day at a time because that was all she was capable of.

Time passed. Weeks passed, then months, then years. Baby Jamie grew into a toddler and then started nursery and one day Meg found herself outside the gates at Hamblehurst primary school, waving her excited little boy off for his first day at school.

She'd cried that night in bed, cried like she hadn't cried in a long time, wishing that Johnny had been there to see his son rush off to start school. He would've been so happy to see their baby grow into a sweet little boy who looked so proud in his smart school uniform.

Look at what we did, Meg! she imagined him saying. *Look at our amazing son!*

With Jamie at school, Meg had gone into full-time office work. She had a knack for administration and keeping order and excelled at coordination and project management. When she landed a cushy job at the local council office, she thanked her lucky stars. The job was secure and well-paid, and it soon became obvious that no one else there had her skill for keeping a complicated administrative machine running smoothly. The managers she'd worked for during her time there were a mixed bunch, and her current boss left a lot to be desired in the competence department, but Meg made her peace with that.

The comfortable and secure job suited her just fine. It let her concentrate on what really mattered—raising her son and navigating life as a lone parent.

Not a single day passed during which Meg didn't wish that Jamie had known his father. They were so alike in so many ways—good-natured, enthusiastic, optimistic, hard-working, kind. Johnny would've been an amazing father to Jamie as their son grew, and Meg liked to imagine all the things they might have got up to together. Johnny would've taken Jamie to football practice, and helped him with his school work, and encouraged him in his various hobbies. Meg had done all those things too, of course, but Johnny would have brought his irrepressible, natural enthusiasm and joy to every activity, an enthusiasm unique to Johnny and Johnny alone.

When Jamie's academic abilities became obvious at school, Meg devoted herself to doing everything in her power to make sure her son could go to university, if that's what he chose to do. She scrimped and saved to make sure there would be enough money to help pay for the costs, managing her household budget with endless care and avoiding spending a single penny she didn't have to.

Now, Jamie had earned himself a place at one of the best universities in the world, along with a scholarship to help with some of the costs, which meant that the savings pot Meg had grown during Jamie's teenage years would go a little further during his time there. When Meg travelled with him to Cambridge last autumn to help him move up there, she'd almost burst with pride to imagine the new life he was about to start. And when she'd waved goodbye at the station before catching the train back to Hamblehurst, her heart had been full of love for her boy and what he'd achieved.

Jamie was beginning new adventures in the world on his own terms and under his own steam. Meg had done her job as a mother and raised her son as best she could. She had no doubt in her mind that Jamie had a wonderful life ahead of him.

Lost in her memories and thoughts, Meg now blinked and looked again at Johnny's headstone. Time had aged the engraving and the Christmas snowfall lay drifted across the top.

“Christmas day dinner was a bit of a disaster,” Meg said. “Not anywhere near my usual standard. The turkey got burned to a crisp. And with Jamie staying on at university for the holidays, well, it just didn’t much feel like Christmas, if I’m being honest.”

It’s your first Christmas without him at home. It was bound to be strange.

“That’s true. Maybe I overcompensated and tried to pretend it wasn’t as hard as it was. And I probably made a mistake in inviting Ian round to share Christmas dinner with me.”

You’re not so keen on this bloke, are you?

Meg sighed. “No, I don’t think I am. He’s harmless enough, and he’s a decent chap, all things considered, but... he’s not you, Johnny. No one’s ever come close to being you.”

The voice inside her head had no response to this. Meg began to feel the icy chill of the freezing cemetery drilling into her bones. In the distance, the two crows in the tree took flight and flew off together, out of sight.

“Merry Christmas, Johnny,” Meg whispered, touching her fingers to her lips and laying a kiss on the headstone.

Merry Christmas, sweetheart.

She heard the words inside her head, but realised she suddenly couldn’t hear Johnny’s voice saying them, and suddenly couldn’t remember what he sounded like, either. Despite imagining this whole conversation she’d been having with him since she arrived at the cemetery, the pitch and timbre of his voice was all at once lost to her and the realisation sent a dull ache through her heart.

Meg huddled into her coat and turned for the cemetery gates. It was time to go home.

LIFE HAD TAUGHT Meg many things during the past twenty years. Some of those lessons had been harsher than others, but she'd learned from them all. The biggest thing she'd learned was that when you had to do something difficult, there was no point in putting it off. Better to get it over and done with than have it linger and leave you feeling anxious.

A difficult decision waited for Meg as Christmas passed and the New Year approached. Although the more she thought about it, it wasn't a difficult decision exactly, because she'd already made the actual *decision*. What she hadn't done yet was put that decision into *action*.

Meg had decided that it was time to break things off with Ian. In her heart, she knew that decision was the right one. Now, she just had to tell him.

That was the hard part.

"You're not doing yourself any favours putting it off, Meg," said her Foxglove Street neighbour and friend, Sophie, from her perch at Meg's kitchen table. "If you don't want to see this Ian bloke any more, you might as well tell him sooner rather than later."

"I know," Meg replied as she sliced cake at the kitchen counter. "But it's a bit horrible to break up with someone at Christmas, don't you think?"

Sophie sipped her coffee and threw Meg a challenging look. "Christmas has been and gone."

“But we’ve not had New Year’s yet, have we? I don’t want to ruin the poor fella’s holiday season by dumping him two days before the new year. What sort of person does that?”

“A person who’s sensible and doesn’t want to beat around the bush, that’s who.”

Meg laughed. She’d known Sophie’s advice would be typically brisk and straight-to-the-point, which is why she’d asked her round for coffee and cake. But she hadn’t expected her friend to be quite so brutal in her assessment of the situation.

“I was thinking I’d wait until a few days into the new year,” Meg said. “That way, the festive season will be completely behind us and I won’t feel like I’m ruining the holidays for him.”

“Is this Ian bloke madly in love with you?”

Meg blinked at the surprising question as she carried the plate of sliced cake to the table. Sitting down, she sipped her coffee before answering.

“Well, no, I don’t think so,” she said. “In fact, I’m quite sure he’s not.”

“So if he’s not madly in love with you, how exactly would you be ‘ruining the season’”—Sophie made dramatic air quotes at this—“by telling him things are finished between the two of you?”

“Come on, Sophie. No one wants to get dumped during the Christmas holidays, do they?”

“And no one wants their Christmas turkey to be burnt to a cinder either, but when that’s the hand we’re dealt, we just have to get on and play it.”

It amused Meg that her friend was even more outraged about Ian’s neglect of Meg’s Christmas turkey than Meg was herself. When she’d phoned Sophie the day after Boxing Day for a quick catch-up and shared her tale of woe about the poor charred turkey, Sophie had made her thoughts more than clear.

What sort of plonker leaves the house empty when there's a turkey roasting in the oven? Sophie had demanded to know. And what exactly are you doing spending time with this idiot, anyway?

By then, Meg had already made the decision to end things with Ian, but hadn't told Sophie that at the time. When she'd invited Sophie over this afternoon and brought her up to speed, she'd expected encouragement and the unwavering support her friend always offered. She hadn't expected Sophie to push her into doing the break-up deed straight away.

"I'll feel better about it if I wait until after New Year's," Meg insisted. "It's the decent thing to do. Ian and I might not have been together for long, and it's true that we're not exactly head-over-heels for each other. But that doesn't mean I shouldn't think about his feelings before I tell him it's all over."

Sophie rolled her eyes and bit into a slice of the chocolate cake Meg had brought over to the table. "So, are you seeing him on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day?"

"We're having dinner at some restaurant Ian's booked on New Year's Eve and then coming back here to have a glass of bubbly at midnight."

"And during all this, you're just going to pretend everything's fine and dandy?"

"It's just dinner and a few drinks. It's not like I'm about to go through with a wedding when I've already decided to dump the groom."

"Well, I think you should get shot of this Ian plonker and then spend New Year's Eve round at my house. Some of the ladies from our yoga class are coming over and we're going to get sozzled."

"I think my days of getting sozzled on New Year's Eve are long gone."

Sophie gave her another eye roll. "You're only thirty-seven, Meg. You're more than up to the challenge of a good

bit of sozzling.” Her eye roll turned into an eyebrow waggle. “As well as some decent rumpy pumpy too, if you ask me.”

Meg sprayed a mouthful of coffee across the table. “*Rumpy pumpy?*”

“Yes, as in sex. I’m sure you must remember what sex is, Meg? It’s about time you started having some of it.”

“What makes you think I’m not having it with Ian?”

Sophie gave her a look. “Well, are you?”

“Well, yes, of course I am.”

Her tone obviously gave her away, because Sophie let out a cackle. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. I think I know whether I’m having sex or not.”

“And is it any good, this sex you claim to be having with this Ian chap?”

“It’s... okay.”

This prompted another cackle from Sophie. “With that resounding assessment of the man’s lovemaking skills, I’m surprised you’re breaking up with him at all.”

Meg could only laugh. Sophie had a point. The truth was that her sex life with Ian was about as exciting as the rest of her time spent in his company—in other words, not very exciting at all. When they went to bed together, there was a bit of kissing and fumbling, but it all felt perfunctory and fairly underwhelming. They only stayed over at each other’s houses once a week, sometimes not even that often. The realisation that this didn’t bother her as much as it probably should was one of the factors that had helped Meg decide that their relationship—such as it was—really ought to be put out of its misery.

She wasn’t a good fit for Ian and he wasn’t a good fit for her. They’d had a few nice dates together when they’d first met, but had since sunk into a sort of comfortably lazy catatonia.

“He’s not a bad bloke, Sophie,” Meg said. “We’re just not well-matched. And I’ve probably been unfair to him, keeping things going between us during these past few months when it was obvious we weren’t really going anywhere. The truth is, it’s been a big adjustment since Jamie left home and I’ve struggled with it.”

Sophie’s expression softened. “Of course you have. It’s not easy being an empty nester. Take it from someone who knows.”

Sophie’s only child, her daughter Lucy, had left home two years ago to start university, and as Sophie had separated from Lucy’s father years ago, she’d told Meg many times about how much her empty house had troubled her in the beginning. After their weekly yoga classes, which Meg and Sophie went to together at the sports centre, they’d chatted often about the adjustment involved. Meg hadn’t realised just how much of an adjustment it would be until those first days and weeks after Jamie left for Cambridge.

Ian was a handy distraction who’d helpfully filled a gap in her life when Jamie left home, but it was now all too obvious to her that he’d never be anything more than that. And, after the Christmas Day turkey disaster, he was more of a dangerous liability than just a simple distraction.

“Well, once you’ve done the deed and got shot of this bloke, you’ll have a whole new year ahead of you to start thinking about what’s next in your life,” Sophie said, polishing off her slice of chocolate cake.

Meg paused with her coffee mug halfway to her lips and thought about this. “You’re right.”

Sophie tilted her head. “What’s with the look on your face?”

“What do you mean?”

“You look puzzled. Stunned. Alarmed. Take your pick.”

“I don’t mean to. It’s just that, well... when you put it like that, it hits home, doesn’t it. What’s next in my life? Frankly, I have no idea.”

“Well, you ought to hurry up and *get* an idea. Jamie’s off at university now, you’ve done your job and raised him and looked after him and got him set up for a brilliant future. Your work there is done, for the most part. Sure, he’ll still be coming home now and again so you can do his disgusting laundry, but judging by the fact he stayed on campus over Christmas, it sounds to me like you’ve raised a young man who’s determined to get out there and grab life by the throat. And now it’s time for you to do the same thing.”

Meg laughed and shook her head. “That’s very inspirational, Sophie. You should become one of those life coaches who help people become their best versions of themselves.”

“I might just do that,” Sophie replied with a snort of laughter. “Although I think some of those tender types might object to my no-nonsense style.”

“Or perhaps it’s just what they’d need.”

“It’s what *you* need, Meg. Which is why I’m saying all this. Life dealt you a terrible blow all those years ago when your husband died so young and you found yourself a nineteen-year-old widow with an infant son to raise alone. And you’ve done a brilliant job. But now that Jamie’s off starting his own life, I think you ought to take a long hard look at what you want now. You’re still so young, Meg, and you’ve got years and years ahead of you.”

“What, unlike you, grandma?”

Sophie waved this off. “I’ve got a decade on you, lass. Fifty is the next big milestone on the horizon for me. But you? You haven’t even reached forty yet. What I wouldn’t give to still have forty ahead of me instead of so far behind me I can barely even remember it.”

Meg shuddered. Forty might still be a couple of years away, but she hadn’t given its looming presence much thought until now. It felt like just the other day she’d been a twenty-four-year-old young woman dressing Jamie in his uniform for his first day at school. Actually, if she thought about it, it felt

like just the other day she'd been a terrified eighteen-year-old being wheeled into the maternity unit to deliver him.

The years had rushed by.

"I'm not even thinking about turning forty yet, Sophie. Don't start frightening the life out of me."

Sophie chortled. "Sorry, love. All I meant was that you deserve time for *you* now. And that means deciding what *you* want. So, promise me you'll give it some proper thought."

"I promise."

"Good. Now, are we having more of this chocolate cake, or not? And if we are, you'd better put the kettle on for another cup of coffee."

With a laugh, Meg rose from the kitchen table to make more coffee. Sophie began chattering on about other things, this and that, bits and pieces, along with a healthy dose of local Hamblehurst gossip thrown in for good measure, and although Meg listened to every word, her mind kept straying to that startling thought Sophie had planted in her brain.

You deserve time for you now. And that means deciding what you want.

What did Meg want?

And what did it say about her that she couldn't immediately come up with a good answer?

NEW YEAR'S Eve brought fresh snowfall and the promise of plummeting temperatures to mark everyone's midnight celebrations. Meg was washing lunch dishes in the kitchen while Ian made himself comfortable through in the living room. As he was taking her out that night for a meal to mark the turning of the year, she'd insisted on making some lunch to keep them both going until later.

They'd spent the morning walking the roads and lanes around the west of Hamblehurst and admiring the snow-covered countryside. The bracing air and bright skies that had arrived once the snow clouds cleared were just the thing to start off the last day of the year. As they'd walked together in companionable silence, Meg had wondered briefly if she was doing the right thing breaking up with Ian after all. Ever since the turkey calamity, he'd seemed keen to make up for his mistake and had been quite good company on their brisk walk, even if they hadn't said much to one another.

But when they'd sat down to their sandwiches back at Meg's house and Ian had started regaling her with a tale about one of his aquarium fish and some ailment with which it was presently suffering, a tale that went on for quite some time, Meg knew there was no choice but to call things off. She almost did it there and then, too, while they tucked into their cheese and pickle sandwiches, because she feared it was the only way to stop him talking about his fish tank and the wellbeing of the various creatures that lived inside it.

Only kindness and decency stopped her blurting out the truth. She'd already decided to wait until the new year began before calling things off and so that's what she'd do. If she had to put up with Ian and his dull conversation for a few more days, then so be it.

He wasn't a bad bloke, she reminded herself yet again. He just wasn't right for her. There had to be someone out there who'd love nothing more than to talk about goldfish all day long. That person just wasn't Meg.

Once the dishes were washed, she brewed tea and carried the mugs through to the living room where she found Ian fast asleep and snoring on the sofa.

"Sorry, love," Ian said, waking up as Meg sat down next to him. "That walk this morning has tuckered me out."

Meg smiled but said nothing. They hadn't walked that far. Ian just seemed to really like his naps. She couldn't think of a single day they'd spent together when he hadn't nodded off at some point in the afternoon. Napping half the day away wasn't Meg's idea of fun, any more than discussing the technicalities of aquarium filtration maintenance was.

Yet another reason why they were so obviously unsuited for each other.

They drank their tea. The silence became suddenly awkward, with just the two of them sitting in the quiet room and slurping from their mugs. Meg picked up the remote control to turn on the television, but before she could press the button, Ian spoke.

"Meg, love, don't put the telly on. There's something I need to speak to you about."

She set aside the remote control and saw the pensive look on Ian's face. "Okay. What's up?"

For one brief moment, Meg had the horrible notion that there was something terribly wrong with Ian's health. She thought of all those naps he took and wondered suddenly if he was ill, and worried that's what he wanted to talk to her about. When he didn't say anything more, she pressed him.

“You’re not ill are you, Ian?”

“Ill?” He looked confused. “No, why would you think that?”

“Just with you napping all the time, I wondered if maybe there was something wrong.”

He blinked and then laughed. “No, I’m just a lazy old so-and so. There’s nothing wrong with my health.”

“Right, well, that’s good.”

But he kept looking at her with that anxious expression. He sat his mug of tea on the coffee table and began wringing his hands together.

In a flash, Meg realised she knew exactly what he was going to say.

“The thing is, Meg, well... I don’t think this is really working out between us. Me and you, we’re just not clicking the way we probably should. I think we should call it a day.”

Meg sat and stared, clasping her mug of tea as she attempted to process this. “You’re breaking up with me?”

“I think it’s for the best. You’re a lovely woman, Meg, don’t get me wrong. And I’m a lucky man to have such an attractive lady as yourself interested in me. You being ten years younger than me makes me feel luckier still, considering I’m no spring chicken. But the honest truth is, I just don’t feel there’s much chemistry between us.”

She continued staring and blinking, unable to believe he’d beat her to the punch. “*You’re breaking up with me?*” She knew she was repeating herself, but couldn’t seem to help it.

“Don’t take it personally, love. You’re a smashing person. But we don’t have that much in common. I like my aquarium fish and my PlayStation games and you like...” He scratched his head. “Well, I’m not sure what you like. And I suppose that’s part of the problem.”

Meg managed a nod. So much for her wanting to do the decent thing and wait until the holidays were over before letting Ian down gently. Now she’d ended up getting dumped

on New Year's Eve. She should've listened to Sophie's advice and got this break-up over and done with days ago and saved herself this complete humiliation.

"Meg, I'm sorry if I've upset you," Ian said, his expression one giant wince.

"No, you've not upset me." Meg offered as much of a smile as she could muster. "You're right, though. We rub along well enough, but as far as a romantic future is concerned? No, I don't think we're headed in that direction, either."

Ian looked relieved. "Good. Well, no, I don't mean it's good that we're breaking up. I mean, it's good we're on the same page about all this."

"Yes, I couldn't agree more."

They sat for a long moment, exchanging awkward smiles.

"Listen, I hope you don't mind if we cancel tonight's dinner plans," Ian said.

"Well, of course not. I mean, we're hardly going to go out to dinner together after we've just broken up, are we?" Meg laughed.

Some childish part of her wanted to tell him she'd been on the cusp of dumping him before he'd dumped her, but that wouldn't help anything. Mortified though she was that Ian had got in there first, she was relieved the deed was now done.

"You won't lose your restaurant deposit, will you?" Meg asked. "What with it being New Year's Eve and everything?"

"Actually, this might sound a bit cheeky, but there's a lady I know at the Hamblehurst Aquarium Club who I've taken a bit of a shine to. I happen to know she's at a loose end tonight, and, well, I thought I might see if she wanted to have dinner with me instead."

Meg could hardly believe what she was hearing. Not only had Ian dumped her, he already had someone lined up to take her place. So much for trying to spare his feelings and letting him down gently once the holidays were over.

“Um, well, I hope you have a good time,” Meg said, determined to sound magnanimous about the whole thing.

Ian got to his feet and picked up his coat from where he’d draped it over the arm of the sofa. “We can still be friends, though, I hope?”

“Of course we can,” Meg said. There was fat chance of that happening, but it was what people said to each other when relationships fizzled out like this one had.

Ian made a beeline for the door, clearly eager to leave. They managed an awkward embrace in the hallway before Ian hurried off. He waved from the gate as he stepped out onto Foxglove Street and didn’t look back as he disappeared down the road.

Meg closed the door against the freezing wintry air. Part of her was relieved Ian was gone and the break-up was over and done with. Another part of her seethed that he’d been the one doing the breaking up.

It was for the best. What did it matter who broke up with who? She should’ve done it weeks ago, and probably would have done it too, had it not been for the fact that Christmas was on the horizon and she didn’t want to spend the holidays by herself.

That was a terrible reason for staying with someone you weren’t interested in, Meg now realised. She felt a bit pathetic. It wasn’t fair on Ian to have kept him dangling just so she’d had someone to spend Christmas Day with.

Well, look where that had got her—feeling worse than ever on Christmas Day and with a ruined roast turkey to fling in the bin. Served her right, all things considered.

The idea that Ian had already set his sights on someone else left Meg feeling more stupid than ever. She wondered how long he’d liked this other woman, this similarly minded aquarium fanatic who he was no doubt already inviting out for New Year’s Eve dinner while she found herself alone.

Yes, that served her right, too.

The last day of the year suddenly stretched out before her, entirely empty of plans. Although she was relieved not to be greeting the new year with Ian, she couldn't help wondering how she'd spend the time instead.

She thought of the invitation Sophie had extended the other day, to spend the evening at her house and in the company of some of the other ladies they knew from their yoga class at the sports centre. Meg imagined the copious amounts of wine that would be drunk, the laughter and hilarity, the chatter and conversation. It would do her good to join the party and have a good time.

But Meg felt suddenly deflated and out of sorts. She thought she'd feel better once the break-up with Ian was behind her, but the circumstances now left her feeling all at sea. Perhaps she'd feel in the mood to join the yoga ladies later once the party was actually underway—it was still only the middle of the afternoon, after all—but right now she just wanted...

...actually, she had no idea what she wanted.

As she cleared the tea mugs from the coffee table, something Ian had said while he'd been in the process of dumping her replayed inside her head. He'd talked about how they didn't seem to have much in common, talked about how he liked his aquarium hobby and playing his PlayStation, and had then tried to contrast these pursuits with things that Meg liked, but had come up short.

I'm not sure what you like, Ian had said. And I suppose that's part of the problem.

Had she really been a mysterious void, as far as Ian was concerned? Hadn't he understood a little more about the things that interested her by the time they'd broken up? After all, she'd chatted often enough about...

Meg cast her mind back, trying to remember occasions when she'd talked to Ian about the things that interested her in life, about her hobbies, her passions.

She remembered talking often about her son, of course. Jamie was the light of her life, her pride and joy, her one great triumph. She'd regaled Ian with many a tale about how clever Jamie was, how hard-working, how proud she was that he was now off studying at Cambridge, and how she couldn't wait to see what he did with his life.

Meg had talked about Jamie, and Ian had talked about his children, too. Parents boasted about their children, that's how it worked.

But once they'd stopped chatting about their offspring, what had they talked about then?

Well, Ian had talked about his aquarium, of course. And his favourite PlayStation games, and the various clubs and forums he hung out in, both in person and online, where he talked about these hobbies of his.

What had Meg talked about by way of reciprocation? She couldn't remember a single thing she might have mentioned, beyond an occasional word about the yoga class she took at the sports centre.

And that's when it dawned on her—she *had* no passions or interests to talk about.

None.

The realisation hit her like a slap across the face.

As a mother, she was naturally happy and eager to talk about her brilliant son. Considering the intelligent, kind, funny, and generally wonderful human being she'd managed to raise, how could she not talk about him to anyone who was willing to listen?

And like most people, she had plenty to say about her job. The endless bureaucratic shenanigans at the council office where she worked made for amusing conversational fodder. Being a senior administrator might not have been her life's dream as far as careers were concerned, but it was still a tough job with a lot of responsibility and she'd had to develop a multitude of skills in tactful communication and organisational ability in order to handle the work that was thrown at her. She

might not be *passionate* about the work, but she *liked* it well enough.

Perhaps she ought to have talked more about her yoga class at the sports centre? But what was there to say, really? One evening a week, she attempted to bend herself into a series of improbable postures dreamt up by some deranged masochist, all the while huffing and puffing and sweating along with the other women in the class and giggling at the sight of dozens of middle-aged female buttocks being thrust up into the air like some grim perverted offering to the gods.

So, it was little wonder she didn't talk about her yoga class.

And as that was the be-all and end-all of her extra-curricular activities, Meg realised that might explain why Ian hadn't really understood anything about her passions and interests.

Meg didn't understand anything about her passions and interests, either.

Well, it's not as if she had endless amounts of time on her hands for hobbies. For the past nineteen years, she'd been a widowed, single mother. She'd raised a child from infancy all by herself, had to juggle work and parenthood, and had to balance the household budget on only one income. Her one priority was looking after her son and making sure he was loved and cared for.

Outside of single parenthood and work, there hadn't been time for anything else. There hadn't even been time for romance until Jamie was well into his teenage years. Meg hadn't been interested in anything like that for a long, long time after Johnny's death, anyway.

When she had finally begun dating again, no man had ever turned her head the way Johnny had.

No man had even come close.

And now she'd just waved goodbye to another man who'd barely created a blip on her radar.

Meg let out a soft sigh and sank into the sofa as she thought about all this.

Her son had left home and was happily living his own life. She was on her own from this point forward. What did she want now from life? What did she want to do? Who did she want to be? What did she want to be interested in and passionate about?

Now that things were over with Ian, and those unwitting comments he'd made were still slithering around in her brain, Meg wondered if it was time to start thinking about those questions.

And finding some answers, too.

MEG BLINKED AWAKE from where she'd dozed off on the sofa and glanced at the time. It was just after midnight. On the television in the corner of the living room, the New Year's Eve celebrations being broadcast live from London showed fireworks and crowds of revellers and Big Ben ringing in another year. Outside her window, the fireworks her neighbours were letting off sounded louder still.

That's what had woken her, Meg realised—the sounds of cheering and fireworks and celebrations out on Foxglove Street as the residents welcomed a new year.

Meg picked up her glass from the coffee table and raised it in a toast to the television. The prosecco she'd poured an hour ago might be a bit flat now, but it would do the trick.

“Happy New Year to me,” she said and glugged down the flat wine.

In the end, she'd decided against the party happening further down Foxglove Street at her friend Sophie's house. She just wasn't in the mood for it, and there was nothing wrong with staying at home and welcoming the arrival of a new year while snuggled up in her pyjamas.

Plus, if she went to Sophie's party, she'd end up having far more wine than was good for her while enjoying the company of the excitable yoga class women, and then she'd just spend New Year's Day loping around feeling hungover and terrible.

She wanted to start the new year off the way she meant to go on—feeling bright and energetic and ready to grab life by

the scruff of the neck. After the break-up with Ian and the startling realisation that she hadn't a clue what she wanted to do next in life now that her son was off at university, she figured it made sense to have her wits about her on January the first.

How could you come up with a fantastic plan for the rest of your life if you were clutching your head and wishing you hadn't downed so much prosecco while screeching out the lyrics to *Auld Lang Syne*?

You couldn't. Well, Meg couldn't. That much she did know.

So, she'd settled for a cosy night at home with the television and her pyjamas and mugs of tea until it was time for the obligatory midnight toast. She just hadn't expected to fall asleep before the new year's bells actually started ringing.

To think she'd silently scolded Ian earlier that day for falling asleep in the middle of the afternoon. She couldn't even make it to midnight on New Year's Eve without dozing off. Well, maybe if the programmes being offered on the television weren't so awful, she might have found it easier to stay awake.

And now she was making excuses for being a sad old mare who'd decided to spend New Year's by herself and had proceeded to fall asleep before the midnight bells rang out because she was bored senseless.

No matter. She was awake now. Awake and welcoming the new year while still nice and sober.

"Happy New Year," she said again to herself and finished the last of the flat prosecco as the revellers on the television continued hugging and cheering and watching in awestruck wonder as the fireworks display lit up the London sky over the Thames.

Meg's phone pinged. When she glanced at the screen, she saw a message from Jamie.

Happy New Year, Mum!

Meg smiled at her thoughtful son, taking the time to send a text when she knew he was out celebrating with his brainy

computer friends from university. They'd gone to a party in a local Cambridge pub favoured by the students from his department, and she knew he'd been excited about the night's celebrations.

She tapped out a reply. *Happy New Year to you too, darling!*

A few moments later, a reply pinged through. *I'll phone you tomorrow. Too noisy here in the pub for a phone call and if I go outside someone will nick my seat at the table xx*

Meg laughed and sent another reply, telling him that was fine and that he should go and enjoy himself.

The London firework display on the television finally came to an end, and the show switched over to a live music performance from some band Meg had never heard of. She turned off the television and carried her empty glass through to the dishwasher, then flicked on the kettle.

With a mug of tea in hand, she returned to the living room. Having dosed off waiting for midnight to arrive, she wasn't quite ready for bed just yet. She scrolled through her phone, checked out a few news sites, jumped onto social media and liked some new year celebration posts from friends.

The house seemed awfully quiet. Meg wondered if she'd made a mistake by not popping round to Sophie's house for the party. Wasn't it a bit sad and pathetic to greet the new year all by yourself?

No, she reminded herself, it wasn't sad at all. And once the fireworks stopped exploding outside her house, it would just feel like any other night of the year again.

Meg walked to the window and peered out to the street. Across the road, the couple who lived in the terraced house opposite were in their front garden with their two small children, letting off the last of their fireworks. The two kids, bundled up in hats and coats, cheered as the final firework shot up into the air, and then they all retreated indoors.

A few houses further down the street, Meg spied fireworks still blasting up into the night sky from a back garden,

whizzing and banging and prompting cheering and whooping from whoever it was who lived there.

A small group of party-goers wearing sparkly hats and clutching bottles of booze staggered down the street, laughing and singing before stepping through a garden gate further along and knocking on the door. When the door opened, loud music drifted out and there were cheers of welcome as the party-goers were waved inside.

Meg watched a few more people coming and going up and down Foxglove Street, perhaps on their way to join parties or coming home from parties, kicking up snow from the pavement with every step. She heard the sounds of conversation and well-wishing and happy merriment as everyone enjoyed the arrival of the new year amongst friends and family.

As Meg sipped the last of her tea, still at the window, there was a lull in the comings and goings. Although the sounds of parties and music still drifted outside, the world seemed suddenly still.

From further along the street, Meg saw a flash of movement between parked cars. A fox appeared, scurrying down the middle of the road, its red fur a flash of colour against the white snow.

The sight of the beautiful creature, so sleek and lovely and surprising as it trotted along the street, brought a bright bolt of joy into Meg's heart. Stepping closer to the window, she tweaked the blinds for a better look.

The fox must have noticed the movement at the window because it stopped dead in its tracks in the middle of the road and peered in her direction. For one long, magical moment, Meg looked straight at the fox and the fox looked straight back at her.

And then, in a move that startled Meg as much as it delighted her, the fox veered closer to her front garden and paused on the pavement outside her gate, looking up at her with an expression on its sweet foxy face that Meg could only describe as amused curiosity.

The moment felt filled with wonder and grace.

A flood of car headlights washed across the road as a vehicle approached and the moment was over. The fox ducked its head and darted closer to the fence line along the front gardens that bordered the pavements, and was soon swallowed by shadows as it disappeared from sight.

Meg closed the blinds and stepped away from the window. It might only have lasted for a few seconds, but that lovely moment of strange connection she'd shared with the beautiful fox as it scurried along the street on its nocturnal adventures had made her New Year's celebrations more wonderful than she could ever have hoped for.

THE GLISTENING SNOW that had brought a white Christmas and New Year to Hamblehurst vanished in a thaw that left behind slushy pavements, grey skies, and the January blues.

Back at work, Meg found plenty to keep her occupied. The powers that be at the local council had announced yet another internal reorganisation in the name of efficiency and effectiveness. Having endured several of these reorganisations already in the course of the fourteen years she'd worked there, Meg knew the only likely outcome of the process would be confusion, irritation, and even less efficiency and effectiveness than there had been before.

But as the senior managers and civil servants had made up their minds many months ago and were committed to sallying forth with their doomed project, Meg had no choice but to go along with it and wrestle with the fresh workload that arrived in its wake.

Her direct manager, Bill Hilburn, a peevish man in his early sixties who knew a lot less about local government than he seemed to think he did, was spearheading the new reorganisation, and with the work now underway he spent most of his time ping-ponging endless volumes of 'action points' into Meg's inbox while he wasted his days drafting lengthy update memos for the local councillors to keep them abreast of progress, such as it was.

Meg applied herself to the mountain of work that crossed her desk as January got underway. Her years spent working

inside the labyrinthine mystery that constituted the local council gave her the insight she needed to sort the wheat from the chaff when it came to the ‘action points’ Bill Hilburn delegated to her, but her days were still filled with more paperwork and administrative wrangling than a person could shake a stick at.

She also couldn’t escape the feeling of déjà vu that gripped her, and the sense that as far as this new work project was concerned, she’d already done it all before.

“We *have* already done it all before, of course!” Meg told her friend Sophie one evening in mid-January as they wrestled with the downward dog pose at yoga class in the sports centre. “The head honchos seem to think that every problem can be solved by just reorganising how the council operates, when what we really need is a bit more cash to spend on the things that actually matter to people. Putting us through yet another reorganisation is like rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*.”

“You’ll get through it,” Sophie said with a wheeze as she collapsed to the mat once downward dog had been put out of its misery and the instructor had declared the class finished for the week. “And considering how much you know about how everything works over there at our useless council, maybe it’s time you piped up and started telling them where they’re going wrong.”

“Oh, I’ve made that mistake in the past,” Meg scoffed. “All that happened was that I ended up being made to chair some dull committee charged with reorganising the internal filing system while being given no resources with which to do it. No, I won’t make that mistake again.”

“So, what will you do?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? I’ll keep dealing with these ridiculous action points Bill Hilburn insists on sending to me because he hasn’t a clue how to do anything useful, and eventually we’ll get to the end of the reorganisation process and everyone will declare it a huge success, at least until they

realise things *still* don't work properly and they decide to go through the whole thing yet again."

"Sounds like fun."

Meg laughed as she swigged from her water bottle. "I might sound like I'm whining, and I *am* whining, but the truth is, endlessly pointless paperwork aside, it's a decent job and I'm lucky to have it. I'm pretty good at it, too. God knows how Bill Hilburn would survive there if I wasn't around to keep his head above the water."

"If you're the genius behind his throne, perhaps it's time for a palace coup?"

They were all packing up their yoga mats now, and as Meg carted her mat to the stack in the storage cupboard, she gave her friend a puzzled look. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it?" Sophie said with an airy wave of her hand. "*You* should be doing your boss's job. You've complained about Bill Hilburn often enough over the years for it to be obvious the man is clueless. So, you should shunt him out and take his place."

Meg let out a startled laugh. "And how exactly would I do that?"

"I don't know. You could sabotage him while also sucking up to his boss, so that when they get rid of him for being incompetent, you'd be in a prime position to take his place."

"I had no idea you had such an evil streak, Sophie."

Sophie shrugged. "It's a nasty old world out there, Meg. It's every woman for herself. Dog eat dog. Kill or be killed."

"Okay, settle down," Meg laughed. "This is Hamblehurst district council we're talking about here, not the Sicilian Mafia."

"I still think that after all those years working there, you should be a manager by now, instead of just an administrative pencil-pusher."

"Thanks very much."

“You know what I mean! You’re already doing a manager’s job, for all intents and purposes, and just not getting paid for it. Meanwhile, this Bill bloke is lounging around doing sod all useful and dumping all the hard work onto you. That’s basically the gist of what you’ve told me. So, why do you put up with it?”

It was a good question. Why did she put up with it?

She’d put up with it in the past for the reasons she’d just explained to Sophie—it was a good job, she was good at *doing* the job, and although it had its fair share of moments, her council job had been secure and flexible enough to help her raise her son as a single mother and just about keep the wolf from the door.

But ever since her strange New Year’s Eve epiphany when she’d found herself questioning who she was now and what she was doing with her life, Meg wondered if those reasons for sticking with her job were still good ones.

“Actually, I’ve been wondering if it’s time for a change,” Meg said as they left the exercise studio and walked along the corridor towards the sports centre exit. “Now that Jamie’s off at university, it feels like it’s time to think about things and figure out what I’m doing next.”

“Good for you,” Sophie said, obviously pleased with this. “What have you come up with so far?”

“That it’s time to think about things and figure out what I’m doing next.”

Sophie rolled her eyes. “You just said that! I meant, what progress have you made?”

“None, not yet. I’ve been so busy at work since we started back after the Christmas break, I’ve barely had a chance to draw breath.”

“Well, hurry up and get your thinking cap on. If you’re going to make a move for your useless boss’s job, we’ll have to come up with a stratagem.”

“We?” Meg asked, amused.

“Yes, obviously you’ll need help to formulate a cunning plan to unseat this lazy cretin from his current position. You’re too nice for your own good, Meg, and I know you won’t be able to dream up a decent scheme on your own. I’ll help you.”

“Thanks for the offer, I think,” Meg laughed. “But whatever I decide to do next, I don’t think it will involve shoving my boss out of his job so I can have it.”

Sophie looked disappointed. “That’s a pity. If you change your mind and decide you need my help after all, you know where to find me.”

“Yes, I do—in your lair, twirling your moustache and cackling villainously.”

“I’m very good at both those things, as it happens.”

Meg laughed and shook her head in amusement. They were in the car park now. Sophie clicked her key to unlock her car.

“Come on, let’s stop off at the ice cream parlour on the high street for a hot chocolate fudge sundae,” Sophie said. “I need to get my energy levels back up after all that silly yoga.”

“Sounds good to me. Although if we stuff our faces with an ice cream sundae, doesn’t that wipe out all the good from the yoga we just suffered through?”

Sophie brushed this off. “It’s winter and it’s cold, dark, and miserable. We need all the comforts we can get.”

Meg liked this reasoning, and as she liked the ice cream sundaes they served at the Sugar Rush treats parlour on the high street even more, she hopped into the passenger’s seat of her friend’s car and prepared for some gluttonous indulgence.

* * *

An hour later, Meg unlocked her front door and dumped her yoga bag in the hallway. Her stomach felt full and heavy and like it might burst the elastic waistband on her stretchy leggings at any moment.

She’d eaten more than her fair share of the hot chocolate fudge sundae at the ice cream parlour, and it hadn’t helped that

Sophie had insisted on ordering an extra-large serving for them to share. The dessert had been fantastic—sweet and creamy and rich—but Meg now accepted she ought to have stopped eating long before she did.

She'd be rolling around on the sofa for the rest of the evening, clutching her guts and praying for mercy. Sophie really was a bad influence, she decided with a wry grin as she kicked off her trainers. Between hatching plans to dispatch Meg's boss and talking her into devouring that enormous calorie-laden dessert, her older friend seemed determined to lead her astray.

Meg poured a glass of water and carried it to the living room. As she flicked through the television channels, she thought about what she'd talked to Sophie about.

Was a new job the shake-up she'd hoped for when she'd started wondering about her life at the start of the new year? Meg wasn't sure. She might feel irritation about the lunacy of the district council's pointless and endless reorganisations, but she also felt sure that her job wasn't the main reason for her discontent.

When she'd thought about Ian's parting comments on New Year's Eve about how he didn't really know much about what she liked and was passionate about, Meg had realised that, beyond her son and her job, she didn't have much going on in her life to be passionate about.

That's what she wanted to change. *That's* what had left her feeling discontented.

Rejigging her career wasn't what she'd imagined at all. In the last few weeks, she'd tried to think about various activities she might enjoy, hobbies she might want to explore, interests that might grab her and on which she'd like to spend her free time, and although nothing had come to mind just yet, that was probably because things had been non-stop at work since they'd all returned after the Christmas holidays now that the dreaded council reorganisation was proceeding at pace.

Meg's boss might push her buttons now and again, and give himself an easy life by delegating far too much stuff to

her, but everyone's boss was a pain in the backside from time to time.

No, it wasn't work that was the problem. It was Meg being a boring old fart that was the problem.

She wasn't even that old, she reminded herself.

"You're only thirty-bloody-seven!" Meg grumbled to the empty living room. "Too young to be alone every night. And definitely too young to be talking to yourself, that's for sure."

On the coffee table, Meg's phone pinged. She grabbed it up and saw Jamie's name on the screen. They'd arranged to chat tonight once Meg got home from yoga and Jamie finished his evening computer labs. She was looking forward to talking to her son and hearing his news.

But when she read his message, her smile sagged.

Can we wait until later in the week for a catch-up? I'm heading out to the pub with some of the guys from the lab and won't have time to phone. Sorry! Jamie x

Meg tapped out a reply, telling him of course it was fine to chat some other time. She was disappointed not to get to speak to her lovely son, but what mattered was that he was making the most of his time at university and having fun. It thrilled her to know he was making new friends and settling in so well up there. He was already thoughtful enough to text her most days, and Meg knew the fact that they spoke to each other a couple of times a week meant she was pretty lucky. Most young lads heading off to university never thought to phone their parents at all.

Still, she'd been looking forward to hearing Jamie's voice and hearing his news, and was sorry she'd have to wait until later in the week until they spoke.

No sooner had she tossed the phone down on the sofa beside her than it started ringing. With a silly little thrill in her stomach, Meg grabbed it up, imagining Jamie had decided he had a spare couple of minutes after all.

But when she looked at the screen, it wasn't Jamie's name she saw there. It was her mother's.

“Hello, Mum,” Meg said when she answered the phone. “I haven’t heard from you in over a week, and I was just beginning to wonder if—”

“Meg!” her mother cut her off. “I need your help! There’s been a fire!”

AN HOUR LATER, Meg flung open the door to her mother as she trudged up the garden path after waving off the car that had dropped her off.

Liz Atkinson cut a sorry figure, with sooty marks smeared across her face and a bewildered look in her eyes. She clutched a stuffed shopping bag in one hand, her handbag hiked up on her shoulder. Her coat hung open and underneath it Meg saw her mother was wearing pyjamas.

The emergency in which her poor mother had found herself tonight had clearly left her caught short.

“Oh, Mum! Come inside! I can’t believe this has happened!”

“Me neither, love,” Liz replied, her voice quivering. “I’m still shaking from the shock.”

Meg pulled her mother into the house and hauled her into a tight embrace. “Are you okay? Are you sure you’re not hurt?”

“I’m not hurt, thank God. I got out in plenty of time. The ambulance paramedics checked us thoroughly and said we were fine. Although I do need a hot cup of tea.”

“That I can do.” Meg released her mother from the embrace and raked her gaze across her face, taking in the sooty smears up close. “Do you want to wash up first?”

Liz shook her head. “I’ll do that later once I’ve had some sugary tea to settle my nerves.”

Meg took the plastic shopping bag her mother was holding and set it down in the hallway before helping her out of her coat. Inside the bag Meg saw an assortment of hastily packed clothes and imagined her mother stuffing a few belongings in there while the fire brigade urged her to hurry up.

The sight of her mother with her sooty face and her steely grey hair sticking up all over the place, and wearing pyjamas and a pair of heavy winter boots while standing in her hallway wringing her hands together, made Meg's heart hammer with a mixture of shock and dismay.

After filling the kettle to boil, Meg watched her mother sink into a chair at the kitchen table.

“Won't you be more comfortable through in the living room on the sofa?” she asked.

Liz shook her head. “I'm all smelly from the smoke. I don't want to get it on your soft furniture and cushions. I'll be fine sitting here while I have my tea and get my breath back after the night I've had.”

Meg took mugs from the cupboard and added milk from the fridge. “Tell me again what happened. You were so frantic on the phone earlier, I didn't catch everything you said.”

Liz closed her eyes and blew out a breath. It was rare for Meg to see her mother looking so shaken and vulnerable. At seventy-three years old, Liz Atkinson was a wise and sure-footed woman who rarely encountered a problem she couldn't whip into shape and dispatch in record time. When Johnny died, Liz had been Meg's rock, alongside Meg's father, Matthew. Without them, Meg had no idea what she'd have done or how she would've coped.

When Meg's father had died three years ago, after a short battle with cancer, Liz had handled the bereavement with grace and strength. Meg had marvelled at her mother's fortitude in the face of grief, and marvelled too at her ability to pick herself up and keep going in life. Liz's heartbreak and loss were very real and hardly surprising, considering she'd lost her husband of almost forty years. But her determination

to embrace what life still had to offer left Meg amazed by and proud of her mother in equal measure.

Now, though, her mother looked hollowed-out as she sat at Meg's kitchen table, her expression close to haunted. The events that had brought Liz to Meg's door had clearly been traumatic. A long moment passed before Liz opened her eyes and began talking.

"The fire started in the kitchen," Liz said. "We think Marjorie must have left the gas hob on after she cooked dinner for us. Quite how a forgotten gas burner sent the whole kitchen up in flames is still to be determined by the fire investigators, but I wouldn't be surprised if it turns out that there was a tea towel left sitting on the counter and much too close to the unattended gas flames. It wouldn't be the first time I've had to tuck a tea towel away from danger after Marjorie tossed it aside once she was finished using it."

Meg brewed the tea and carried the mugs to the table. "Didn't Marjorie's smoke alarm go off?"

"Of course it did. But by then, the fire had already taken hold. My best guess is that if the gas hob was accidentally left turned on, and that set light to the tea towel because Marjorie tossed it down without thinking, then it would have been all too easy for the fire to spread to the cooking magazine Marjorie was using when she prepared our meal and which, along with the tea towel, she just left lying around. From there, the flames jumped to the curtains at the window, which was where it had reached when Marjorie and I raced in once the smoke alarm started screeching. I'm still half-deaf from the ringing in my ears."

Meg could sympathise, remembering her own run-in with the smoke alarm on Christmas Day when her turkey was almost incinerated in the oven.

"You said on the phone something about how you tried to put the fire out?" Meg said.

"Well, of course we tried to put the fire out. When we first realised what was going on and rushed through, the flames weren't yet out of control. If I'd been able to get the fire

extinguisher working, I feel sure I could have put the fire out before it spread. But, thanks to stupid Marjorie, that wasn't to be."

"What happened?"

"The silly mare grabbed another tea towel that was drying on the radiator and started wafting it at the flames crawling up the curtains!" Liz said, her tone seething. "Can you believe it? I screamed at her not to do it, but once she got the airflow moving, the flames licked up the curtains at record speed and that was that. Between the fire at the gas hob and the fire in the curtains, and Marjorie stupidly *fanning* the flames to boot, it was game over. It's a wonder the whole house didn't burn down."

"Oh, Mum. I'm sorry. It sounds very frightening. But what matters is that you got out safely."

"Only just. I had to drag Marjorie out. She kept trying to put the fire out and kept wafting the tea towel at the flames like some demented idiot. If she hadn't been doing that, I might have had a chance with the fire extinguisher. As it was, once the flames were licking around the entire kitchen, I had no choice but to get us both out of there and phone nine-nine-nine."

Liz took a long sip of the tea that Meg had placed in front of her and let out a sigh. "That's better. I needed that." She shook her head and sighed once more. "So, now it looks like I'm homeless."

"Of course you're not homeless. You'll stay here with me, Mum, for as long as you need."

"I should never have gone to Marjorie's house in the first place. If I could turn back time, believe me, I would."

"You went to stay with Marjorie because she's your oldest friend and you thought it would be a fun adventure to live together for a little while. There was no way of knowing this would happen."

"Living with someone is very different from just being friends with them. I realise that now. And in the four months

I've been staying at Marjorie's house, there have been plenty of signs that she's careless and a potential hazard to life and limb. I should've paid more attention."

Liz frowned and shook her head. Meg let her mother sip her tea for a moment, hoping the strong, sugary brew would settle her down and stop her from beating herself up this way. It wasn't Liz's fault that her friend had almost burned her own house down.

Last autumn, Liz had at last sold the house Meg had grown up in. After Meg's father died, she knew her mother would want to sell up eventually. The house was much too big for two people, never mind one. For most of last year, Liz had scoured the house listings around Hamblehurst and beyond, looking for a new place to live, somewhere smaller and cosier and easier to manage now that she was by herself.

But although she'd found several lovely places, including a sweet cottage just a few miles away that had stolen Liz's heart, she hadn't been able to find a buyer quick enough for her own house and had been thwarted by other buyers who were able to move faster.

In the end, Liz had decided to sell her house and find a place to rent instead, so she'd be ready to move swiftly once she found somewhere that suited her needs. With Jamie almost ready to move up to Cambridge for university at that point, Meg had offered her mother the option of her son's room, but Liz had declined, not wanting to get in her daughter's way, or at least that's how Liz had put it.

She wouldn't have been in Meg's way, not in the least, but Liz had always been independent-minded, and Meg understood why her mother might not want to become her daughter's house guest, the two of them suddenly living in one another's pockets. Meg's house was a small two-up two-down mid-terrace, and although Liz wanted somewhere smaller now, Meg's place would no doubt feel cramped to her mother after a lifetime spent in the smart detached three-bedroomed house in which she'd lived with Meg's father. Liz wanted a smaller place to live in, but that didn't mean she wanted to squeeze

into her daughter's tiny house and become her lodger, even if it was only temporary.

As Meg had begun seeing Ian by that point, her mother said she wouldn't want to get in the way of a budding romance, either.

When Liz's oldest friend, Marjorie, had offered her spare room as an option, Meg's mother had decided to accept.

They'd been friends since childhood, Liz had explained to Meg, and both were recent widows. Marjorie lived in a smaller village a few miles to the north of Hamblehurst and Liz said she'd enjoy the change of scenery for a while. Marjorie's house was also much bigger than Meg's, so they wouldn't feel like they were crammed in. It would be fun to live together and have a few laughs while Liz continued her property search. *One last hurrah for two old girls before the knacker's yard* was how Liz had described it.

As far as Meg knew, the two women had been having the time of their lives since Liz moved in a few months ago. Liz had never given her any reason to think things were anything other than perfectly fine between them.

But as she'd listened to her mother recounting the events surrounding tonight's terrible kitchen fire, the way she'd spoken about her old friend made Meg realise things hadn't been quite as hunky-dory between Liz and Marjorie as she must have hoped.

The picture she'd painted of Marjorie was of a scatty and apparently potentially dangerous woman who left hazards lying around the house and then panicked in the face of the resulting household emergency she herself had caused.

"I'm sure Marjorie is sorry about what has happened," Meg said.

"Of course she's sorry. She almost burned her own house to the ground. But after these past few months spent living with her, I'm only surprised she hasn't come close to disaster long before now. Like I said, it isn't the first time I've had to

move things away from the gas hob because she's been too careless."

"That's not good."

"No, it isn't. In fact, the first few times it happened, I worried that there might be something wrong with Marjorie, you know, neurologically. I actually feared she might have some sort of dreadful dementia. But that's not it at all. She's perfectly fine in all other areas of her life, and more than capable of running her finances and dealing with the ins and outs of things. She's just very messy and very scatty. And tonight, that ended in almost total disaster."

"At least you were there to help, Mum. Things might have been far worse. You're a good friend to Marjorie."

Liz pulled a face. "Perhaps. Although the truth is, while we had fun together for the first couple of months after I moved into her spare room, things have been more than a little strained between us lately. I suppose living in such close quarters inevitably becomes wearing, no matter how good friends you think you are. If I'd had any luck finding a new place to live, I would've happily moved out already."

Meg felt bad for her mother. She'd had no idea things had turned sour with her old friend, and wished Liz had said something about all this sooner.

"You said Marjorie's house has been ruled uninhabitable by the fire brigade?"

Liz nodded. "Although the fire was confined to the kitchen, the water damage caused while the fire fighters were extinguishing the blaze means the place will need a lot of work. I suspect most of the kitchen will have to be replaced, at the very least. Thankfully none of our belongings in the upstairs bedrooms were damaged, but the fire fighters still didn't give us much time to get out of there and no one's allowed to move back in until the ceiling between the kitchen and the first floor is declared safe."

"Where has Marjorie gone to stay?"

“Her son’s house. He lives down in Brighton and came to pick her up, and he insisted on dropping me off here while his mother finished speaking to the fire brigade and getting a few more things together from the house to take with her. Marjorie invited me to go and stay there with her, but her son lives with his partner in a small beachfront flat and I happen to know it would have been a very tight squeeze. It was kind of Marjorie to offer, I’m sure, and she wouldn’t have wanted to leave me in limbo. But I think we’ve both had our fill of being housemates.”

Liz let out a throaty laugh and immediately began coughing. Meg quickly fetched a glass of water.

“The smoke inhalation hurt my throat,” Liz croaked after downing the water. “I expect it will be sore for a day or two.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m sure. As I said, the paramedics gave us both a thorough examination.” Liz sipped more of her water and gave Meg an apologetic look. “I’m sorry for landing in your lap like this, love. I’m happy to book a hotel tomorrow.”

“Don’t be daft. I’m not going to let you move into a hotel, am I? You’ll stay here until you’ve recovered from tonight’s upheaval and you’re ready to decide what to do next. Who knows, maybe the perfect house will appear on the market while you’re staying here and you’ll be able to jump in and buy it.”

“Maybe, although January’s not exactly the best time for buying and selling houses.”

“Don’t worry about anything like that tonight.”

Liz sighed. “I’m grateful you’re letting me stay here, but I don’t want to get in the way of you and Ian.”

Meg blinked. She hadn’t told her mother yet about the break-up with Ian. Although they’d chatted on the phone a couple of times since the new year, Meg just hadn’t felt like talking about it.

“Ian and I broke up,” she now admitted.

Liz's eyes widened. "Oh! When did this happen?"

"New Year's Eve."

Her eyes widened even more. "New Year's Eve? Why didn't you mention something before now?"

"To be honest, Mum, it wasn't much fun being dumped on New Year's Eve, especially as I'd been planning on dumping Ian right before he beat me to the punch. I just wanted to forget about it and move on."

"Well, I'm sorry. Although I can't say I'm surprised. He didn't seem like the right fit for you at all, love."

"I know."

Liz smiled and patted Meg's hand across the table. "What a pair we are. You get dumped on New Year's Eve and two weeks later, my so-called best friend almost burns me to death."

"There's a theme here, I'm sorry to tell you. Ian almost set my oven on fire on Christmas Day when he wandered off home and left the turkey charring to a crisp while I was out visiting Auntie Bridget."

"You didn't tell me about that."

Meg shrugged. "I was annoyed that my poor turkey got ruined and it was obvious that Ian felt badly about it. When you and I spoke later on Christmas Day, I didn't want to bring it up while Ian was in the house and make him feel any worse than he already did."

"I suppose I can understand that. Well, hopefully we've both had our share of kitchen-related disasters and can move on towards sunnier uplands."

"Fingers crossed."

They shared another laugh as Liz finished her tea and got up from the table. "I'm absolutely wiped out. If you don't mind, I'd love to have a shower, change my pyjamas, get into bed, and put this whole wretched night behind me."

Meg followed her mother upstairs and sorted her out with fresh towels before turning down the bed in Jamie's old room. She'd changed the linen before Christmas, thinking he'd be coming home, and so the bed was nice and fresh. By the time she'd made sure Liz was comfortable and settled, it was close to midnight.

In her own bedroom, Meg got ready to turn in.

These past few weeks, she'd found the house just a little too quiet for her liking. Jamie's decision not to come home for Christmas and the break-up with the hapless Ian had left her feeling out of sorts, and that feeling had yet to go away.

She felt terrible that her poor mother had endured such awful events tonight. And although she'd rather Liz had never been placed in any danger to begin with, she was still happy to have her company here in the house.

Between missing Jamie and breaking up with Ian and now her fire-ravaged mother turning up on her doorstep in need of sanctuary, it had been quite a strange few weeks.

As Meg drifted off to sleep, she couldn't help wondering what might lie in store next.

“HERE YOU ARE, love, get this breakfast down you.”

Drawn from her bed by the delicious smells of sizzling bacon, Meg wiped sleep from her eyes as she stood in the kitchen door and looked at the enormous plate of full English breakfast her mother had just set down on the table.

Alongside the crispy bacon rashers, there were sausages, fried eggs, mushrooms, and a grilled tomato. Toast sprung up from the toaster on the counter and Liz plated the bread and brought it to the table, where butter and marmalade were already waiting to be put to use. The teapot sat in the middle of the table, steam rising from the spout.

“This looks fantastic, Mum,” Meg said, taking a seat. “You didn’t have to go to all this trouble.”

“It was my pleasure,” Liz said. “After you taking me in off the streets during the week, it was the least I could do.”

Meg chortled at her mother’s description as she slathered butter on a triangle of toast.

“And after only being here for a few days, I can see how hard you’re working at that job of yours. They’re slave-drivers at that council! So, I thought you deserved a Saturday morning treat.”

“You’re a star, Mum.” Meg sliced her fork into the fried egg and let the orange yolk pool around the crispy bacon rashers. “I didn’t even know I had bacon and sausages in the fridge, to be honest.”

“I popped over to the shop on the high street this morning while you were having a lie-in,” Liz said, pouring tea into their mugs. “Oh, that reminds me. When I got back, the postman had been. I put the letters on the counter over there. There’s an envelope on top of the pile that looks like it’s been delivered here by mistake.”

After popping a sinfully delicious piece of bacon into her mouth, Meg rose from her seat to check out the pile of post. The letter at the top was not addressed to her, but to Mrs Olive Nimmo, another resident of Foxglove Street. They shared the same house numbers in reverse.

“This isn’t the first time it’s happened,” Meg said, setting the envelope back down and ignoring the rest of the mail—a mixture of bills and circulars—until later. “I think the post office sorting machine must have a problem with our house numbers and the postie is too busy to notice the mistake. I’ll walk up to Olive’s house later and drop this off where it belongs.”

“So, what’s on the agenda today?” Liz asked, cutting into her sausages.

“Not much. Laundry, some housework, and a quick trip to the supermarket for groceries.”

“It’s such a lovely bright fresh day outside,” Liz said, nodding to the kitchen window over the back garden where a wintry blue sky was growing lighter by the minute. “Perhaps we ought to get out and have a bracing walk together and take advantage of this better weather.”

“That sounds nice. I could do with a good walk and some fresh air after being stuck in the office all week. Things are so busy just now I didn’t even make it out of the building this week to the café across the road where I like to buy a coffee now and again.”

“Good, that settles it. Once we’ve enjoyed our breakfast, we’ll get ourselves outside. I’ll even treat us to a nice coffee in one of the lovely cafes on the high street, to make up for you not getting a decent cuppa at work this week. I’m sure your laundry and whatnot can wait until later.”

Meg didn't mind being talked out of doing her various bits and pieces of housework. Her mother was right that those things could all wait. With Liz staying in the house these past few days anyway, the place had been kept in smart order while Meg was at work. Both of them were tidy women and Meg's house rarely needed much by way of cleaning at the best of times, but with Liz in residence, even her usual daily tasks had been whipped away from her by her mother. Liz had even taken charge of preparing their evening meals, and Meg had savoured coming home to a hot dinner cooked by someone else for a change.

"I'll pop some laundry into the machine before we go out and the cycle will be finished by the time we get back," Meg said. "That way, my shirts and trousers for work will be dried and ready for ironing tomorrow."

"Fair enough." Liz sipped her tea and flashed a smile at Meg. "Perhaps we'll do a spot of shopping on the high street after our coffee, too. It's been a while since I've been back in Hamblehurst for any decent length of time and it'll be nice to have a wander around the shops."

"Sounds like a plan."

"And maybe we'll get some lunch together, too."

"After this enormous breakfast?" Meg said, gesturing to her plate. "I won't be able to eat anything else until tea time. Maybe not even then."

"Nonsense. After a nice bracing walk, and a trip to the café for a coffee and a natter, and a wander around the shops, you'll be more than ready for a pub lunch later this afternoon. It will be my treat."

Meg laughed at her mother's firm expression. "Despite the unfortunate circumstances that brought you here, it really is nice having you staying with me, Mum."

"It's nice to be here. I'm beginning to wish I'd moved in with you in the first place after I sold the house and while I was looking for somewhere new. We rub along just fine, you and I, don't we?"

“Of course we do. We rub along more than just fine, I think.”

Liz smiled and nodded to Meg’s breakfast plate. “Eat up before your food gets cold.”

Meg applied herself to her breakfast with enthusiasm. No one cooked a full English quite like her mother.

* * *

After they finished breakfast and loaded the plates into the dishwasher, Meg showered and dressed warmly for a Saturday morning walk with her mother.

They completed a loop around Peartree Park and then pushed towards the western edges of Hamblehurst and around the ruins of an old church that lay there and which added an extra thirty minutes onto their brisk walk. The air was fresh and crisp, the sky a cloudless wintry blue, and it was nice to get out and about after a week stuck inside the overheated council offices at work.

It was nicer still to chat with her mother as they strolled side by side, the two of them swapping news and conversation. They talked about Jamie off at university and how thrilled they were to know he was doing so well there. They talked about Meg’s late father, Matthew, and how the three-year anniversary of his death would soon be approaching in the spring. And they talked about Johnny, too, and how much Meg still missed him, even after the passage of almost two decades since he’d died.

As Liz talked about how much she’d loved Johnny, despite her early misgivings about how he and Meg had ended up as a couple of teenagers with a baby on the way, Meg found herself growing quiet.

“I’m sorry, love,” Liz said after a moment, throwing Meg a worried look. “I didn’t mean to upset you by going on and on about him.”

“You haven’t upset me, it’s just...”

“It’s just what?” Liz pressed when Meg fell quiet again.

“Well, the truth is that after all these years, I find myself forgetting things about him,” Meg admitted. “I loved Johnny so much, Mum. I loved him with all my heart. But the other day I was over at the cemetery and I was thinking about what he would have said about Jamie doing so well at university and making such a great adventure out of his life, and thinking about other things I wish I could chat to him about, too, and although I could imagine the words Johnny would have said, there was a moment when I couldn’t quite remember what his voice sounded like. And I felt so sad and guilty and terrible.”

“Oh, love,” Liz said, moving closer as they walked and giving Meg’s hand a squeeze through her gloves. “You mustn’t feel badly about something like that. It’s been almost twenty years since Johnny died. Of course there are things you’ll have forgotten about him.”

“But his voice? How could I forget that, even if it was only for a moment?”

“Memory is a funny thing, Meg. You said it was only temporary, forgetting how he sounded?”

Meg nodded.

“There you go, then. It was just your mind playing a nasty trick on you, that’s all. And don’t forget that, although you loved Johnny and would no doubt still have been together now if he’d lived, the fact remains that you were only together for less than two years. Yes, you were soulmates, and yes, you had a child together and got married and lived together and were set for a whole lifetime together. But eighteen months is all you got. Eighteen months, almost twenty years ago. You’ve lived for such a long time without him, I’d be more surprised if you claimed you hadn’t forgotten at least some things about him by now.”

Meg sighed. “Sometimes I remember everything about in such clear detail and other times it all feels so hazy, like he was just a lovely dream I had a very long time ago.”

Her voice caught as she uttered these words, the truth of them slicing through her heart.

“Oh, Meg,” Liz said, once more pulling her close to her side and clasping her hand tighter. “My poor, lovely, baby girl.”

Meg let out an unexpected laugh at her mother’s description of her. “It’s been a long time since I was a baby or a girl, Mother.”

“You’ll always be my baby girl,” Liz insisted. “Just the same as Jamie will always be your baby boy. Am I right?”

Meg nodded to concede the point. “Do you ever forget things about Dad?”

Liz peered off into the distance to where the lane they were walking along curved around the edge of a field bordered by a tall hedge that was bare of leaves, its spindly brown branches waiting for the arrival of spring.

“It’s different with me and your dad, Meg,” Liz said. “We were married for almost forty years before he passed away. I had much longer with him than you did with Johnny. When you’ve spent your entire adult lifetime with someone, it’s hard to forget anything about them. And your dad has only been gone for a few years. It’s still... well, it’s still raw.”

Meg heard the quiver in her mother’s voice. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked such a stupid question.”

“It’s not a stupid question. There are no stupid questions where grief and loss are concerned. You can ask me anything you want, anytime. But I think that people sometimes assume that when we lose someone we love, you just sort of get over it one day. It doesn’t work like that at all. You never get over it. You learn to live with it, and that’s a very different thing, because even doing that much can feel so far beyond us as to be completely impossible. But, eventually, we get to that point. We learn to live with the loss and start to find another path in our lives. You of all people must know that.”

“I wish I had your wisdom, Mum.”

“I’m not so wise,” Liz laughed. “I’m simply as battle-scarred as the rest of us and have tried to learn the various lessons of life as best as I could.” Liz gave her a soft look.

“The truth is you were dealt a tragic blow all those years ago when Johnny died, but you handled it and got on with it and built a life for yourself and your son when I’m sure all you wanted to do was crumble into a thousand pieces.”

“I think I *did* crumble into a thousand pieces, many times.”

“But you put yourself back together again every time, too.”

“Only thanks to you and Dad being there. And Johnny’s parents. I had a lot of support to help me through.”

“Maybe. But you did the hardest work alone, which is the only way it *can* be done.”

They walked on for a few minutes. The winter morning was quiet and still at the edge of the village. A crow called out from a patch of woodland beyond the field and Meg was reminded of the crows she’d heard on Boxing Day when she’d visited Johnny’s grave at the cemetery. Glancing up, she saw the black bird high up in the branches, sitting there alone and emitting its croaky call.

“There *is* something I wish you’d done a little differently in the years after you lost Johnny,” Liz said.

Surprised by this comment, Meg turned to her mother. “What?”

“Well, I wish you’d found someone else to be with. Another man. Someone to share your life with.”

Liz must have clocked the look on Meg’s face, because she quickly added, “I don’t mean straight away, obviously. Johnny’s death was a terrible and completely unexpected blow and it was only natural that it’d take time to get over it. And you had Jamie to think of, too. I’m under no illusions that while Jamie was small, thinking about new men or new relationships would have been the last thing on your mind.”

“It didn’t even *figure* in my mind, never mind be the last thing on it.”

“And that makes perfect sense. But once Jamie was older and no longer needed you quite as much as when he was

small, well, I couldn't help but wish that you'd found someone to love."

Meg let out a long breath. "I have tried, Mum. These last couple of years, I've met a few men and had a few relationships, but nothing really went anywhere."

"Have you ever stopped to wonder why?"

Meg frowned. "I suppose I just haven't been lucky enough to meet the right sort of bloke. There's no mystery about it."

"Yes, but *why* haven't you met the right bloke?"

"If I knew the answer to that, we wouldn't be having this conversation, would we?" Meg laughed.

Liz's expression remained neutral as she pressed on. "Are you sure you don't know?"

"Yes, I'm sure. But judging by the look on your face, you have some theory you'd like to share. Come on then, spit it out."

Meg laughed again, but felt a flicker of unease at what her mother might be about to say.

"It seems to me that the small number of men you've had any sort of involvement with over the past few years have been... well, they've been very, very different to Johnny."

Meg's frown returned as she processed this. "How do you mean?"

"Well, Johnny was the sort of young man who was just bursting with life and excitement and energy, wasn't he? You've told me often enough about how he swept you off your feet because of how he was and who he was. The *way* he was. And although I can't claim to know any of the men you've dated recently particularly well, it just seems to me that they've all been... they've all been a bit dull and grey, if I'm being completely honest with you, Meg."

It wasn't an entirely unfair assessment. Her recent break-up was a case in point. After all, Meg had known things wouldn't go much further with the dowdy Ian because she found him too boring and there just hadn't been any spark

between them. The few men she'd spent time with before Ian were all much of a much, too. Nice enough, certainly kind and decent and honest, but ultimately there hadn't been anything beyond basic friendship at best.

"Maybe I'm a bit dull and grey, too, Mum," Meg said with a sad laugh. "When Ian said he thought it would be best if we stopped seeing each other, I'd been on the cusp of telling him the same thing. I think he broke up with me for the same reason I broke up with him—boredom."

"You are not dull, Meg," Liz insisted. "Nor are you grey. But when I think about the men you've got involved with over the past couple of years, I can't help but thinking that..."

Another pause. Meg turned to her mother and frowned. "What? Don't keep me in suspense."

"I can't help but thinking that you are choosing men who you have no chance whatsoever of falling in love with. Maybe you're doing it subconsciously, maybe not."

"You think I *want* to be alone?" Meg said, her voice rising.

"No. But I think that so long as you never find anyone who makes your heart sing the way Johnny did, you never really have to let him go completely."

Liz's words made Meg almost come to a halt, her feet scuffing on the ground. "How can you say that? I *had* to let go of Johnny. I didn't have any choice. He *died*, for God's sakes!"

"I'm not trying to upset you, love. That's the last thing I want. But you and Johnny had a once in a lifetime love affair. I know that and you know that. And even after all these years, I can understand why you might not want to find out if lightning can strike twice, because... what if it doesn't?"

"It hasn't so far."

"Because you've held yourself back. You've settled for dull dates with quiet, dull men who could never in a million years make you feel the things your late husband once did. Unless you want to keep having the same boring relationships you've had so far, perhaps it's time to find someone who's

very different to the sort of men you've been spending time with lately."

As they reached the far side of the field and joined the road that led back towards the centre of Hamblehurst, Meg let what her mother had said sink in.

"You should be one of those magazine agony aunts, Mother," she said. "Any other startling insights you want to share with me?"

Liz chuckled. "I've said my piece. I just think you should take more of a risk. You're a beautiful, sweet, and wonderful young woman, Meg. You deserve to find a man who can make you light up again."

"The way I used to with Johnny?" Meg said, her voice quiet.

"No. In a whole new way that will bring an entirely different sort of happiness into your life." Liz patted her arm as they crossed the road and made their way along the pavement. "And that's the last thing I'm going to say about this. I have no intention of brow-beating you into agreeing with me about this or any other matter. It's your life, after all."

Liz gave her a meaningful look and then rubbed her hands together. "Right, it's high time we had ourselves a coffee. I'm in need of a caffeine boost after all this walking and yapping."

Meg smiled and agreed, and although their conversation turned to simpler matters as they continued on their way, her mother's words and insights rang inside her head with every step she took.

THEIR ROUTE back towards the centre of Hamblehurst took them along the length of Foxglove Street from the Riverside Road end. Knowing this before they set out, Meg had slipped the letter into her pocket that the postman had mistakenly put through her door earlier that morning, so she could pop it into Olive Nimmo's letterbox on the way past.

When they reached the older lady's house, Meg pulled the envelope out for delivery and was just about to push the letterbox flap when the door was flung open, startling her.

"Oh, my goodness!" Olive Nimmo yelped from inside the hallway, clutching a hand to her chest and looking just as surprised as Meg felt. "My word, Meg Marshall, you gave me a bit of a start!"

"I'm so sorry," Meg laughed as she caught her breath following the sudden encounter. "I was just dropping off this letter for you. It landed through my door by mistake this morning."

She held out the letter and Olive peered at the address. "Yes, you're quite right, this is for me. That's the third time in as many months that this has happened to us."

"I was just saying that to my mother. I think the sorting office machine has taken umbrage with the pair of us."

"Perhaps you're right," Olive laughed. "On the other hand, it's given us the chance to say hello to one another far often than we might do otherwise, which is a lovely thing."

Meg smiled. She only knew Olive Nimmo in passing as a neighbour who lived at the other end of Foxglove Street, but it was always nice to bump into the friendly older lady and exchange a moment of chitchat.

“I haven’t seen you since the Foxglove Street Christmas Lights extravaganza,” Meg said. “Did you have a nice Christmas?”

“I did have a lovely Christmas, thank you. Although I actually think I recall seeing you on Christmas morning, didn’t I? I was speaking to a new neighbour further down the street and you went rushing past, saying something about having to rescue your Christmas turkey. Was everything okay in the end?”

“No, not for the turkey, I’m afraid. It was beyond saving.”

Olive looked pained at this news. “What a pity.”

“We made do with the trimmings and plenty of wine.”

“That’s the spirit, dear. Good for you.” Olive jingled her keys in her hand. “Well, I was just going out, so I’ll walk you up the street if you like?”

Meg accompanied the older lady up the garden path and re-joined her mother on the pavement.

“Olive, I don’t think you’ve met my mother, Liz Atkinson?” Meg said, introducing the pair.

“No, I haven’t had that pleasure,” Olive said and held out her hand. “Hello, Liz. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Hello, Olive.”

“My mother’s staying with me for a while, so you might see her coming and going on the street from time to time.”

“Lovely,” Olive replied. “I hope you enjoy your time here. We’re a friendly bunch on Foxglove Street, so if you’re ever looking for some company while Meg here is off at work, you know where to find me, Liz.”

“That’s very kind, thank you, Olive.” Liz nodded to the bright blue silk scarf wrapped around Olive’s neck and then

pointed to the colourful peacock-shaped brooch pinned to her coat. “What a beautiful scarf you’re wearing. And that brooch is absolutely gorgeous. Look at the colours on the tail feathers! Where did you get it?”

Pleased with the compliment, Olive patted her scarf and brooch in turn. “These were Christmas gifts from my good friend, Walter Montgomery.”

“He has a good eye and good taste,” Liz said peering more closely at the brooch.

“I suspect he may have had a helping hand from his grandson and his grandson’s girlfriend when he picked these out,” Olive laughed. “But that’s neither here nor there.”

“You and Walter have really become good friends lately, haven’t you?” Meg said as they made their way down the street, remembering how often she’d glanced out her front window and saw the two older folks ambling past together.

“We have, that’s true,” Olive replied. “I must say I’m subjected to quite a bit of teasing from my friends about it, all of whom assume it is only a matter of time before Walter and I declare ourselves madly in love with one another and decide to pair up. However, we don’t have that sort of relationship at all. We really are just very good friends. I wouldn’t be without the grumpy old curmudgeon, but nor do I want to set up home with him, either.”

“Good for you,” Liz said. “It’s important to have friends of all kinds, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely,” Olive agreed with a nod towards the house they were passing. “And speak of the devil, here he is.”

Walter Montgomery appeared outside the house they were passing, pulling his front door closed behind him and locking up.

“Brilliant timing as always, Walter,” Olive grinned as the older gent shuffled along his front path towards them.

“I’ve got my timing down to an art form by now,” Walter said as he joined them. “From the moment you text me to say you’re leaving your house to the moment you arrive here

outside my door, I can time it to the very second.” Walter glanced at Meg and Liz. “Hello, ladies. I’m not sure we know each other?”

“Walter, you know Meg Marshall I’m sure,” Olive said. “She just lives a few minutes away from you on the other side of the street. And this is Meg’s mother, Liz.”

They went through another round of greetings and had just got that out of the way when the front door opened on the semi-detached house on the other side of Walter’s house and two young women came barrelling outside.

“Sorry! Did we keep you waiting?” asked one of the women. “I lost track of time reading my book.”

“Typical Ellie, always lost in a novel,” Olive said with a warm smile. “But don’t worry, you’re right on time. I just got here myself.”

“This will be fun!” said the other young woman who’d come out of the house with Ellie. “I’m excited about this! I was already over there this morning to set up my stall. I forgot my business cards and had to rush back here to get them because Ellie couldn’t find them where I thought I’d left them.”

Olive must have noticed the non-plussed look on Meg’s face because she turned to her and began explaining things.

“Meg, I’m not sure if you know Ellie Jones, who works at Hamblehurst library over on the market square? And this is her new housemate, Carrie Dixon. We’re all on our way over to an arts and crafts fair being held in the church hall at St. Mark’s, and Carrie has her very own stall there selling some of the lovely creations she makes as part of her photography business.”

There was another round of hellos and nice-to-meet-yous as Meg and Liz greeted the two young women. Meg judged them both to be quite a bit younger than she was, probably in their late twenties or early thirties, and both women wore wide grins on their faces and were clearly excited about the morning ahead.

“I hope you have a fantastic time and make lots of money,” Meg said to the younger of the two women, Carrie.

“Fingers crossed,” Carrie replied. “I was a last-minute addition to the line-up after someone else pulled out because of illness. It was a bit of a scramble to get enough stock together to fill an entire stall, as I’ve never done anything like this before. I’m also thinking of starting a new product line creating lovely bespoke photograph albums and memory books, and I have a few sample items to show and find out if it’s something that people might be interested in.”

“That sounds lovely,” Meg smiled.

“The idea is that I put my own special designs into the albums and memory books, so that it really reflects the individuals and what they want and...” Carrie trailed off and looked abashed. “And I’ll shut up now before I descend into a sales pitch and you wish I’d never started talking.”

Everyone laughed at this.

“It’s not a sales pitch when someone is simply talking with passion and enthusiasm about something they are very good at and which they want to share with others,” Olive insisted. “That said, we’d better get ourselves over to the church hall, as the doors will be opening for the craft fair shortly and I’m sure Carrie will want to be in her place at her stall.”

“Good luck,” Meg said to Carrie, and then to the others she added, “I hope you all have a nice time.”

“Oh, what am I thinking!” Olive suddenly exclaimed as she glanced at Meg and Liz. “Would you both like to come with us?”

Meg looked at her mother. “Actually, we were heading over to the high street to find a café and have a nice cup of coffee.”

“There’s a tea and coffee stall at the craft fair, if you’re interested,” Olive informed her. “All the profit from the hot drink sales will be going towards the church roof fund. You know how they’re always having to repair some damage or other up there on that old roof.”

“And there are plenty of lovely stalls to enjoy,” Carrie added. “Honestly, if I wasn’t running a stall myself, I’d probably be there for hours anyway, admiring the wonderful crafts and spending far too much money.”

Meg laughed and looked towards her mother. Liz wagged her eyebrows.

“It sounds like fun to me,” Liz said.

“Good,” Meg smiled. “In that case, we’ll walk over there with you.”

“Splendid!” said Olive.

“Let’s a get a move on then,” Walter grumbled. “If we loiter out here on the street any longer, I’ll have to go back inside the house and fetch my walking stick, and I’m determined to use the blasted thing as little as possible this year. Plus, it’s freezing, too.”

As Walter shuffled off ahead of them, Olive traded a wry smile with Meg. “Grumpy curmudgeon, as I said,” she whispered.

“Is he okay without his walking stick after hanging around for a minute or two on the pavement?” Meg asked. She remembered seeing the elderly gentleman’s careful progress over the summer and autumn as he’d accompanied Olive up and down Foxglove Street, and also remembered Olive saying something in passing about how Walter had suffered an accident early last year that had left him with a nasty ankle injury.

“He’ll be fine,” Olive said. “He needs the walking stick far less than he used to. That said, it is very cold and I for one will be happy to arrive at the church hall and get warm, assuming someone over there has had the presence of mind to turn the heating on in that draughty old place.”

The group made their along Foxglove Street, the two young women up ahead and chattering excitedly with one another, Olive and Walter in the middle, and Meg and Liz bringing up the rear.

“You’re sure you’re okay with an unplanned visit to this arts and crafts fair?” Meg asked her mother quietly as they reached the high street.

“Absolutely,” Liz replied. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“You might not be saying that once you’ve ordered your coffee over there,” Meg said. “I doubt they’ll be serving posh cappuccinos and flavoured lattes.”

“Oh, it’ll be fine, I’m sure,” Liz said. “And it’ll be fun to do something a little bit different with our Saturday, won’t it?”

Meg nodded. It *would* be fun to wander around a few lovely craft stalls with her mother and maybe pick up a lovely purchase or two. And perhaps she’d bump into a few more neighbours from around Foxglove Street and beyond, as well?

THE SMALL GROUP of Foxglove Street residents arrived at St. Mark's church hall just as the doors were opening and the visitors were being welcomed inside. While Carrie Dixon hurried off through the crowds to attend to her stall, Meg and Liz followed their other neighbours to the back of the queue, which snaked around the side of the church.

There was an entrance fee to help cover the costs of running the event and aid the church roof fund, and after Meg had dropped money into the donation bucket, she stepped into the hall and took a good look around.

Stalls lined the space from one end to the other, and cheerful bunting hung along the walls between the tall windows. Meg spied all sorts of arts and crafts on offer—ceramics, watercolours, handmade candles, knitting and crochet, chocolate and fudge, chutneys and jams, painted ornaments, wooden toys and games, and even more.

Liz tapped Meg's arm and pointed to the back of the hall, where the hot drinks stalls were set up alongside a few tables and chairs sporting colourful plastic table covers.

"Before we get distracted looking at all these lovely things, I need a coffee," Liz said.

"Me, too." Meg turned to Olive, Walter, and Ellie Jones. "Would you all like to join us over there for a hot drink?"

Olive shook her head. "Not right now, dear. I had a nice cup of tea before I left the house, and I'm keen to take a good look at Carrie's stall before it gets any busier in here."

Walter and Ellie nodded their agreement with this course of action.

“We’ll see you later, in that case,” Meg said.

“I’m sure we’ll bump into one another again while we’re wandering around the stalls,” Olive smiled.

They all went their separate ways. Olive, Walter, and Ellie made a beeline for Carrie’s stall halfway across the hall, and Meg smiled to see the look of excitement on the young woman’s face as she fussed with the items she’d set out for sale. Meg and Liz headed towards the back for a hot drink, and were pleasantly surprised to discover proper coffee-making machines set up and already being used by the vendors to serve Hamblehurst’s thirsty craft fair shoppers.

“They *do* have flavoured lattes!” Liz said, clearly delighted as she dug her purse from her pocket.

“They’ll make a fortune,” Meg said, peering at the coffee and hot drinks machines. “These portable hot drink makers are amazing. I thought we’d be lucky to see a couple of hot water urns and a catering-sized jar of instant coffee.”

It was a good thing they opted to buy drinks before doing anything else, because a queue soon formed behind them. When it was their turn, they ordered hazelnut lattes and, at Liz’s insistence, added two slices of homemade rocky road to their order, before grabbing a free table and settling down to enjoy their refreshments.

“Oh, I need this coffee,” Liz said, taking a long sip. “That was quite a walk we put in this morning.”

“We needed a long walk after that full English you fed us.” Meg glanced at the piece of rocky road tempting her on a napkin on the table. “I’m nowhere near hungry, and yet here you are plying me with sugary treats. You’re a bad influence, Mother.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Liz winked.

They drank their frothy coffees and ate their delicious chocolate treats while glancing around at the nearby stalls, which were already doing a roaring trade. One woman

wearing a cheerful pink-and-white apron and running an alluring confectionery stall could barely keep up as shoppers bought armloads of her homemade fudge.

“It looks like that woman’s homemade goodies are a huge hit,” Liz observed. “We ought to get some.”

“*You* get some. I’ll stick to this rocky road and hope I don’t keel over from a sugar overdose as it is.”

Liz chuckled, then pointed to another stall. “My goodness, look at those watercolour paintings! Aren’t they fantastic!”

Meg followed her mother’s outstretched finger to a stall displaying a dazzling array of artworks depicting all manner of landscapes—ocean sunsets, woodland dawns, summer meadows, stormy mountains, and more. Even from a distance, the vibrant colours were eye-catching and alluring, each scene drawing the observer deeper and deeper into the world painted there inside the frames.

“We *must* take a look at those as soon as we finish these coffees,” Liz said.

“Agreed.”

A small group of browsers crowded the stall, admiring the artworks. Meg’s gaze travelled to the stallholder, and her eyes lingered for a long moment on the man who stood there chatting to customers.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a sweep of dark hair across his forehead and a warm smile. Something about the man looked vaguely familiar, but Meg couldn’t place how she might know him. She watched as he gestured to a painting on display at his stall, and watched him chat to a customer about it, his hand waving this way and that as he pointed to various features. Moments later, the customer nodded and produced their wallet while the stallholder smiled and unhooked the watercolour from the display board.

He was a very good salesman, clearly. Meg watched him carefully wrap the watercolour with thick brown paper and hand it over to its new owner, offering another broad smile as he thanked the customer for their business.

“Something caught your eye?” Liz asked, before grinning and adding, “Or should I say, *someone?*”

“What?” Meg blinked.

Liz laughed. “You’ve been staring over there at that stall for ages.”

“You were the one who pointed it out in the first place.”

Liz only laughed again and drained the last of her coffee. “Come on, let’s get over there and take a closer look at those paintings.”

They rose from the table, which was immediately requisitioned by another bunch of coffee-drinkers. After depositing their empty cups and napkins into the bin, they turned towards the watercolour stall.

Up close, the paintings looked even more amazing. Meg found herself mesmerised by one painting in particular, featuring a blazing sunset reflected against a deep blue ocean. The scene was filled with energy and life and drama. She couldn’t tear her eyes off it.

“You like this one?” the man behind the stall asked her and offered a friendly smile.

“It’s beautiful,” Meg replied. “The colours are so gorgeous.”

“This is Pointe du Raz in Brittany,” the man said. “The sunsets on the French west coast can be spectacular.”

“I see that. You saw this for yourself, in person?”

He nodded, then gestured around his stall. “Every painting is from real life. I travel a lot and I’ve been lucky to see many wonderful places over the years.”

“It’s a beautiful painting. They’re all beautiful, actually. You’re incredibly talented.”

“Thank you.”

The man smiled again, accepting her compliment. He had an easy, relaxed manner about him. Meg didn’t feel as if he was putting on a sales pitch or trying to talk her into buying

anything. His demeanour was of a man who was just happy to have the chance to share his paintings and talk about his work.

That alone probably helped him sell far more of his paintings than any polished sales pitch ever would.

“Meg, I’ll be over there looking at those hand-painted teapots,” Liz said behind her. “You stay here and just come and find me when you’re ready.”

Meg was about to say that she’d just come with her mother right now. But she realised she didn’t want to leave the watercolour stall just yet and wanted to spend a few more moments admiring the beautiful paintings there.

Nodding to her mother, she turned back to the watercolour featuring the burning sunset over the ocean before looking at some of the other paintings on either side.

“Where is this?” Meg asked, pointing to a soft, dreamy garden scene featuring nodding roses in a riot of pinks and yellows clustered around an old-fashioned water fountain.

“That was near Bordeaux,” the man replied. “I passed through a village one summer’s morning and saw an old man tending to his garden. He’d been growing roses all his life, he told me, and it showed. I told him how wonderful they looked and explained I was a painter and asked if I could paint his garden. He said yes. I did one painting of the old man, taking care of his roses, and gave it to him as a gift. He thanked me by feeding me lunch, serving a baguette from the village bakery, made just that morning, and cheese from the local fromagerie. Once we’d eaten together and become friends, I asked if I could do another painting of his garden to take home with me, and this is it.”

Meg listened, enraptured, as he shared this story, her gaze switching between the beautiful painting and the man who’d painted it. Every brushstroke rendered on the canvas brought the scene vividly to life, and she could imagine the tiny French village, the dewy summer’s morning, the scent of the tumbling roses, the gentle sound of the water fountain. She thought of the artist, befriending this old French rose gardener, and sitting down to a meal of soft bread and sweet cheese, while a blank

canvas sat perched on an easel nearby, waiting for this man to conjure the scene with his paints and brushes.

“That’s a wonderful story,” Meg said, finding her voice at last.

The man smiled. “It was a wonderful day and a wonderful part of the world to find myself in.”

“I don’t know how you could bear to part with the painting after hearing the story about how you created it. Don’t you want to keep it as a reminder of that lovely village and the kind rose gardener you met there?”

He smiled again and shook his head. “I don’t need a reminder. The memory is safe up here.” He tapped the side of his head. “Every painting I’ve ever done has its own memory and that’s enough for me.”

Meg could only stare as she listened to this man speak. He was so fascinating and beguiling and...

... and definitely *familiar* in some infuriating way she still couldn’t place.

“I’m sorry, I feel like I know you from somewhere,” Meg said. “Have we met before?”

The man’s smile widened and he laughed. “It’s funny you should say that, because I was just thinking the same thing about you, but I’m not sure how I know you. My name’s Harry Doyle.”

He extended his hand. Meg shook it, feeling the rough skin of his painter’s hands as his palm enveloped hers.

“Meg Marshall,” she said. “Your name rings a bell, but I still can’t place you.”

A memory flashed suddenly, a memory so old and fleeting she had to fight to grab hold of it and stop it slipping away again.

“Wait! Hang on. Harry Doyle? You didn’t happen to play in a band about twenty years ago called The Westerlies, did you?”

Harry's eyes widened in surprise. "I did, guilty as charged. I played rhythm guitar and sang backing vocals, or at least, I attempted to." His surprised look turned into one of confusion. "Hang on, you don't remember me from the band days, do you? That old band barely lasted six months before we broke up."

"Do you remember Johnny Marshall?" Meg asked.

Johnny blinked, and then his eyes widened even further. "Yes, I remember Johnny. He was a great lad. Everyone was sorry he left the band when he got his girlfriend pregnant and..."

Realisation dawned on his face. "Hang on. *Meg Marshall?* You're Johnny's *wife?*" He looked thrilled by this. "Meg, it's great to see you after all these years! That must be why I thought you looked familiar. I think I remember seeing you at some of the gigs we played back in the day before Johnny left."

"That's it, exactly."

Meg was pleased to solve the mystery of why Harry Doyle looked familiar. Still, it was strange that she'd somehow remembered his face, at least on some level, after all these years. It might have taken her a moment to place him, but she'd got there in the end. Considering she'd probably only met him half a dozen times twenty years ago, it was something of a miracle she'd remembered him at all.

"So, how's Johnny doing these days?" Harry now asked, a smile stretching across his face in expectation. "I was sorry we lost touch after he left the band."

Meg felt her own smile falter. "Johnny passed away a long time ago, I'm sorry to tell you."

Harry's expression crumpled, and the smile vanished in an instant. "Oh my God. I'm so sorry. I had no idea. What happened?"

"There was a road accident and Johnny was killed. It happened about a year or so after he left the band."

Harry shook his head, clearly shocked. “We’d probably broken up by then, the band I mean, which is why I never heard. When we called it a day and went our separate ways, I travelled around Europe for a couple of years, and never kept in touch with the other lads after a while. It wasn’t as easy back then, with no social media and not everyone had mobile phones and...” He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “Sorry, I’m babbling here. It’s just a real shock to hear what happened to Johnny. I’m sorry. He was a great bloke.”

Meg smiled. “He was.”

“But you got married and had a baby together before...” He waved a hand and frowned, looking pained and obviously not wanting to keep repeating the terrible facts Meg had just given him.

Meg smoothed over the awkward moment with a kind smile. “Yes, our son, Jamie. He’s all grown up now. He went up to Cambridge last autumn to start a computer science degree.”

Harry looked suitably impressed by this. “That’s fantastic. Good for him. You must be proud.”

“Proud doesn’t even begin to describe it. In fact, don’t get me started talking about how brilliant my clever son is or I’ll be standing here talking at you for the rest of the day.”

Harry laughed, and Meg was glad she’d punctured the unexpected news he’d just heard about Johnny’s death all those years ago with something more uplifting. It had been a long time since she’d had to inform someone about Johnny having passed away, someone who hadn’t known about the accident. She remembered Johnny and Harry being fairly good friends during their brief time playing in that old band they’d run around in together.

When Johnny had found out Meg was pregnant, he’d given up his band and anything else that ate up too much time in order to work and earn money in preparation for the baby coming. Meg hadn’t thought of that band Johnny had played in for many years. Those brief months he’d spent playing guitar

with his buddies and performing gigs at a few pubs and clubs around Hampshire felt so long ago now.

She remembered going along to support Johnny and the band at some of those gigs they'd played on Friday and Saturday nights, remembered clapping and cheering as they rolled off cover song after cover song, remembered how young and handsome and filled with life Johnny looked up on the stage, strumming his guitar and singing into the microphone and throwing her his trademark winks between songs, making her feel like the only girl in the room.

Now, she stood looking into the eyes of this long-lost face from the past as those memories returned. The years had aged Harry Doyle, just as they'd aged her, but there was still an easy confidence about the man she recalled from when he'd still been not much more than a boy, an eighteen-year-old waiting for life to begin.

Just as Johnny had been, too—a young man on the cusp of adulthood, ready and waiting for the adventures to come.

“Listen, it was great to see you again, Harry,” Meg said with a smile, and gestured to the browsers crowded around his stall. “But I'd better let you get back to it.”

“We should try to catch up while I'm still in town,” Harry said.

Meg was about to answer, although she wasn't sure what she would've said, but an eager shopper caught Harry's attention just then and began asking questions about one of the watercolours on display. Meg gave Harry a quick wave goodbye, which he returned before turning to speak to his new customer.

Edging past the other browsers crowded around Harry Doyle's artworks, Meg found her mother at the next stall over, inspecting the hand-painted teapots on display there.

“Who's he?” Liz asked, nodding towards Harry Doyle.

“An old friend of Johnny's from way back,” she replied. “They used to play in a band together. Remember that band Johnny was in?”

“I vaguely remember there was a band. I don’t remember much beyond that.”

That made sense, considering Meg had scarcely remembered those brief days herself. “Well, anyway, I thought I recognised him, and he thought he recognised me. It took us a while to get there, but that’s how we know or each other. Or knew each other, I suppose.”

“And are those his own paintings, or is he just selling them for someone else?”

“They’re his own. He says he travels a lot and paints wherever he goes.”

“That certainly sounds like an interesting life.”

Meg stole another glance towards Harry, immersed in talking about his paintings with the crowd of potential buyers gathered around him. It did sound like he’d led an interesting life since Meg had last saw him. She found herself wondering how he’d made the leap from a scruffy eighteen-year-old heading off to college and playing guitar on the weekends with his buddies, to an accomplished artist and world traveller.

His life had certainly taken a very different route compared to hers.

“Meg? Are you okay?” Liz asked, frowning.

“I’m fine,” Meg said brightly, then pointed to the teapot her mother was holding. “Are you buying that?”

Liz’s gaze lingered on Meg for a long moment, her expression thoughtful, before she looked at the teapot and turned it this way and that. “I think I might. These lovely strawberries painted all over it are really quite sweet, don’t you think?”

Meg nodded. “They are. Get your purse out, then. We’ve barely started browsing around the stalls and there’s so much to see.”

Once Liz paid for her new teapot, they turned to make their way further down the row of stalls, but Meg couldn’t help glancing back one last time at Harry Doyle’s stall.

His eyes locked with hers right before she turned away and he flashed her a smile.

Meg waved one last time, turned, and kept walking.

“YOU DON’T HAVE to go to all this trouble just for me, Meg. I’ll manage fine in here as it is!”

It was Sunday afternoon and Meg was perched on a ladder as she hauled another box up into the attic.

“It’s no trouble. Jamie says he’s fine with me sticking the clothes he left behind up here while you’re staying in his room. He took most of his stuff with him up to Cambridge, but there’s no point having these extra bits and pieces taking up space in his drawers and wardrobes when you need somewhere for all your things, Mum.”

Down on the landing, Liz frowned. “I don’t like making work for you.”

“You’re not. It’s fine. Stop fretting about it and hand me up that other box.”

Liz did as she was asked and Meg slid the box across the attic floor, then climbed up through the hatch to shove it over to a better position.

Earlier that day, Liz had got a phone call from her erstwhile housemate, Marjorie, who’d informed her that the fire officers had declared her property safe to enter, if not suitable to live in until the kitchen was refurbished and the fire and water damage was fixed. Liz had taken the opportunity to clear out everything she’d had at Marjorie’s place, which consisted mostly of clothes because the bulk of her belongings were in storage while she looked for a new house to buy. When she’d returned from the trip over there, she’d headed

straight upstairs with her things to unpack, but it had quickly become obvious that there wouldn't be enough room for everything.

Not wanting her mother to live out of black bin bags or put up with a jumble of clothes piled up on the floor, Meg had chatted with Jamie and agreed to move his things out of the way. It hadn't taken long to box up the small bundles of clothes he'd left behind. Everything would be fine stored in the attic until Liz moved out or until Jamie decided to take these final items away with him the next time he came home for a visit.

"Thank you, love," Liz said once Meg returned from the attic. "I hope you know I appreciate this."

Meg waved off her mother's thanks, then turned her attention to a set of old board games stored on top of Jamie's wardrobe. "I can shove those up into the attic, too."

As Meg lifted the stack of boxed games down, trying and failing to remember when any of them had last been played and debating whether she ought to just pack them off to the charity shop instead, a dusty old school exercise book fluttered down from where it had been wedged beneath the game boxes.

Setting aside the stack of games, Meg leaned down to retrieve the item. She flicked through a few pages, her heart clenching with love.

"Oh, look at this, Mum!" Meg said, turning the exercise book so Liz could see it. "It's one of Jamie's old school books. Look at all his neat sums written out so carefully. And look at all the ticks he got from his teacher! Every single one is correct." Meg flicked to the front of the book and noted the year and class written there. "Even when he was only seven, he was miles ahead of where he ought to have been."

"He was always a smart cookie, our Jamie," Liz said, beaming with pride at the exercise book as Meg continued flicking through the dusty old pages where the pencil marks had faded with the passage of time.

“I’ve no idea why this old school workbook was stuck up there on top of his wardrobe. He must have flung it up there at the end of the school term ages ago and forgotten about it. I don’t want to throw it out. It’s sweet seeing his scratchy handwriting from so long ago. I’ll keep it and we can have a good giggle about it the next time he comes home.”

“That’s a fine idea.”

“Although I must admit, I’ve kept far too many of Jamie’s things over the years. School books, silly toy collections, science projects,” Meg laughed. “When he becomes a wildly successfully tech entrepreneur, I’ll make a fortune selling all his childhood memorabilia.”

“I still have many of your old things kicking around in my storage boxes,” Liz admitted. “It’s not easy letting stuff like that go.”

“I’ll be right back,” Meg said, and carried her son’s old exercise book through to her bedroom where she kept a box at the back of her wardrobe which she’d filled with Jamie’s old things. She dropped the thin workbook in amongst the rest of the stuff and resisted the urge to start looking through the lot of it, an undoubtedly pleasurable activity, but one she didn’t have any time for right now.

As she pushed the box back into place, it caught the edge of another smaller box stored there and knocked it out of line. Meg reached further into the wardrobe to line it up again, then found herself wondering what was actually inside this other box. She couldn’t for the life of her remember what it might contain, and couldn’t remember the last time she’d looked inside it to find out.

Meg hauled the small box out of the wardrobe with a grunt and lifted the lid. She stared at the contents for a long moment, processing what she saw there.

On top was an old university prospectus, dated the year she would’ve applied for a degree course had she not found herself pregnant with Jamie instead. Meg flicked through the pages, which showcased the lively campus and the busy library and enormous lecture theatres. Her younger self had marked the

pages of the degrees she thought she might like to take—American history, business and marketing, English literature. She'd felt spoiled for choice.

Meg remembered keeping the prospectus, thinking that one day she'd eventually make it to university, perhaps when Jamie was older and she and Johnny found themselves on a more even keel after the shock of becoming teenage parents. That day had never come, and after Johnny died, Meg rarely thought of university at all.

She gulped back a surge of emotion as she remembered all those plans her younger self had made.

Although she knew she should just put the box back in its place where it belonged, she couldn't help glancing through the other items that were stored inside.

Beneath the prospectus, she found a couple of old Polaroid photographs showing Meg and Johnny grinning for the camera. Johnny had a guitar over his shoulder, one hand on the fretboard while the other scooped around Meg's waist and held her close. Turning it over, Meg saw she'd written the date and location on the back in faded biro ink, and realised the photo was taken at one of Johnny's pub gigs with his old band, The Westerlies.

Meg stared at the photograph for a long moment as distant memories surfaced of that specific night—the loud music the band had played, the noise of the crowd, the crush at the bar, the fun of it all.

How strange, she thought, that she should come across these old photographs the day after bumping into one of Johnny's old band mates.

She dug deeper into the box.

Beneath the small stack of Polaroids, she found an old ticket stub from the pub gig in question, advertising the date, time, location, and price. It was little more than a few words printed on a sheet of thick paper, but that was as far as Johnny's band's resources had stretched. Meg's ticket was bent

and worn at the edges from being shoved in the back pocket of her jeans all evening during the show.

The gig had taken place not long after Johnny and Meg got together. They hadn't even been old enough to buy alcohol at the bar yet, but that hadn't stopped them from having fun.

Far from it, Meg thought with a blush as she remembered their fumbled kisses in the back of the van that the lead singer, who was in his early twenties, had driven everyone home in.

Each memory hurt. Each memory brought sweet feelings, too, of those lost days from long ago.

Meg dug deeper still into the box and then paused. If she kept going, if she kept pulling out these old reminders of her past, how would she feel about what else she might find there?

Happy? Sad? Thankful for the memories she had? Or regretful for the memories she'd never got the chance to make?

And she thought, too, about something else she might find in that box, something she *knew* she'd find in that box, something she wasn't sure she wanted to see at all.

Before she could decide whether to dig any deeper or just let those old ghosts stay there undisturbed where they belonged, she heard a knock at her bedroom door.

"Meg, are you okay in here?" Liz asked, sticking her head around the door. "I hope you're not still trying to find more space for my silly things?"

"No," Meg said, quickly tossing everything back inside the box and replacing the lid before shoving it back inside the wardrobe. "Just taking a walk down memory lane."

Meg attempted to clear her expression, but Liz must have noticed it anyway. For a moment, Meg thought her mother was about to ask if she was okay, but after a few seconds of debate, she seemed to think better of it.

"Right, well, I was about to pop the kettle on before I start unpacking these bags of mine," Liz said. "Do you want to join me for a brew?"

“Go on then,” Meg smiled.

“I’ll use my new teapot. I’m quite enamoured with the lovely little thing.”

Liz chuckled and disappeared from view, leaving Meg alone with her thoughts.

She didn’t want to be alone with her thoughts, though, not after peeking inside that old box of mementos from when she’d been young and happy and so blissfully unaware of what was coming next.

Pushing the difficult thoughts firmly out of her head, Meg returned to her son’s room to see what else she could shift around in order to help her mother feel at home during her stay.

* * *

“I have a present for you, Meg.”

Meg looked up from the ironing board where she was pressing her shirts for work. It was Sunday evening, and Liz had been upstairs for the past few hours. Meg assumed her mother was sorting through all those bags of clothing and belongings she’d collected from Marjorie’s house earlier that day.

Now, though, as Meg glanced up from the ironing and saw a fancy gift bag in her mother’s hands, which she was holding out towards her, she realised she must have been up to something else up there, too.

“What sort of present?” Meg asked, setting down the iron.

“Why don’t you open it and find out?”

With an amused chuckle, Meg took the gift bag, wondering what was inside. The bag was light, so light it seemed impossible that it contained anything at all, but when Meg untied the blue ribbon that sealed the top, she saw a folded piece of paper tucked inside.

Giving her mother a confused frown, she pulled out the piece of paper and unfolded it. As she read what was printed there, her eyes widened in astonishment.

Gift Certificate

Have fun and unleash your inner artist!

Enjoy a prosecco-and-painting class taught by artist Harry Doyle.

Wednesday evenings in Jan and Feb.

7pm-9pm at Hamblehurst Community Centre.

Call ahead to book your place and redeem your gift.

Meg stared at the printed sheet, rereading it twice before looking up at her mother, who stood before her with a pleased-with-herself grin plastered across her face.

“What’s all this about?” Meg asked, waving the sheet of paper in the air.

“It’s my way of saying thank you for putting me up while I keep looking for somewhere else to stay,” Liz replied.

“You don’t have to thank me, Mum.”

“Don’t be daft, of course I have to thank you. I *want* to thank you. Yesterday at the craft fair, I looked at lots of different things I might buy as a nice gift, things I’m sure you would’ve liked. But every time I considered something or other, I kept remembering how taken you were with those watercolours on display at that arts stall run by that friend of yours from back in the day. So, while you popped to the loo, I went back over to his stall, planning to pick up one of his watercolours.”

Liz waved a hand, as if dismissing this idea. “But when I got there, I saw a sign posted on the display board about these art classes he’s running. There are only a few of them scheduled for the next few weeks, and once the slots are gone, they’re gone. And I thought to myself, I bet Meg would much rather enjoy a lovely experience such as this, something fun and exciting to do. After that unhappy business with your break-up with Ian, and you looking a bit down in the dumps these days—”

“I look down in the dumps?” Meg interrupted, surprised by this description.

Liz bit her lip. “Just a little. Oh, I’m sure it’s just the winter blues and I know we all get those, but mix that in with an unfortunate relationship failure and all the pressure you’ve got at work right now, and you missing Jamie so terribly... well, I decided that rather than buying a painting for your wall, I thought, I’ll give you this lovely gift experience instead.”

Her explanation delivered, Liz paused and drew a breath. Meg had the distinct impression that her mother had been planning this little speech and anticipating Meg’s baffled reaction to the gift certificate.

It really was a surprising thing to give her.

“I’m not sure what to say,” Meg said. “Thank you, obviously. I’ve never done any art before, though. I’d hate to think you’ve wasted your money paying for me to drink prosecco while cackhandedly smearing a paintbrush across a canvas.”

“I haven’t wasted my money. Like I said, it’s about getting you out there to enjoy a lovely experience. I don’t expect you to come home lugging a piece of artwork that could hang in the Louvre beside the Mona Lisa.”

Liz laughed and tapped a finger on the number printed on the sheet of paper. “Just make sure you phone up and book which night you want to go along.”

“Well, which night would suit you?” Meg asked.

Liz blinked and then shook her head. “Oh, this is just for you, love. I’m not going.”

“I thought it was for the both of us? Something nice to do together?”

Another head shake from her mother. “No, I think you’ll enjoy doing something fun on your own without your creaky old mother hanging over your shoulder. Didn’t you say just the other day that you were thinking you needed to get out there and find something new and exciting to spark some interest in your life? A new hobby or interest?”

“Well, yes, I did say that.”

“There you go, then. This will be perfect. And who knows, perhaps you’ll enjoy it and want to keep painting?”

“True. I won’t know until I try, I suppose.”

“That’s the spirit. And that nice young artist, Harry Doyle, seems like a lovely bloke. Plus, you said you knew him from way back. Well, going along to one of the art classes he’s teaching will give you a chance to catch up and find out what he’s been up to since you last saw him, won’t it?”

Meg’s eyes narrowed at this additional reasoning supplied by her mother. “Please tell me you didn’t buy this gift certificate as some sort of elaborate attempt at a romantic set-up, Mother.”

Liz tutted. “Of course not. What a load of nonsense. I just thought you’d like the art class, that’s all. And you seemed to chat for long enough to Harry when you stopped by his stall, so I just thought this would be a nice chance to chat a little bit longer with him. I have no ulterior motives, despite what I said yesterday about you only seeming to go after deadly dull men who aren’t suited to you at all, but that’s neither here nor there and certainly has nothing to do with me making this gesture of a fun evening activity for my daughter, who I love and only want to be happy, and—”

“Okay, okay!” Meg said, laughing and holding her hands up in surrender. “Thank you for this thoughtful gift, Mother. I’ll look forward to it. It’ll be fun. I’ll book a slot as soon as I can. Are you sure you don’t want to come with me?”

“Quite sure.”

Meg tucked the gift certificate behind the clock on the sideboard. She’d phone tomorrow during her lunch break at work and book her slot. It was thoughtful of her mother to do this and Meg knew it would probably be fun, swigging wine and painting a bowl of fruit or whatever it was they’d be asked to paint during the class.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d done something unusual or unexpected like this. And it was true she’d been muttering to herself about finding some interest or hobby to

occupy her time, something that would spark some passion and excitement.

“You deserve to have a little fun in your life, Meg,” her mother said softly. “And I hope that’s what this will turn out to be,” she added, nodding over to the folded gift certificate. “Just a bit of frivolous fun.”

“Thank you, Mum,” Meg said, and hugged her. “You’re a star.”

“Oh, by the way, when you turn up for the art class, you should know that it’s a live nude you’ll be painting and Harry Doyle himself is the nude model.”

Meg’s eyes widened in stunned shock and she almost keeled over. “*What?*”

An evil grin spread across her mother’s face. “Only joking, dear. But your reaction just then spoke volumes, don’t you think?”

Before Meg could utter a reply, Liz disappeared back up the stairs with a throaty cackle. It took Meg a long moment to remove the mental image of a naked Harry Doyle from her head.

She was still blushing furiously as she returned to her pile of ironing.

MEG ARRIVED at the community centre the following Wednesday evening just before seven o'clock and found the room where the art class was being held filled with a gaggle of noisy women already getting stuck into the prosecco.

Across the room, she saw Harry Doyle organising the paints and easels. When he looked up and saw her loitering in the doorway, he smiled and waved her inside.

"Meg, great to see you," Harry said. "Are you ready for an evening of art?"

"I can't wait," she replied, accepting the glass of prosecco he held out for her.

"Your mother said she thought you'd enjoy this class when she bought the gift certificate for you. I don't know if you've done any painting before, but don't worry if not. This is all about having fun and doing whatever comes natural to you."

"I'm sure the booze helps loosen up any artistic inhibitions amongst those who are clueless and terrified, like I am."

Harry laughed at that. "Once we get started, you'll get into the swing of it. Just enjoy yourself." He pointed to the carrier bag Meg had hooked in the crook of her arm. "Did you bring something to wear over your clothes to prevent any paint splashes, like I suggested on the phone when you booked?"

Juggling her prosecco glass into her other hand, Meg pulled an old shirt from the bag. "Will this do?"

“It’s perfect. There’s one painting easel and stool still empty over there, if you want to get yourself sorted.”

Meg shuffled over to the easel and stool and said hello to the women on either side of her as she donned the old shirt she usually wore when doing the gardening. By the time she’d buttoned it up, Harry was getting the class under way.

After welcoming everyone, he talked them through the paints and brushes they’d each been given, then pointed to a tall table in the middle of the room on which there was some sort of object covered with a drape of material.

“I’m sure you’re all wondering what you’ll be painting tonight,” Harry said with a grin as he walked towards the centre of the room and lifted the cover.

Instead of the fruit bowl Meg had been imagining for the past few days—it was ubiquitous for a reason, she assumed—there was instead a mobile phone propped up beneath the cover Harry had removed. The other art class students all looked at one another in confusion when they saw this, a few of them squinting and protesting that they’d need to fetch their glasses if they were expected to paint such a small object.

But Harry was grinning and shaking his head as he picked up the phone. “Don’t worry, you won’t be painting this boring old phone. Instead, I want you to take your phone out and flick through your photos.”

“I don’t have a phone!” someone complained.

Harry only smiled. “That’s okay. If you don’t have a phone, we’ll sort you out in just a minute. Now, if you *do* have a phone, look through your photos until you find a picture of yourself that you like. That’s what you’re going to paint—a self-portrait.”

“Eek! I hate looking at pictures of myself!”

“All the photos I have of myself are awful!”

Harry stilled the rebellious crowd with a calming wave of his arm. “Wait, I haven’t finished yet. I don’t want you to just attempt a lifelike painting of yourself. Where would the fun be in that? Instead, I want you to let your wild creative side come

out and imagine yourself however you'd like to. Want to give yourself pink and orange hair? Go for it! Wish you had long, flowing locks like Rapunzel? Go for it! Want to imagine yourself as Medusa with snakes coming out of your head? Go for it!"

The art students all glanced at each other, tentative smiles curving at their mouths as they listened to what Harry was saying.

"Or maybe you want to imagine yourself as a comic book character or a fairy or a witch or a mermaid or something else entirely," Harry continued. "Maybe you're an assassin or a soldier or a celebrity or a mad scientist. It's completely up to you."

"We can choose anything we want?" someone asked, incredulous.

"Anything you want," Harry replied. "There are no rules here. Paint yourself however you'd like to—with features you'd love to have but don't, as a superhero you love, as a fantasy character you feel some affinity for. If you don't want to paint yourself as some sort of character, maybe you'd like to have fun with colour instead, giving yourself purple skin and blue hair, or strange tattoos on your face. Perhaps you want to over-emphasise something about yourself that you like, such as making your eyes really huge, and play down some other feature you're less keen on. Or perhaps you like animals, and you'd like to imagine yourself with features like those of a wolf or lion or other favourite creature. Like I said, there are no rules. You can go as far as you'd like, so long as you're having fun."

Harry picked up the phone and waved it in the air. "Once you've found the photo you'd like to use, we'll print it out so you have a reference image to pin to your easel. There's a printer already set up in the room." He gave them the device name so they could find it on their phones and connect to it. "If you don't have a phone with you, I'll take a photo for you and print it from my phone. How does everyone feel about this as our focus for tonight's class?"

Meg glanced around the room and saw a mixture of wary smiles and outright excitement. Everyone appeared to be on board with the idea of painting a creative and inventive self-portrait. Meg loved the idea and couldn't wait to start. Her initial hesitation at having to paint her own face had disappeared as Harry spoke and she began to realise just how much fun she could have with this.

The printer was soon whirring and as people gathered their prints from the machine, Harry helped those who needed him to take a photo of them. Meg flicked through her selfies until she found a recent one where she looked halfway decent and after printing it out, she pinned it next to her blank canvas.

Once everyone was ready, Harry moved to an easel set up at the front of the class and began working his brushes on the canvas as he showed them how to create the basic facial shapes and structures they'd need to get started. Meg marvelled at how his easy brushstrokes so quickly produced an outline that was so obviously the beginnings of a human face, and most people in the room laughed when their own attempts didn't quite match those of the professional.

"Don't worry if it's not quite right," Harry assured everyone. "Remember, I'm a professional. I do this for a living. If I can't manage to whip up a quick drawing of my own face that looks pretty good, then I shouldn't be here, should I?"

This got a round of laughter and Meg sensed everyone relaxing into the activity. Over the next few minutes, Harry took them step-by-step through the various stages of the process, explaining how he was holding the paintbrush, how he was creating the strokes on the canvas, how he was achieving this or that paint effect. Meg followed his tuition and soon had something on her canvas that didn't look absolutely ridiculous.

With their basic facial structures painted, Harry set them to work adding whatever flourishes and features they wanted. After completing the rough version of his own self-portrait by turning his face into that of a clown, complete with colourful

make-up and hilarious hair and a funny grin, he invited the class to get to work on their own inventive creations.

As Harry began touring the room offering advice to each painter on how to create their vision, while also topping up their prosecco glasses, Meg pondered what she wanted to do with her own self-portrait.

It was strange being given permission to imagine herself however she wanted to. Her mind raced in every direction as she considered the examples Harry had given in his introductory talk. The idea of painting herself as a superhero or comic book character didn't particularly appeal to her, and the thought of turning herself into an animal like a wolf or lion or whatever just made her want to giggle with embarrassment.

Meg mulled it over as she dabbed her brush in the paint palette and considered the colours she had available to work with. She glanced at the printed photo of herself pinned to the easel, her gaze taking in her short, simple hairstyle that stopped just above her shoulders, and the pale pink lipstick and light make-up she'd been wearing on the day the picture was taken.

She looked... unremarkable, Meg thought. Forgettable. Dull.

Meg chewed her lip, not liking these thoughts. This was supposed to be fun.

An image suddenly jumped into her head, an image of herself with long blonde hair flowing behind her and vivid red lips and a steely gaze as she peered off into the distance.

Where had that come from? Meg had no idea. But she liked it. And she liked how she looked in that image—strong and determined and ready for anything.

Meg dipped her brush into the yellow paint. Her own hair was light brown, albeit with a few grey hairs sneaking in these days. She didn't mind the grey, not really, but she'd never much liked the dull brown shade of her natural colour. It might be fun to be blonde. They had all the fun, if the old saying was to be believed. As this art class was supposed to be about

having fun and letting your wild creative side get out, then it might be a laugh to give herself long blonde hair, whipping in the wind.

She ran her brush across the paper, creating a long blonde tendril, then squinted to judge the effect.

It looked like a worm rather than a lock of flowing hair.

She tried again, applying more paint and adjusting her brush stroke.

Now it appeared a little better. Possibly still somewhat worm-like depending on how you looked at it, but the two worms together could conceivably be hair belonging to some fearsome woman.

Harry appeared at her shoulder and smiled as he looked at her easel.

“You’re doing great,” he said and topped up her prosecco glass. “Nice work on the eyes, by the way.”

Meg was quite pleased with the eyes she’d brushed in while following Harry’s lead when he’d demonstrated at the front of the class. “I think I must be better at eyes than I am at hair.”

“Let me show you a little trick,” Harry said.

He took her brush, dipped it in the paint, then touched it against the paper. “See the angle I’m holding the brush at?”

Meg nodded.

“Good. Now, if I move the brush like this,”—he flicked the brush against the paper to demonstrate—“then you can get the sort of effect I think you’re after.”

Meg gaped, amazed at how the brushstrokes he’d created had changed her wormy tendrils into the flowing goddess locks she’d wanted.

“Wow,” Meg said, taking the brush back. “Let me see if I can do it.”

Emulating the way Harry had held and moved the brush, Meg grazed the bristles across the paper. The new blonde

locks she'd added weren't as lovely as Harry's, but they were a lot better than what she'd done before.

"See, that looks fantastic," Harry said. "Well done."

"It's not quite what I see in my mind's eye, but I like how it's turning out."

"For what it's worth, the image I have in my head when I start painting is almost never what ends up on the paper or canvas. Details change as I paint, or I realise something I thought might work actually turns out not to work at all. What matters is starting and finding out where the painting wants to take you."

Meg smiled at this whimsical notion. "I'm enjoying the class, but I'm not sure this female I'm painting actually looks anything like me."

"She does, in her own way," Harry said, pointing again to the easel. "Like I said, you've really done a great job with the eyes. And anyway, the whole point is that you paint something that *you're* happy with and that gets those creative processes working."

"Thanks, Harry."

He smiled and moved off to help the next artist seated beside Meg. After refreshing herself with a good glug of prosecco and chatting for a few minutes with the woman on the other side of her as they compared notes on their progress so far, Meg returned to her painting.

She studied what she'd managed to paint so far. It obviously lacked the style and flair of the clown self-portrait Harry Doyle had dashed off in two minutes flat at the start of the class, but that was only to be expected. And although what Meg had painted was clearly the work of a rank amateur, she was still quietly thrilled with how it was turning out.

A few more thoughtful brushstrokes added something approximating the tumbling, windswept blonde locks that Meg had hoped for, banishing the tendril worms that had threatened to ruin the entire enterprise. And Harry was right, she *had*

captured some element of the likeness of her eyes, although quite how she'd done it was a mystery.

Meg liked this woman who was appearing on the easel, brushstroke by brushstroke. She was Meg, but also *not* Meg. The fearsome blonde was rough and tumble, take no prisoners, and knew exactly what she wanted and how to get it, staring off into the distance with determination in her focused stare.

What was she looking at? Meg wondered.

What was this icy blonde going after in life?

What did this version of Meg know that the real Meg did not?

Because she knew *something*—that much was obvious.

She knows how to live—that's what she knows.

Meg wasn't sure where those words came from inside her head, but she pondered them for a long while as she selected a new brush and prepared to paint Easel Meg's bold red lipstick into place.

She paused with her brush in her hand, poised above the red paint. Red wasn't right, she suddenly realised. It wasn't right at all. She'd been so sure when she'd started out that this woman in the painting would have bold red lips, and yet that wasn't what she wanted to paint at all.

Harry had said that the vision often changed once a painting was underway, and now she understood what he'd meant.

Switching the bold red for a deep luscious pink, Meg mixed the paint until it was just right and then loaded her brush. With tentative strokes, she moved the brush across the lips she'd sketched in earlier, hoping for the best.

Meg filled in the colour, softened it using the techniques Harry had demonstrated, then did a little more work before pausing once more to judge her progress.

Easel Meg wasn't perfect, far from it, and anyone else looking at the painting would probably laugh and tell Meg not to give up her day job just yet. But that was fine, because Meg

hadn't been trying for perfection. She'd just been trying for fun.

Easel Meg looked like someone who knew how to have fun. With her technicolour blonde hair and big pink lips she looked terrific, at least that's what Meg thought. She'd rushed some parts of the painting, and there were a few places that probably needed tidying up, but it wasn't half bad and...

"Okay everyone, we're almost out of time!" Harry called out from the front of the room. "If you want to add any last touches to your painting, now is the time to do it, because we need to give the paint at least fifteen minutes to dry so you can all take your art home."

Meg looked at the clock up on the wall, hardly believing the two-hour class was almost over. The time had rushed by in the blink of an eye. She'd thought there was still time to work more on Easel Meg's hair, maybe add some texture to try to show how the wind was moving through it, but that was now out of the question.

Still, Meg was happy with what she'd done. Most of the other people in the class looked like they'd had as much fun as she'd had, too. As everyone set down their paintbrushes, Meg glanced at the array of self-portraits perched on the easels and saw so many wonderful creations and interpretations of the brief they'd been given.

As they gave their paintings time to dry, Harry invited the artists to wander around the room and enjoy one another's creations while he cleared up the paints and brushes. There was plenty of chat and laughter and compliments as the artists toured the room, admiring what everyone had achieved. Soon, everyone was pulling on their coats and getting ready to leave.

"Thanks for a fantastic evening, Harry," Meg said, clutching her watercolour painting that was now more or less dry and safe to be lifted from the easel. "I loved every minute of it."

"I'm glad to hear that," Harry said and nodded at the painting in her hand. "I hope you're proud of what you painted tonight. It looks terrific."

Meg laughed. “Her hair is a little yellower than I planned, and I’m not entirely sure about her lips, if I’m honest. I can’t help thinking she looks like the victim of a botched cosmetic surgery procedure.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a good bit of pouting,” Harry grinned.

“Well, thanks again,” Meg said and turned for the door.

“Hey, Meg, listen,” Harry said quickly. “Shall we get together for a drink and a proper catch up? I was about to suggest it on Saturday at the craft fair until I got busy with customers and you left me to get on with things. I’d love to hear more about what you’ve been up to since the old days.”

Harry’s open smile and the warmth in his eyes had Meg nodding. “I’d like that. Yeah, it’d be nice to catch up. Although it sounds like you’ve had a lot more going on than I have, so I think you’ll be the one doing most of the talking.”

He gave an easy shrug and laughed. “What about this Friday? Are you free then?”

“Yes, that works for me.”

“Is the Royal Oak still decent enough? I haven’t been back in Hamblehurst for long enough to know which pubs are worth the trouble.”

“It’s fine,” Meg said. “They have bands playing later on Friday nights, but in the early evening it should still be quiet enough to hear ourselves talking.”

“Great. Shall we just get some dinner there too while we’re at it? Save ourselves the trouble of feeding ourselves before we meet up?”

Meg nodded. “Sounds good to me. How does six o’clock sound? Too early? Too late?”

“It sounds perfect. You’ve got my number if you need to get in touch to change the arrangements.”

Harry gave her another warm smile. As there were still class participants mingling around and obviously waiting for the chance to chat to Harry about their paintings before they

left, Meg said goodbye, not wanting to take up any more of his time when other paying customers were keen for his attention.

When she stepped out of the community centre, a hard frost had descended and the pavements glistened beneath the streetlights. Buttoning her coat, Meg tucked her self-portrait inside the protective cardboard cover Harry had given everyone and started for home.

What a fun night she'd had, Meg thought as she navigated the slippery pavements. And she'd bagged a catch-up with Harry Doyle to boot.

That had been an unexpected way to end the night.

She'd have to rack her brains for interesting things to talk about with him when they met on Friday night. If he was now a globe-trotting artist, it stood to reason that Harry Doyle would have plenty of interesting stories to share about what he'd done in the twenty years since she'd last known him.

As she headed home, she thought about this and wondered what had brought him back to Hamblehurst now.

She'd ask him on Friday, she decided, over dinner and drinks at the pub.

* * *

Meg was shrugging off her coat and kicking off her boots in the hallway when her mother's head appeared around the living room door.

"Did you have fun at the art class?" Liz asked, stepping into the hallway and wrapping her dressing gown around her to fend off the chill that had swept into the house when Meg came inside.

"It was terrific, Mum," Meg replied. "Thanks for buying me the ticket and making me go along."

"Want some tea to warm you up after the walk home?"

"Yes, please." Meg followed her mother into the kitchen.

"Let's see what you painted, then," Liz said, nodding to the cardboard cover Meg set down on the kitchen table.

“It’s sort of silly.”

Liz waved this off. “Let me see it.”

Meg removed the watercolour from the protective sleeve. “Don’t laugh, but our task was to paint a self-portrait, but to be all creative and arty with it.”

“Meg! This is wonderful!” Liz grinned. “Look at this!”

“We had to imagine ourselves differently from how we are. Some people painted themselves as comic book characters or superheroes, one woman painted herself as a witch, someone else gave herself fangs like a vampire. None of that appealed to me, but I liked the idea of having mad blonde hair.”

“Are you thinking of dying your hair? You’d suit a colour like this.”

“No, I can’t be bothered with all that palaver and constantly getting my roots done. Maybe in a few years, when the grey starts to annoy me more than it is right now.” Meg laughed. “I don’t know where the blonde hair inspiration came from. I was thinking about what I wanted to paint, and this is the image that popped into my head.”

It wasn’t really about the blonde hair anyway, or the pouting pink lips that were far too big for her face. It was about the intention and the *fearsomeness* of the woman she’d depicted. The version of Meg she’d painted knew what she was about.

“I think it’s wonderful,” Liz said. “And it does look like you. The eyes are pretty good.”

“I was quite pleased with how those turned out.”

“Has the art class given you a bug to take up painting?”

“Maybe. It might be a fun hobby to potter around with. Although the truth is that Harry Doyle is a pretty great teacher. He showed us all how to create the basic face shapes and add features, like eyes, that would’ve been pretty hard to tackle otherwise. If it hadn’t been for Harry and his expert guidance, I’m sure we’d all have ended up with nothing more than a few splodges on the paper.”

“I’m glad it was a fun night for you,” Liz smiled and brewed the tea. “If Harry is running any more art classes, perhaps you ought to sign up?”

“I’ll ask him when I see him on Friday night.”

Liz turned from the tea pot with a surprised look on her face. “You’re going out with him?”

“Just to catch up on old times.”

“That sounds like a fine idea. He’s a fine-looking young man.”

“Don’t go getting ideas into your head, Mother. He’s just some bloke who used to play in a band with Johnny for a few months almost twenty years ago. He was sorry to hear Johnny had died when I chatted with him at the craft fair, and after seeing me again tonight, he probably just wants to remember the old days.”

“You said it sounded like he’d been travelling for a while. Has he moved back to Hamblehurst for good?”

“I have no idea.”

“Well, you can ask him on Friday.”

Meg accepted a mug of tea from her mother and then spent a few minutes chatting before Liz went back through to the living room to watch the rest of the programme she’d been enjoying when Meg arrived home.

Alone in the kitchen, Meg studied the watercolour she’d painted. She liked Watercolour Meg and wondered if it would be ludicrously self-indulgent to buy a cheap frame for the painting and stick it up on the wall. Not because of any intrinsic artistic genius it revealed—because it didn’t reveal any—but because she liked the fearsome determination she’d captured in the features of her watercolour alter ego.

For now, she popped the painting back inside the piece of protective cardboard and carried it upstairs to her bedroom, where she tucked it on top of the chest of drawers between her free-standing mirror and a decorative candle holder.

Her mind turned to the drinks and dinner she'd arranged to have with Harry Doyle at the end of the week, and wondered if she'd done the right thing in agreeing to meet up.

On the one hand, it would be nice to chat with someone from the old days.

On the other hand, it might actually *hurt* to chat with someone from the old days. What if Harry wanted her to give him chapter and verse on Johnny's tragic death, and she ended up feeling awful?

But she felt confident pushing that notion away. She might only have spent a very short time in Harry Doyle's company since they'd bumped into each other at the craft fair, but he didn't strike her as ghoulish or insensitive.

And anyway, she was looking forward to getting together with him again. His easy, relaxed manner during the art class tonight was strangely alluring and made her want to reconnect with this barely remembered ghost from her past, even if it was only for old time's sake.

FAT SNOWFLAKES WERE DRIFTING down from a dark wintry sky when Meg arrived at the Royal Oak pub on the high street on Friday evening to meet Harry Doyle. As she hurried towards the pub, eager to get inside and out of the snow, she spied Harry standing outside the doors. When he saw her approaching, he raised his hand in a wave.

“You shouldn’t have waited outside for me,” Meg said. “It’s freezing cold.”

“The pub is packed inside,” he replied. “I didn’t want you to have to hunt around the whole place looking for me.”

He held the door open for her and they both ducked inside. The wall of warmth that greeted Meg was welcome after her chilly walk from Foxglove Street. Just as Harry said, the pub was packed, and it was standing room only at the bar where every stool had already been requisitioned. Meg couldn’t see any spare tables either.

“Good thing I phoned ahead yesterday and booked us a table so we’d be able to get a proper meal,” Harry said.

“Smart thinking. We’d have to make do with loitering near the bar with a packet of pork scratchings otherwise, by the looks of things.”

Harry laughed and gave his name to a barman, who checked a clipboard and then pointed to the lounge at the back before showing them to a small table tucked in the corner with a ‘Reserved’ sign perched on it. As they shrugged off coats

and sat down, Meg felt the radiated heat from the nearby open fire that was crackling in the grate.

“This is nice and cosy,” Harry said, rubbing his hands together to warm them. “I think they’ve done this place up since I was last here.”

“New owners bought it about seven or eight years ago and put a lot of work into it. The pub wasn’t nearly as nice before. Plus, the new owners created a small stage for live music performances and I think that’s helped generate a lot of customers and interest, too.”

“It looks like a great pub for a live band,” Harry said, looking around appreciatively. “If the old band Johnny and I played in back in the day had ever had the chance to perform somewhere as nice as this, we would’ve considered ourselves very lucky.”

Meg grinned. “I seem to recall The Westerlies tended towards the grubbier end of the scale when it came to the local hostelrys they performed in.”

“Grubby?” Harry said. “Try downright revolting. Some of those pubs and clubs we played in ought to have been condemned on health and safety grounds. I remember one place where an actual *rat* leapt out from some darkened corner and ran around on the stage right in front of us while we were trying to perform our set. I nearly had a bloody heart attack.”

Meg let out a peal of laughter. “God, I’d forgotten all about that! What a place that was! Where was that again?”

“I think it was some den of iniquity somewhere near Portsmouth. And that place wasn’t even the worst of it, either. I remember another gig we played all the way over in Brighton, and the building was literally falling down. There was a bucket in the middle of the pub to catch the rainwater coming in through the roof, and the water damage was so bad that when the bass guitarist plugged in his amp, he got zapped with fifty thousand volts and shorted out the whole place. He looked like Marty McFly at the beginning of *Back To The Future* when he tries to play his guitar at Doc Brown’s house.”

Meg was almost doubled over with laughter. “I don’t remember that. I must not have been there that night.”

“Lucky you. The poor bass player went around with his hair on end for the rest of the night, and the landlord threatened to sue us for damaging his property. Bloody cheek! Once he got the lights back on again, he chucked us out and refused to pay us. We’d pooled all our spare cash to afford the petrol to drive us all over there and ended up having to leave empty-handed and with a band member who literally had smoke coming out of his ears.”

Meg could barely catch her breath from laughing so hard. “Stop, or I’ll have tears running down my face next and everyone will wonder what on earth’s the matter with me.”

Harry held his hands up in an amused apology. “Ah, the good old days. We had our moments in that old band, that’s for sure. We’d have done anything for the chance to play our music, which is why we agreed to turn up at those rancid old places and play for next to nothing, just wanting to have fun while secretly hoping we’d get lucky and catch a big break.”

Harry’s funny stories about the old band days brought the memories back, turning them brighter and fuller inside her mind. Until she’d crossed paths with Harry at the craft fair, she hadn’t thought about Johnny’s old band days in years. Too many of those memories had hurt for much too long in the years after Johnny’s death, and with an infant son to care for while she dealt with her grief, Meg had little headspace for reminiscing, not when it only left her hollowed out with the pain of loss.

But Harry had remembered those old band days very differently, which stood to reason. He hadn’t known Johnny had died, so there were no bittersweet memories to taint things, and he’d already mentioned that when the band split up, he’d gone off travelling and into a new world of grand adventures.

Harry Doyle’s memory frame was very different from Meg’s.

“I don’t remember Johnny talking much about the band after he left,” Meg confessed. “We were busy getting ready for our son arriving and Johnny started working at a couple of different jobs to help us put away as much spare cash as we could, and I don’t think I ever heard about how The Westerlies eventually broke up.”

“With a baby on the way, and you two getting married, I would’ve been surprised if either of you gave that old band a second thought,” Harry said easily.

“You must have been upset when you all went your separate ways?”

“I don’t think it came as much of a surprise, to be honest. We really weren’t very good.” Harry laughed and gave her a wry look. “But it was fun to run around playing those gigs and wondering if we might get lucky and make it in the big time. We all missed Johnny when he left, but then we all started getting busy with college and jobs and other things. The Westerlies had a decent run, probably for far longer than we ought to have, but it was time to call it a day. There’s a season for everything, right?”

Meg smiled and was about to reply when a waitress arrived at their table and asked if they were ready to order food. The conversation had flowed so easily since they’d sat down, and neither of them had even looked at the menu. After quickly scanning the options, they choose their meals and agreed to share a bottle of red wine. Once the waitress left, Meg gave Harry an amused smile.

“I thought it might be strange meeting up with you tonight and thinking back to all those years ago. But it’s not strange at all. You remember a lot of funny stories about that old band you all played in, and it’s fun hearing them.”

“I’m sure I have plenty more stories like that,” he said softly. “But listen, I just want to say how sorry I was when you told me about what happened to Johnny. I’ve been thinking about it ever since the craft fair. It wouldn’t have been right to mention it during the art class the other night, when you were there as a paying customer looking for a fun evening involving

prosecco and watercolours, and it would've been completely inappropriate for me to risk upsetting you by offering condolences about something that happened so long ago. But I am sorry to know that Johnny died, and I do want you to have my condolences, even if it is twenty years too late."

Touched by his words, Meg smiled. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

She feared that Harry might feel compelled to ask questions about the accident that had killed Johnny, feared he might think it would seem odd if he didn't ask, but perhaps he caught the look in her eyes because instead he sat back in his chair and gave her a thoughtful look.

"I just realised I don't know if you remarried after Johnny died."

Meg shook her head. "No, I didn't. I had my son, Jamie, to look after, and for a long time the idea of even thinking about anything like that was just too much."

"I can understand that."

The waitress reappeared with their wine. Meg was thankful for the interruption to their suddenly awkward conversation. Once their glasses were filled, Harry raised his.

"To old friends," he said simply.

The words lodged a lump of unexpected emotion in Meg's throat. "To old friends," she managed, quickly taking a drink of the deep, rich red wine.

"So, what do you do for a living, Meg?" Harry asked.

Meg spent a few minutes filling him in on her administrative job at the local council. He laughed when she talked about the latest reorganisation they were all enduring there, and the endless nonsense that accompanied the process.

"Do you ever think about retraining and doing something else?" he asked.

"Sometimes," she admitted. "Although I do actually like the job I have, and I think I'm reasonably good at it. If they'd just let us get on with doing our jobs instead of forcing us to

put up with these pointless reorganisations every few years, we'd all be a lot happier, I'm sure of it."

"It can be hard knowing when it's the right time to move on," Harry said. "Or even *if* it's the right time to move on."

"Exactly. And I know the reason I'm feeling more annoyed at work right now than I normally would is because of Jamie leaving home to start university. It's a big change for him, but I think I'm only starting to realise it's a big change for me, too."

"You spent almost two decades raising your boy and caring for him alone, after suffering a terrible tragedy," Harry said, his voice soft once more. "Now that he's off at university, I can only imagine what it must feel like for you to consider what comes next in your own life."

She glanced at her wine glass, knowing Harry had hit the truth of the matter. As she had no real answers about what might come next in her own life, she turned the tables in their conversation. "Do you have children, Harry? A wife? Girlfriend?"

He shook his head. "None of the above. I never stayed in the same place long enough for it to happen. I like life on the road too much, seeing new places, painting and honing my craft. Maybe that makes me selfish."

"Not if you're happy."

"I am happy. Very much."

The simple honesty with which he said these words struck her. Here was a man who knew what made him happy and made no apologies for it. She almost envied him his certainty and his confidence.

"Tell me about all your travels and adventures," Meg said. "I've been excited to hear more ever since you told me about the inspiration behind your paintings at the craft fair. And I've been curious about how you ended up becoming an artist."

"Ah, now that really is a story," Harry laughed. "After the band broke up and I left sixth form college, my parents wanted me to go to university, but I knew I'd never last three years on

a degree course. My feet were itchy and I wanted to get out and see something of the world. I travelled around France and Spain for a year, picking up jobs wherever I went to earn my keep and prove to my parents I could make it on my own. They were furious with me for not going to university and told me I'd ruin my life without a proper qualification. I know now that they were just worried about me and scared about what sort of future I'd have if I didn't have any real skills. But I was eighteen, about to turn nineteen, and I just wanted to live a little, you know?"

Meg nodded. "My own parents almost keeled over when I told them I was pregnant at eighteen, so I know exactly what you mean. Johnny and I were so sure of ourselves and what we were doing, but our parents saw it differently. Obviously, once Jamie was born, they fell in love and that was that. But in those early days, when I'd only just found out there was a baby on the way, they were livid. Now that Jamie is the same age I was when I fell pregnant, I understand only too well how they must have felt back then."

"You took on a lot of responsibility at a young age, Meg. That took guts. In my case, I just wanted to have fun. My parents were probably right to be furious with me, although the truth is we never really saw eye to eye properly after that. I don't think they ever forgave me for not doing what they expected me to do, and there was always a distance between us because of it."

For the first time, Meg saw an uncomfortable look on Harry's face. The decisions he'd made as a young man had clearly had repercussions in his family life that had caused pain and regret.

Their food arrived and Harry continued talking as they ate.

"Anyway, after a year of roaming around from job to job along the east coasts of France and Spain, I started working in a café near Nice, owned by a local artist and her husband. Her name was Simone, her husband's name was Theo, and they were both in their late fifties and hired me to work in the café kitchen. They made a great living for themselves between the café, which drew plenty of locals as well as tourists exploring

the Côte d'Azur, and selling Simone's paintings of the local area, which sold like hot cakes. Simone also ran art classes on the café terrace which made even more money. One day, Simone's art assistant failed to turn up to help her run a large class booked by a bus load of tourists. Simone pulled me out of the kitchen and put me to work as her assistant."

His eyes grew soft and distant. "And that's when I fell in love with art. I'd never seen Simone painting before, but that day I got to watch her as she led her class through some basic techniques. What Simone painted on her canvas blew me away. Instead of helping with the painting supplies and serving coffee to the art class students, I stood there dumbstruck, watching Simone paint. She must have saw the look in my eye, which I imagine would've been a look of complete and utter rapture, because although she told me to stop dawdling and get back to work, she also took me aside after the class was over and asked if art was something I might be interested in."

"And you said yes."

"Sort of. Simone was a fairly terrifying lady, and her being French and an older woman in her fifties made her even more terrifying, so it took me a few attempts to admit that I'd been amazed as I watched her painting. Remember, I was still a dorky, mumbling nineteen-year-old at this point and it wasn't easy to put into words the way I'd felt watching her as she painted."

"It sounds like it was one of those life-changing moments."

"That's exactly what it was. Anyway, Simone took me under her wing and started to teach me when I wasn't working in the café kitchen. I soaked up everything she was willing to share. For an entire year, I spent every spare minute I had painting and honing my craft, and every bit of spare cash I had went towards paying for the art supplies I needed. For a long time, I wasn't very good at it at all, but no matter how awful my paintings looked when I finished them, I was lost in my own world while I was painting. I knew there was nothing else

I wanted to do, nothing else I'd feel this passionate about, and so I kept painting, kept learning, kept improving."

Harry's gaze grew more and more distant as he talked, and then a wry smile lifted his lips. "And eventually, I'd learned enough that one day Simone kicked me out of the café and told me it was time to go and see more of the world and find my own style as an artist."

Meg's eyes widened. "She kicked you out?"

"In the nicest way possible," Harry laughed. "I didn't want to leave her, or the café she ran with her husband. I felt at home there. Which is why she knew I had to move on. Telling me to pack up and leave was the best thing she could ever have done for me. Ever since, I've been travelling and discovering new places, and always painting whatever scenes I found there. I love it. I've been all over France and Spain, I spent a couple of years in Italy and another couple travelling along the coast of Croatia. I sell my paintings and I make a little extra money wherever I'm staying by running art classes, like the one you attended during the week."

He spread his hands and gave her an easy shrug. "And that's my life."

Meg could've happily listened to him talk more about his exciting, creative life filled with travel and adventure, but sensed by his self-deprecating shrug that he didn't want to dominate the conversation by talking only about himself.

"What an amazing life you've had, Harry," Meg said. "It sounds like your decision all those years ago to leave Hamblehurst was vindicated."

"I didn't know exactly what direction my life would go in, but I always knew that leaving was the right move for me, but my parents were never happy with it."

Meg considered this, trying to understand it. "But you make a living as a successful artist! And your paintings are so beautiful, Harry. They must be proud of you?"

He gave another shrug. "My parents never made their peace with the choices I made," he said, and now there was a

flicker of regret on his face. “Like I said, they wanted me to go to university so I could get a degree and find a proper job. But they also wanted me to settle down and give them a nice daughter-in-law and a bunch of grandkids to dote over. I was sorry I couldn’t do that for them and sorry they never really appreciated or understood the choices I made.”

“That’s too bad.” Meg had picked up on his use of the past tense. “The way you’re speaking, it sounds like they’ve they passed on?”

Harry nodded. “My father died six years ago, aged eighty. My mother had a few health issues on and off in the years that followed, and died three months ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Harry,” Meg said, realising with a start how recent this bereavement was and how fresh the loss must still feel.

“Thank you. That’s what brought me back here to stay, at least for a while. Settling the estate and dealing with the house and all my mother’s belongings. There was a lot to sort out.”

Things clicked into place now about why Harry had returned to Hamblehurst after such a long absence. “I wanted to ask you why you’d come back to the town. I’m sorry it was such a sad reason.”

“It’s taken a while to clear the house and settle everything with the solicitor and so on, but it’s done now.”

The sad expression lingered for a moment before Harry turned back to his meal and scraped the last of his food onto his fork.

“These things are never easy,” Meg said. “Believe me, I know. Although I’m sure you’re still very upset about losing your mother, you must feel relieved, too, that you’ve settled her estate and dealt with all the paperwork and so on.”

“Exactly.”

“So, what’s next for you? Are you planning on staying on in Hamblehurst?”

Harry set aside his cutlery and shook his head. “I did think about it, but no, I won’t be staying.”

Meg felt a mix of emotions at this news—a little sadness that Harry wouldn’t be sticking around because she would’ve liked to get to know him better; and also an odd sense of relief.

Why did she feel relieved? She wondered if it was because the flicker of attraction she felt for this man, this long-lost ghost from so long ago, would come to nothing now that she knew Harry Doyle had no plans to remain in Hamblehurst.

It was easier to let that flicker of attraction fade and die than it was to admit she felt attracted in the first place to a man who had once been the teenage friend of her late husband.

“So Hamblehurst doesn’t feel like home anymore?” Meg asked with an easy smile, keen to smooth over any clue she might have betrayed about the thoughts she’d just had.

“I won’t deny that when I came back to be with mum before she died, and then in the weeks that followed after her death, there were moments when I wondered if I ought to stay on here,” Harry said. “But I realised quickly that was just nostalgia talking. I don’t feel this is home anymore, and it hasn’t felt like home for a long time.”

“Where will you go next on your life of travel and adventure?” Meg asked with a smile.

“I’m leaving next month and travelling to Andalucía in southern Spain. After a winter spent here in England, I need some warmth,” he said with a laugh. “I’ll stay there until the temperature gets too much for me, and then I’ll migrate north again and see where the road takes me. Perhaps Provence or maybe Tuscany. They’re both wonderful in the late spring.”

“That sounds incredibly romantic and carefree,” Meg said. “After the freezing cold winter we’ve had so far, I’m definitely not jealous to think of all that lovely warm weather you’re about to soak up.”

They laughed and chatted for another half an hour, lingering over coffee before Harry asked for the bill and

refused to accept any money from Meg when she tried to cover her share.

“This has been fun,” Meg said, and meant it. “I really enjoyed catching up with you, Harry, and hearing all your amazing stories.”

“I enjoyed catching up with you too, Meg,” he replied as he left a tip for the waitress and slipped his wallet back into his pocket. “I’m only sorry we didn’t bump into one another before now, but with everything that’s been going on since I came back, I haven’t had much time to touch base with anyone I used to know around here.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t catch up before now, too. And I’m sorry you’re leaving soon, Harry. For what it’s worth, I would’ve happily signed up for more of your art classes if you’d been staying around.”

He smiled at this. “That you for saying that. I’m sure there are other classes on offer you could try. I’d be glad to ask around and find out if you’d like? Without tooting my own horn, I’m pretty good at working out whether an art teacher is likely to be worth the money they charge.”

“Yeah, why not? Thanks, Harry, I’d appreciate that. I need a new hobby to keep me out of trouble and I had such a lot of fun in your art class. I wouldn’t mind giving it another go.”

“In that case, I’ll make a few inquiries and get back to you so you can sort the wheat from the chaff.”

Leaving the dining area of the pub, they squeezed through the folk gathered in the bar, which was even busier now than it had been when they’d arrived. Over on the stage, the band who were playing tonight were finalising their sound check and preparing to perform, strumming guitars and testing microphones. When Meg pushed through the pub doors and reached the street outside, the cold blast of snowy air hit her full in the face after a cosy evening spent inside the warm, busy pub.

“Jeez, it’s freezing out here,” Harry said, buttoning his coat and pulling on a woollen hat. “I think it might snow again, too.

I'll walk you home before it closes in."

"You don't have to walk me home," Meg said. "I only live a fifteen-minute walk away on Foxglove Street."

He gave her a look. "I'm not leaving you here to make your own way home, Meg. What sort of man do you take me for?"

She smiled at that. No, he wasn't the sort of man who'd just wave goodnight at the pub doors and leave her to it. He'd see her home safely. He'd insist upon it.

"Does it take you far out of your way?" Meg asked.

"Not really. And if it did, it wouldn't matter. It's late and it's dark and so I'd still walk you home."

They set off along the high street. The slick, slushy snow on the pavements combined with the incline made for slippery a walk. More than once, Meg flung out her hand to steady herself, laughing as Harry grabbed her and kept her upright.

"Steady," he said with a grin the second time it happened.

"These pavements should've been gritted," Meg wheezed as she caught her breath. "If the council weren't spending all their money on silly internal reorganisations and so-called management consultants, there might be a few quid going spare to sprinkle some salt on the ground and stop us all falling on our backsides."

Harry chuckled. "You should run for office. Become a local councillor."

Now it was Meg who chuckled. "No chance."

"I bet you'd be brilliant at it. You've seen how things work on the inside, and I'm sure you've got ideas about how they could work better."

"I've also seen the abuse some of the local councillors have to put up with. Some of them might be useless, and some of them might only be waiting for a chance to run for MP or move on to something better, but even the decent ones who are genuinely trying to make a difference still end up getting dog's abuse. No, that's not for me."

“Fair enough. I suppose we all know what we want and what we don’t want.”

He gave her an easy smile as he said this, and yet his words caught on repeat inside Meg’s head the rest of the walk home.

I suppose we all know what we want and what don’t want.

Meg *didn’t* want to run for the local council, that much she did know, and she could only laugh at the bizarre idea Harry had suggested.

But she didn’t really know what she *did* want.

Ever since Jamie left for university, there’d been an empty hole in her life and she still wasn’t sure what to fill it with.

More work or a different sort of work? New hobbies and interests that might spark fun and joy in her life? Some sort of romance that might actually make her heart beat faster instead of boring her half to death?

All those things or something else entirely?

“Meg, did you hear me?”

Meg blinked and realised Harry had said something and she’d missed it altogether on account of her wandering thoughts. “Sorry, what did you say?”

“I said, would you like to get together again for a coffee or another meal while I’m still in Hamblehurst?” Harry asked. “It’s been fun catching up tonight, but it feels like we barely scratched the surface.”

She thought about this, weighing up the option of spending more time with Harry Doyle and considering the still flickering attraction she felt towards him. The man was leaving in a matter of weeks, returning to his vagabond life of travel and art and adventure.

Should she really spend more time with someone she felt attraction to when she knew that he was leaving soon?

Add in the fact that Harry was an old friend of her late husband, and didn’t all this become, well, just a little weird?

Icky?

But it didn't feel icky. It didn't feel weird, either.

It felt comforting to spend time with this person who'd once known her husband, who remembered those brief days in their teenage years when the world was their oyster and anything was possible.

"Yes," Meg found herself saying. "Let's have coffee sometime before you leave. I'd like that."

Harry's expression lit up with a smile. They agreed on a time, a place. Moments later, they arrived outside Meg's house on Foxglove Street.

"This is me," Meg said, gesturing to the small terraced house. "Thanks for walking me home and keeping me upright."

"My pleasure." His smile was still there, bright in the dark snowy night.

A long beat passed between them as they searched each other's eyes. Harry stepped closer and pressed a soft, chaste kiss to her cheek and squeezed her arm.

"Goodnight, Meg," he said.

"Goodnight, Harry. Thanks again for dinner."

He continued along Foxglove Street towards Riverside Road at the other end. Meg watched him go, and realised she hadn't even asked him where he was heading, or where his late mother's house was, or how far he had to walk.

As she turned her key in the front door, she thought of the soft kiss he'd brushed across her cheek, and wondered if she'd wanted more than he'd offered.

That was another question she didn't know the answer to, Meg thought with a wry laugh, and closed the door on the freezing wintry night.

“MAYBE HARRY the Gorgeous Artist will fall in love with you and decide to quit his life of travel and adventure and stay here in Hamblehurst.”

With her limbs folded into an improbable yoga pose that she was convinced might cause lasting injury if she wasn't careful, Meg peered through her legs at her friend Sophie and let out a grunt of amusement.

“We're just getting together again for coffee, that's all,” Meg said. “No one is falling in love with anyone.”

“Never say never.”

The yoga instructor at the front of the exercise studio clapped her hands and released them from their torturous poses. As they began the easy stretching routine that finished the class, Meg let out a sigh of relief as she relaxed her sore muscles after the intense workout.

“Was it fun catching up with him after all these years when you went out to dinner?” Sophie asked.

“It was, actually. We talked about the old days, talked about where our lives have taken us in the years since. When you haven't seen someone for such a long time, there's an awful lot of ground to cover. Although...”

“Although what?”

“Harry's done so many amazing things. He's an artist who travels around Europe, going wherever he wants, staying wherever he wants, painting as the muse inspires him. He's

seen and done so much. Nothing I've got to share about my life is anywhere near as exciting as that."

"It's not a competition."

"I know, but still."

"You were busy raising a son, alone, and keeping a roof over your head," Sophie said. "That isn't nothing, Meg. And maybe hearing more about Harry's life since you last knew him will give you a bit of inspiration to think about what you're going to do next in *your* life."

"You're saying I should set off on the road and become a free-spirited artist?" Meg laughed.

Sophie wiggled her eyebrows. "That painting you did at that art class wasn't half bad, so why not?"

Meg had shown Sophie her watercolour only because her friend had refused to take no for an answer. Sophie had loved the flowing blonde locks she'd given Watercolour Meg, and, like Meg's mother, had thought the eyes were striking and determined.

She knows what she's about, that one, Sophie had laughed as she'd looked appreciatively at the painting. *You could learn a thing or two from her.*

"I'm not about to become a starving artist," Meg now said.

"Doesn't sound like your friend Harry is exactly starving. Sounds like he's doing pretty great."

"The point is, even if I do take another art class at some point, it'll just be for fun. I'm not about to have some mad midlife crisis and jack in my job in order to take up painting. I enjoyed the art class, but that's where it starts and ends, with nothing more than a bit of fun."

Their stretching routine over, they all began packing up their yoga mats.

"You could paint a few more wild women and sell them for a fortune to clueless people who don't know any better," Sophie said.

Meg just shook her head. “I like the job I have. If I was allowed to just get on with doing it, minus endless reorganisation headaches, I’d like it even better.”

“Maybe you should tell your stupid boss that.”

“I’m sure that would go down really well. Obviously, my boss would like nothing more than to configure things so that my working day is filled only with joy and good cheer.”

Sophie scoffed and they exited the exercise studio. Meg rubbed at a sore spot on her shoulder as they walked along the corridor.

“I think I dislocated my shoulder during that last yoga pose,” Meg frowned. “Aren’t we supposed to feel energised and refreshed after these sessions, instead of injured and exhausted?”

“I feel fine,” Sophie said. “Maybe you did the pose wrong?”

“I think I do *all* the poses wrong.”

Meg laughed as she said it, but Sophie gave her an odd look.

“Meg, do you actually enjoy coming along to yoga?”

“Uh, well, I like coming here with you, because you’re my friend, but...” Meg pushed through the exit to the car park. “Actually, no. If I’m being completely honest, I hate these yoga classes, Sophie. I absolutely bloody hate them!”

Sophie stared at her for a long beat and then started laughing. “Why on earth didn’t you say something already?”

“I don’t know! You’re my friend. You invited me to come to yoga. So, we started going to yoga together, and...”

“And you fell into a rut and never got back out of it,” Sophie finished for her.

“I like coming here with you, though,” Meg said, not wanting her friend to take offence.

But Sophie was still laughing. “You’re fired.”

“What?”

“You’re fired as my yoga buddy. I don’t want you coming here with me anymore. There’s no point if you’re not enjoying it.”

“But—”

“No buts. Find something else you enjoy more. We’ll still have our coffee and cake meet-ups as usual. You’re not getting rid of me that easily. But as for yoga class? You’re out!”

Sophie was laughing, which was just as well, because if she hadn’t been, Meg would’ve thought they were in the middle of a major disagreement here. She didn’t want to upset or annoy her friend. But the idea of not coming to yoga class anymore?

Meg could get on board with that. She only wondered why she hadn’t bailed before now.

“Wow, okay,” Meg said. “So, I won’t come to yoga class anymore. Okay. All right.” She cast a look at her friend. “I feel, um, relieved.”

“You’re welcome. For God’s sake, Meg, why have you kept coming to this class with me for so long if you didn’t like it?”

For the same reason she stayed in a dull, dead-end relationship with Ian for so long—because it was easier not to rock the boat and admit she needed a change, that’s why.

Until she paid the price for her indecision, anyway. Ian had dumped her before she dumped him, and now Sophie had fired her from yoga class.

Why was it up to everyone else to make these decisions that Meg ought to be making for herself?

Yes, that was another good question she didn’t have an answer to.

Except she *did* have an answer.

She wasn’t being brave or bold enough to make decisions that were, in fact, pretty straight forward. And if she couldn’t

make the simple decisions to end things with a man who bored her, and to quit a yoga class she hated, then how could she possibly make the big decisions about even bigger things in her life?

They reached Sophie's car and got in.

"Just think," Sophie said as she started the engine. "Now you've got a whole extra evening free every week to do something you actually enjoy."

"Yeah," Meg said. *And now I have to figure out what to do with it.*

"We should go to the ice cream parlour for a hot chocolate fudge sundae for the last time as yoga buddies," Sophie said.

"I'm buying. My treat, to thank you for firing me from yoga class."

"What are friends for?"

* * *

When Meg arrived home later that night, she found her mother in the living room, curled up on the sofa and scrolling through estate agent listings on her tablet.

"How was yoga?" Liz asked.

"Awful. I quit. Or, more accurately, Sophie fired me from going with her to the class anymore."

Liz cast a look over her shoulder and laughed. "Good for Sophie. Since I came to stay here, I haven't once seen you come back from yoga class looking even remotely satisfied."

"Maybe the enormous ice cream sundaes I eat after every class leave me looking wretched."

"Ice cream sundaes never leave anyone looking wretched. How could you say such a thing?" Liz laughed. "So, no more yoga."

"No more yoga." Meg sat down next to her mother and glanced at the property listings on the tablet screen. "Find anything you like the look of?"

“There are a few options, and a couple of new listings that just appeared in the last few days.” She navigated to a page showcasing a sweet semi-detached house with a neat garden and a cosy kitchen-diner boasting a wood-burning stove. “I like this one. The size is perfect for me. It’s over towards Winchester.”

“I thought you didn’t like the idea of an attached property?”

“I don’t. But most of the detached properties are much bigger than I’m looking for. If I’m serious about down-sizing, I might have to accept that means semis or terraces. And as for the small cottages that have caught my eye so far, well, they’re all quite old and need a lot more upkeep and maintenance than I think I’m interested in.”

“The house you almost bought last autumn was a cottage,” Meg reminded her. “And it was new too, wasn’t it? Only a few decades old.”

Liz nodded. “And because of that, it was so desirable that I got priced out of the running.”

“Are you planning on viewing any of these new places you’ve found tonight?”

“Yes, I expect so.” Liz switched off the tablet and tossed it to the coffee table. “That’s enough for tonight. Oh, I almost forgot. Jamie phoned while you were out. He said he rang your phone, but there was no answer, so he called me instead.”

Meg pulled out her phone and realised she’d forgotten to switch the ringer back on after the yoga class finished. There was a missed call message on the screen.

“Is everything okay with him?” Meg asked, already pulling up Jamie’s number to call him back.

“Everything’s fine, but don’t bother dialling his number. I doubt he’ll answer. He was going into the computer lab to work late on a project for one of his modules. He said you two often chat after you get home from your yoga class, but explained he’ll be busy for the rest of the evening, and so he wanted to touch base before he got started.”

Along with the missed call notification, Meg saw a message from Jamie too, more or less summarising what Liz had just explained.

“I was looking forward to chatting with him,” Meg said after reading his message. “The last few times we’ve talked on the phone, he’s had to cut things short to rush off to class or some late study session or just to be with his friends.”

“That’s how it should be.”

“I know, but... I can’t help missing him.”

Liz gave her a kind look. “It’s a good job you’ve got me here, in that case.”

“I’m a very lucky woman, Mother.”

Liz laughed and got up from the sofa. “I’m putting the kettle on. Tea or coffee?”

“Tea, thanks.”

While her mother boiled the kettle, Meg went upstairs to change. Throwing her exercise clothes into the laundry hamper, she wondered when she’d next put them back on, now that Sophie had fired her from yoga class.

She’d have to find some other way to keep fit and active. Although she was relieved her yoga days were behind her, it was still important to exercise, especially if she planned to keep eating ice cream sundaes with Sophie on a disgracefully regular basis.

What other exercise might she like? If not yoga, then maybe something more aerobic, like boxercise or Zumba or spin cycling?

Meg passed those classes on her way in and out of the sports centre every week for yoga, but none of them really looked like her thing.

What then? What *was* her thing?

She frowned in frustration. This question kept popping up all the time these days and her inability to find a meaningful answer to it was starting to annoy her.

She was annoying *herself*. She was stuck in a rut with no idea how to get out of it. It was time for some sort of change in her life. But what sort of change and for what purpose?

So far, since her midnight revelation on New Year's Eve when she'd found herself alone and had decided it was time for change, the only interesting thing she'd managed to do was go along to an art class in the local community centre... and her mother had organised that.

Now, it was already February, and she was still feeling fed up with herself and more and more clueless about what to do about it.

Frustration bubbled, and anger, too. Never in her life had she felt so discontented and out of sorts.

Meg pulled on her pyjamas and a warm dressing gown and crossed her bedroom to the window to dip the blinds and close the curtains. Snow swirled outside, the fat flakes dancing beneath the streetlamps.

Perhaps this cold, snowy weather was making her feel this way? The freezing temperatures and snowfall that had seemed like such wintry fun in December were far less enthralling now February was here and the weather still showed no signs of letting up.

As Meg peered out through the window at the falling snow, a flash of movement across the street caught her eye.

Darting out between two parked cars she saw a fox, sleek and scurrying as it crossed the road, its burnished orange coat a bright flame in the dark night.

She wondered if it was the same fox she'd seen when she'd looked out of the window on New Year's Eve.

The fox reached the pavement outside her house and paused to sniff at something. Then it lifted its head and looked up, straight towards her window.

Straight towards her.

The gift of the moment, of that silent beat of connection between woman and fox, filled Meg with childish wonder, the

same as it had done on New Year's Eve.

Yes, she decided, this is the same fox as the one she saw that night.

The fox stared up at her for another long moment, then turned away and sat down, tucking its bushy tail around its paws as it surveyed the street.

Satisfied that all was well in its foxy kingdom, the animal stood and let out a soft bark.

Then glanced one last time towards Meg's bedroom window before trotting off down the street and vanishing into the shadows and gloom of the February darkness.

Meg peered along Foxglove Street towards the point where the fox had disappeared, hoping for another flash of orange fur in the night. When none appeared, she closed the curtains with a soft sigh.

The little fox is on a mission tonight, Meg thought, thinking of the animal's determined speed as she departed. Perhaps she's hunting or looking for her friends, or searching for her mate. Good luck to her.

Silently cheering on the sweet fox on her nocturnal adventures, and feeling thrilled to have twice been graced by the animal's intense stare, Meg left her bedroom and went downstairs to enjoy the tea her mother was brewing.

MEG SAT at her desk the following morning scrolling through her work email inbox and wondering how on earth all these people managed to send so many emails.

She'd cleared out the inbox only yesterday, answering queries and supplying information and responding to 'action points' so that various projects in the local council's reorganisation process could be 'taken forward'. She'd deleted emails that had arrived in her inbox but had nothing to do with her, and archived others that might come back to haunt her if she didn't keep them stored. When she'd left work, she'd felt good about how pristine and empty that inbox looked.

Now, it was full to overflowing again and most of the morning had vanished in a flurry of replying to 'urgent' requests and sending through answers and information she'd already sent at least once before.

Meg rocked back in her office chair, sipped her coffee, and reminded herself that once the council reorganisation was over, she could go back to doing the work she actually enjoyed—doing her bit as a skilled administrator to keep local services flowing smoothly, instead of just contributing to a mountain of pointless paperwork and trawling through endless documents filled with management doublespeak and gobbledegook.

Another email pinged into her inbox. Glancing at the sender, she saw it came from her manager, Bill Hilburn. The subject line read, *Just a quick issue for clarification.*

Where Bill Hilburn was concerned, issues were never quickly clarified, and seemingly always spawned an additional shed load of work—for her, not for him. Biting the bullet, she opened the email.

Meg – when you have a moment, could you pop into my office for a quick chat about an issue I need some clarification about. Thank you. Bill.

As there was no time like the present, and Meg figured she might as well find out what he wanted sooner rather than later, she finished her coffee and walked across the open plan office to where Bill had his own room tucked into the far corner.

Knocking on the door, she stepped inside. Bill glanced up, looking startled, and quickly closed the puzzle book he'd been working on. Sweeping the item beneath a stack of papers, he cleared his throat and frowned at Meg.

“Meg, I didn't expect you to come running in here the moment you got my email,” he said.

Obviously, Meg thought but wisely didn't say.

“What can I help with?” she said instead as Bill continued his futile attempt to hide the puzzle book further beneath the stack of papers on his desk.

“The reorganisation steering group have requested an audit of records related to the sub-committee meetings held over the past six months concerning the strategic goals of the reorganisation,” Bill said.

Meg performed some mental gymnastics as she tried to unpack this statement. “Okay.”

“They want to make sure the original reorganisation goals set out by the steering group were properly and effectually discussed at the various sub-committee meetings and that appropriate action plans and action points were debated, agreed, and communicated to the various stakeholders.”

Meg once more processed this, cutting through the swathe of bureaucratic nonsense contained in Bill's words. After working in the council for close to fourteen years, she knew a rat when she smelled one. Unless she was very much

mistaken, the head honchos in charge of the reorganisation had come to the realisation that they didn't know what they were doing or what they were trying to achieve, and that something had probably gone badly wrong with their precious reorganisation. Instead of admitting any of this, however, they'd decided to audit what all the reorganisation sub-committees had done so far in the hope of shifting blame onto everyone below them in the pecking order.

And to do this, they needed to get their grubby hands on all the meeting minutes. As a matter of public record, all those minutes and documents could be found in the shared folders used by the reorganisation squad, but as searching around for them and then trawling through them would be too much like hard work, they needed a minion to do it for them.

That minion was Meg, obviously. Meg the Minion.

“So,” Bill continued, “I need you to set aside some time to pull together all the relevant documents and meeting minutes, compile them into a master file, and create a cross-referenced appendix which charts when each of the strategic action points were discussed in each sub-committee and what the recommendations were for further action in each case.”

Meg peered at Bill across his messy desk. “Okay. That's probably going to take a while, though. It's a lot of work.”

“Yes, of course, but if you can get it done just as quickly as you can, I'd appreciate it. I promised the chair of the steering group we'd have something for her by the end of next week.”

Meg tried not to wince at this.

“Okay,” Meg said. “In that case, I might need some help. An extra pair of hands to help me pull the information together.”

“Sorry, I'm afraid it's just you. We can't spare anyone else.” Bill must have clocked her reaction, because he added, “I'd offer to put my shoulder to the wheel myself, but I'm snowed under at the moment.”

Yes, with your crosswords and word jumbles, Meg thought, as her gaze strayed to the puzzle book Bill had tried

to hide beneath the paperwork on his desk.

Bill frowned and attempted to conceal the puzzle book more effectively. “Anyway, that’s what I need you to work on for the time being, Meg. Thank you and, er, well, keep me updated on your progress.”

Understanding she was being dismissed, Meg closed Bill’s door and returned to her desk. The new workload he’d piled on top of her wasn’t difficult, but it was boring and tedious, and she wasn’t much looking forward to doing it.

Meg plonked herself in her office chair and sighed. She glanced towards the bank of windows on the far side of the open plan office area and saw dark rain clouds rushing in from the west. It was almost eleven o’clock and yet it seemed like the sky hadn’t got any lighter as the morning went on, and now it was getting dark again as the rain closed in.

Snow one day, rain the next, then back to snow again. What a winter it was turning out to be. And an increasingly gloomy one at that, too.

Add a pile of soul-sapping, brain-numbing pointless admin work into the mix, and things really felt much too bleak.

The January blues had turned into the February blues and Meg wondered how much longer these weird moods of hers would last.

And she wondered when spring would arrive to cheer her up again.

* * *

The rain blew through Hamblehurst in a stormy gust, lashing down from gunmetal grey skies and bouncing off the pavements. By the time Meg’s lunch break arrived at twelve-thirty, the rain had stopped and the wind had blown the clouds away towards the east, leaving behind a wash of pale blue sky and a sliver of lemon yellow sun.

Meg seized the opportunity to get outside for some fresh air while it was dry. The pavements were still slick with the residue of snow and slush that seemed a permanent feature

around the place this winter, but with care she was able to navigate away from the local council building and stretch her legs.

Ten minutes after leaving work, she found herself walking through the gates of the cemetery and heading towards Johnny's grave.

"I don't know why I've come here today," Meg said, touching her fingertips to Johnny's headstone. "But here I am, anyway."

She never came here during the week on her lunch breaks. These days, she usually only visited Johnny's grave once a month or so, popping in for a quiet moment when she was out for a weekend walk. She hadn't been here since her visit on Boxing Day.

But from the moment she'd left work, she'd felt herself drawn here. Her lunch remained in its box in the fridge back at work in the staff kitchen. She had no appetite today.

"I'm in a right funk at the moment, Johnny," Meg said. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I feel all out of sorts. Discontented. Restless. Fed up. I feel like I want to do something, but I don't know what. I feel like I want to make some sort of change, but don't know what change to make."

Meg shook her head at this admission. "I feel sad, Johnny. Sad and just a little bit lost. I wish you were here to give me a cuddle and tell me everything will be fine."

Everything will be fine, Meg. You'll figure it out.

"See, but that's the thing, Johnny. I don't know if I can figure it out because I don't know what's actually wrong with me. Is this my midlife crisis, do you think? Is thirty-seven too early for that? Maybe there's no fixed age for when it's supposed to happen. Maybe this is it. My midlife crisis. Well, if it is, it's not much fun."

I'm sorry you're sad.

"Me too, Johnny. I'm not a sad person. I'm not a gloomy person. I've never been that way. I always had too much going on for the luxury of being gloomy. I've always had Jamie to

look after, and I know that this is all wrapped up in him leaving home. I know it's about me having to find a new focus in my life, now that my son is grown up and is off getting on with things by himself. I know that. And yet, knowing that's what's behind all of this doesn't seem to help me work out what to do next."

Maybe you just need some time? Time to adjust?

"Yeah, maybe." Meg sighed again and huddled into her jacket. "I can't remember your voice properly anymore, Johnny. I hear you speaking inside my head, but I can't catch the way you used to sound. That breaks my heart all over again."

That's okay. You don't have to remember everything. How could you? It's been almost twenty years, Meg.

"Don't remind me," Meg laughed. "How time flies."

A flap of black wings overhead caught her eye and she looked up to see a crow flying past. It landed in the tree to her left and emitted a croaky call into the damp February afternoon. A moment later, another crow joined it on the branch. They cawed at one another in greeting and then settled in for some feather preening.

"I wonder if they're the same crows I saw the last time I was here," Meg said. "They're doing exactly the same things the crows were doing on Boxing Day, sitting up there together having a chatter and a bit of personal grooming. I keep seeing the same fox on the street outside the house, too, Johnny. I see it late at night, hurrying up and down the road beneath the lamplight. It's so beautiful and looks very clever and has such a sweet face. Twice now it's stopped and looked in through the window at me. I don't know why I'm telling you this. It's just something that's stuck in my head, I suppose."

The crows called out. A small van trundled along the cemetery road as the groundskeeper went about his business. He raised his hand in a wave to Meg as he passed and she returned it with a wave of her own.

“I bumped into an old friend of yours recently, Johnny,” Meg said once the van was gone. “Harry Doyle. Do you remember him? You played in that old band, The Westerlies, together. Harry’s an artist now, travelling all over Europe and painting beautiful pictures and living a wonderful life. Mum bought me a ticket for an art class he was running at the community centre and I had quite a lot of fun, painting a ridiculous watercolour of myself with blonde hair and silly pink lips. You would’ve got a right laugh out of it.”

I bet it’s amazing, just like you.

“If you say so, Johnny,” Meg smiled. “Anyway, Harry’s only back here in Hamblehurst to sort out everything after his mother died, and he’ll be leaving again soon. We had dinner together the other night and we’re seeing each other again tomorrow for a coffee and another catch-up for old time’s sake before he goes, and...”

Meg trailed off, not sure what else she’d wanted to say. Was she about to stand here at her husband’s grave and talk about the flicker of attraction she’d felt for Johnny’s old band mate?

No, she wasn’t. Bad enough that she stood here talking out loud to herself in the first place.

You’re not talking to yourself. You’re talking to me. I’m always here whenever you need me.

Meg sighed. “In that case, tell me what do to next to get myself out of this funk I’m in.”

But there was no answer this time, just the cawing of the crows up in the tree. Meg checked the time.

“My lunch break’s almost over and I’d better get back to the office,” she said.

Tapping her fingertips one last time on Johnny’s gravestone, her way of saying goodbye, Meg turned and left, her mind already sorting through the grunt work that waited back at her desk.

“WHY DON’T you tell your boss you don’t know how to put together the stupid information he asked for?” Jamie asked later that night when Meg called for a chat.

“Well, first of all, I *do* know how to put it together, and Bill knows I know,” Meg said. “And second of all, he’s my manager which means he gets to tell me what to do and I just have to make my peace with it.”

“But the guy’s a twat,” Jamie said. “How many times have you walked into his office and caught him watching Netflix on his phone or doing puzzles instead of actual work?”

Meg laughed. “Far too many. I caught him doing it today, in fact.”

“You should be doing *his* job, Mum, and he should be the one taking orders from *you*.”

Meg remembered Sophie saying much the same thing only a few weeks ago when she’d been complaining to her about the never-ending nonsense at work. She realised she was starting to sound like a broken record.

“Never mind what’s going on at my work,” Meg said, wishing she’d never joked with Jamie about the stupid council reorganisation tasks she’d been lumbered with. She’d thought he’d find her story amusing. Instead, he’d been annoyed and outraged on her behalf. “Tell me how all your mad computer projects are going at university.”

“Everything’s great here, Mum. Some of the things we’re doing this term are harder than I thought they’d be, but I’m getting my head around it all and it’s sort of fun being tested and pushed to the limits. That’s why I came here, after all.”

“I hope you’re finding time to have fun, too.”

“Sure. In fact, I was out last night with some friends and there may have been too much beer involved.”

“Aw, my little boy, all grown up and drinking too much at the pub with his mates.”

Jamie chortled. “How’s it going at the house living with grandma?”

“Actually, it’s going great. This place was too quiet with you gone. Plus, your grandmother makes a mean macaroni cheese, which is what she had waiting for me on the table when I got home from work tonight.”

“Grandma made macaroni cheese? Now I’m jealous. I love grandma’s macaroni.”

“If she’s still here at Easter when you come home for the holidays, I’ll ask her to make some for you arriving off the train. How does that sound?”

“Actually, I wanted to speak to you about Easter.”

There was a long pause during which Meg quickly understood what was coming next.

“You’re not coming home, are you?” she said.

“One of my professors has spare funding available to hire assistants on a coding research project he’s working on,” Jamie said quickly. “I applied for one of the positions, not really thinking I had much of a chance, what with me only being a first year. But the professor liked the work I did over the Christmas break and she said the assistant job is mine if I want it.”

“Jamie, that’s wonderful news,” Meg said, smoothing over the crushing disappointment at the prospect of yet another holiday coming and going without her son coming home to stay. “I’m so proud of you.”

“It’s a great opportunity to learn stuff and make a bit of cash too. I’m sorry I won’t be home for Easter, Mum. I know it’s still a few weeks away, but I thought I should tell you now, especially as I didn’t come home for Christmas.”

“I won’t remember what you look like the next time I see you,” Meg joked.

“I had another idea, though. I was thinking that, as I’m ducking out of coming home over Easter, I could come home for a long weekend instead in a few weeks’ time? As of next week, my last Friday class will finish at noon because we’re about to complete the lab-based portion of a module and move to theory work instead, and on Mondays I don’t start until eleven. I could catch a train home on a Friday afternoon, spend the weekend with you and grandma, then come back here on an early train on the Monday morning. What do you think?”

“I think I’d love that. Just so long as you aren’t missing any lectures or labs or what have you.”

“I promise. Brilliant, okay, I’ll book train tickets and let you know when I’m sorted.”

They chatted for a few minutes more before saying goodnight. When she hung up the phone, Meg couldn’t keep the smile off her face.

“What’s got you grinning like a Cheshire cat?” Liz said as she walked into the living room carrying two mugs of tea.

“Jamie won’t be able to come home for Easter—”

“Oh no! I was looking forward to seeing the boy!”

“—but he’s coming back to stay for a long weekend in a couple of weeks’ time instead. He’s just firming up his travel arrangements and will let me know when he’s booked his tickets.”

Liz’s face switched from disappointment to joy in a single beat. “Wonderful! I’m so glad to hear that. I know how much you missed him over Christmas. It’s been far too long since you last saw him.”

“I don’t mind missing him so long as I know he’s happy up there and working hard and doing what he wants to do. If I thought he was just dossing around in pubs and going to parties and faffing around, I’d feel differently. But he’s working so hard and the reason he’s not coming home at Easter is because he’s got another chance to work on a special project and this time he’s earning money, too. I can cope with missing him when I know he’s doing so well.”

Meg grinned and all but hugged herself with excitement. “That said, I’m relieved he’s found time to come back for a few days. I need to cuddle my boy.”

“As do I. We’ll spoil him rotten.”

“I’ve already promised him you’ll make macaroni cheese when he comes home.”

“Consider it done.”

Knowing her son would be coming home soon for a visit lifted Meg’s spirits. A long weekend wasn’t the same thing as a two-week Easter break, but it was something. Jamie better prepare himself for being cuddled to death the minute he stepped off the train, because that’s exactly what would happen to him.

The prospect of seeing her son in the very near future was just the tonic Meg needed.

* * *

Later that night, Meg flicked off the television and got ready to turn in.

“I’m heading up to bed, Mum. Are you staying up?”

Liz pulled out her earbuds. “I’m staying up for a bit longer. I’ve got ten minutes left on my true crime podcast and I think they’re about to reveal the killer.”

“How can you listen to that grisly stuff right before bed?” Meg asked with a shudder.

Liz only grinned. And then her eyes widened and she raised a hand to stop Meg’s progress towards the living room

door. “Oh, hang on. I got something for you today and forgot to give it to you.”

Reaching down the side of the armchair, Liz pulled out a slim gift bag. “For you.”

“Another present? You don’t have to keep giving me things, Mum. You know you’re perfectly welcome to stay here for as long as you want.”

Liz waved this off. “It’s nothing much. Open it and you’ll see.”

Meg opened the gift bag and pulled out the tissue wrap. Inside she found a picture frame with bevelled matt black edging.

“I want you to frame that watercolour portrait you did the other week at your art class,” Liz explained. “I thought you’d at least tack the painting up on the fridge with a magnet, but as you’ve whisked it away, I can only assume you’ve decided to hide it from sight. Which I think is a shame. So, I bought this frame and I hope you’ll put the painting inside it and hang it somewhere you can enjoy seeing it.”

Meg was touched by the gift and touched too by the reasons behind it. “I did think about buying a frame for the painting, but it seemed a bit self-indulgent. You know, to paint a picture of myself and then frame it and hang it up on the wall? I’m not sure I’ve got the ego for that.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s a lovely painting. Striking and bold and filled with energy. And it’s *you*. It might not be an exact likeness, but it *is* you, in some essential way I like very much. Quite why you wouldn’t want to admire what you created and feel proud of what you did in only a few short hours, and while swigging prosecco as well, is a mystery to me.”

Meg laughed. “There was an awful lot of prosecco, to be fair.”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is you liked what you painted. So, get it up on the wall and enjoy looking at it. At the very least, hang it up in your bedroom, where you can actually

see it. Otherwise, you'll disappoint your poor mother who paid money out of her old-age pension for a picture frame in the hopes that it would make you happy, and—"

"Okay, you don't have to resort to underhand tactics," Meg grinned. "I'll frame the painting and hang it in my room."

Liz beamed. "I'm so pleased."

Meg kissed her mother's cheek. "Thank you, Mum."

"You're welcome, my love." Liz popped her earbuds back in. "Now, let me get back to my murder podcast. The suspense is killing me."

Leaving her mother to her gruesome audio, Meg went upstairs, taking the picture frame with her. In her bedroom, she lifted the watercolour self-portrait from where she'd left it on her chest of drawers. It was curling at the edges now, because of how she'd perched it there. Smoothing it out, she unclipped the back of the frame and slotted the painting inside.

Her mother had judged the size perfectly. The black trim around the frame set off the painting perfectly, making the blonde hair and pink lips of Watercolour Meg pop and look bolder than ever.

Watercolour Meg peered out from behind her new frame. Although she was looking off to the left, to some distant point Meg had imagined while she'd been busy painting her, she couldn't escape the feeling that Watercolour Meg was also somehow gazing at her, too, as if just catching sight of her from the corner of her eye.

That's what happened when a rank amateur attempted to paint a picture of themselves, Meg thought wryly. You ended up with eyes that seem to be looking at everything and at nothing all at the same time.

And yet, those eyes weren't wonky. They were good. They were a likeness. And it was a little disconcerting to find Watercolour Meg sort of staring at her like this. It was almost as if the woman in the painting was... waiting for something.

Go on then, Watercolour Meg seemed to urge her. Hang me up somewhere. I'm sick of staring at the side of those ugly

candlesticks on your chest of drawers.

Meg wondered briefly if she was all right in the head these days. Between imaginary conversations with her dead husband at the cemetery, and now imaginary remarks from the steely-eyed watercolour she'd painted of herself, it was possible that she was going round the bend.

Still, she searched around her bedroom for somewhere to hang the painting. There was a spot beside the mirror currently occupied by a faded print of a vase of roses. Removing the old print and deciding it was time for a change, she hung Watercolour Meg in its place.

But the slot on the back of the frame didn't attach properly to the hook on the wall. The hook was too small and it wouldn't take much for the frame to slip free and crash to the carpet.

Meg would've waited until the next day to search for a better picture hook, but as she opened her wardrobe to pick out her shirt and trousers for work the next day, she spied a small bag of hooks and pins and whatnot sitting beside the storage box on wardrobe floor.

She'd found the little bag of bits while clearing space when her mother moved in, and had been meaning to take it downstairs for ages to shove in a kitchen cupboard, but had never got round to it. Now, she realised it might come in handy.

Rooting around inside the bag, she found a picture hook that was larger than the one currently on the wall. After removing the small hook that wasn't up to the job, she knocked the new one in using the back of a shoe sole, which wasn't really the right way to do it, she knew, but saved her from going back downstairs and digging around in the toolbox for a hammer.

Satisfied that the new hook was secure in the wall, Meg hung the framed painting. The metal slot on the back neatly latched onto the wall hook. Stepping back, she eyeballed it to make sure it was even, and made a few minor adjustments.

Her work complete, Meg studied the framed painting. It looked good on the wall, adding a splash of fresh colour to replace the old print of the vase of roses which had become so faded and familiar that Meg hardly even noticed it was there anymore.

Now, she'd get to look at this mad vision she'd painted of herself, with wild blonde hair and fat pink lips and an expression that said, *Watch out world, here I come!*

Maybe seeing Watercolour Meg hanging on the wall beside her mirror every day would impart some of that determined spirit into the real world version of herself? She could use it, no question there.

With the painting hung on the wall to her satisfaction, Meg set the bag of hooks and pins on the chest of drawers—she'd definitely remember to take them downstairs tomorrow and store them somewhere more appropriate—and pushed the wardrobe door closed.

But something inside caught her eye and her attention.

It was the old storage box she'd looked through when she'd moved things out of Jamie's room to create space for her mother. She'd knocked the lid loose when she'd reached inside a moment ago to grab the bag containing the picture hooks and other bits and pieces. Meg leaned in to right the lid.

And found herself pulling the whole box out instead and carrying it over to the bed.

Removing the lid, she flicked through the items near the top that she'd already glanced at when she'd first looked inside, albeit briefly, that day she'd helped her mother settle in. She lifted out the old Polaroids of herself and Johnny, their teenage selves grinning for the camera, and lifted out the old university prospectus she'd flicked through.

And then dug deeper through the years and the memories.

Until she found what she'd avoided looking at before, the memory she hadn't wanted to see, the dream she didn't want to be reminded of.

It was a page torn from an old travel brochure, depicting a map of southern France. The page was old, almost twenty years old to be exact. The brochure was from an excursion travel company that had catered to university students and young people. Meg wasn't sure if the company was still in business these days, but she remembered picking up the brochure during a university open day when she was seventeen.

Just as she'd pored over the university prospectuses she'd collected, she'd pored over that travel brochure, too. The company specialised in providing travel packages for backpackers who wanted to explore Europe and offered trips that lasted anywhere between seven days and three months.

Meg had been captivated by one particular package that offered a month-long adventure around southern France, travelling by train and staying in youth hostels and other cheap accommodation. There would be visits to old French historical sites, walks in the beautiful hills and countryside, tours of vineyards, and more. It was a chance to explore another culture, spend time in new places, experience a new country and have a grand adventure.

The trip was expensive, well beyond what Meg would've been able to afford, but she'd torn out those brochure pages anyway because she knew that if she put her mind to it, she could find some way to take that trip, or some version of it. In the summer after she finished sixth form college and before she started university, Meg had wanted to have an amazing adventure, leave Hamblehurst behind and get out into the world. France was close enough to avoid the expense of long-distance travel, but different enough to present a unique experience she felt sure she'd never forget.

For weeks after picking up the travel brochure at that university open day, Meg had scoured the pages, tracing the pre-planned routes with her fingertips, imagining herself setting off with nothing but a rucksack on her back, some money and her passport, and the desire for adventure.

And then she'd met Johnny and fallen head over heels in love and within just a few short months, all those plans—for

university, for travel, for *everything*—had vanished.

Meg remembered putting away the old university prospectus once she found out she was pregnant and had agreed to marry Johnny, imagining she'd return to those dreams at some later point. She remembered tearing out those pages from the travel brochure, too, the pages she'd looked at most often, the ones depicting the trip around the south of France.

One day, I'll go there, she'd told herself. One day, Johnny and I will go there together, with our lovely child, and we'll have a grand adventure together.

But, of course, they never had.

Now, Meg ran her fingers over the musty pages from that old brochure, tracing the route that was picked out there around the towns and villages of southern France.

She'd refused to admit it to herself at the time, had refused to even allow herself to acknowledge it, but when Harry Doyle had bought her dinner at the pub and told her those stories of his European travels and how his love of art was sparked thanks to a lucky break at a small café on the Côte d'Azur, Meg's heart had beat double time.

Harry's story of adventure had thrilled her and made her thrilled for him and for the life he'd led.

But so too had it reminded her of these forgotten boxed-up memories from that time in her life when she, too, had imagined a very different future lay in wait.

Meg regretted nothing about her life. How could she? She loved her son beyond all understanding, just as a mother should. And she'd loved her husband, too, loved him so much that his death had almost broken her. Not a day passed when she didn't wish Johnny was still alive. But that was very different from having regrets about how she'd lived her life.

She regretted nothing about the choices she'd made to marry young, to become a teenage mother, to postpone the plans she'd made in order to raise her child.

And yet here she was, a thirty-seven-year-old woman, sitting on the edge of her bed and leafing through those old dreams she'd once had while wondering...

What? Wondering if any of it was still possible? Wondering if any of was still what she wanted after all these years?

Not university, she didn't want that, not now. Knowing her son was a university student now, that he was working towards a degree that he loved and was passionate about and that would take him places in life—that was enough for her, more than enough.

Even the idea of studying formally, attending classes, completing homework and sitting exams, not to mention finding the money for it all—all that did was make Meg's skin turn clammy and make her feel anxious.

So, that wasn't what she wanted now. She knew that and had known it for a long time.

But holding that old travel map in her hands now, and studying the old journey route she'd pored over so many times as a wide-eyed teenager, and thinking about the adventures she might have had... now *that* filled her with something that felt a lot more like the thrill of excitement.

Was *that* what she needed? A holiday? A couple of weeks somewhere warm and sunny, and a break from the relentless damp and cold of the English winter? She wouldn't be the first person to long for some winter sun while peering out into the darkness of an endless February.

Meg thought about this for a long moment, mulling it over.

Perhaps this unsettled way she'd been feeling lately really was a sign that she needed a change of scenery and a nice holiday somewhere new. After the upheaval of Jamie leaving home last autumn, followed by Meg's inevitable worrying about her boy out there in the world on his own for the first time and the adjustment of finding herself alone after so many long years as a single mother, these last few months had felt strange and unsettling.

Add in her unsatisfying relationship with the hapless Ian and her inaction in putting an end to it before he did, plus the ongoing nonsense at work with the blasted council reorganisation, and it was little wonder that the idea of escaping to a sunny beach somewhere to lounge around a hotel pool and drink brightly coloured cocktails with pretty little paper umbrellas sticking out of them was deeply appealing.

I need a holiday, Meg muttered to herself. *That's what I need. I'm sure of it.*

She decided she'd flick through a few travel company websites on her tablet once she got into bed and find out if there were any late deals she could take advantage of. Maybe her mother would want to come with her for a cheeky seven-night stay somewhere or other.

Yes, Meg thought, *that might just be what I need.*

Tucked up in bed, Meg scrolled through a few travel company websites, checked out a few hotels, ogled some golden sandy beaches. Blinked when she saw the prices, which were eye-watering. She'd have to hunt around more carefully to find a cheap deal.

And she'd have to get time off work, too. The council had a policy that you had to submit holiday requests at least four weeks in advance, to avoid under-staffing. So, if she was going to do this, she'd have to get her holiday form filled out and approved in good time.

Meg closed the browser and set the tablet aside. She'd do a little more digging around tomorrow, and see if she could find a holiday deal that would work.

And yet, much as she'd enjoyed looking at the hotels and pools and beaches on the holiday websites, she didn't have the spark of excitement she ought to have at the prospect of an unexpected winter holiday.

There's no pleasing you these days, Meg scolded herself.

Meg opened the book she was reading and scanned a few pages before losing interest.

“You’re turning into a proper malcontent, Meg Marshall!” she muttered. “You’d better buck up your ideas!”

She was meeting Harry Doyle again the day after tomorrow, for another coffee and a final catch-up before he left Hamblehurst. Maybe he was now the reason for this continuing unsettled feeling that had seized her and refused to let go. The handsome and exciting man who led a life filled with travel and adventure had left her shaken up. His good looks caused her confusion while his creative and carefree life left her dangerously close to jealous.

Once she’d met up with him one last time and said goodbye before he left town once more, she could put all these silly feelings behind her. Harry Doyle would leave and return to his life of wanderlust, and Meg would forget all about him and get back to normal.

Except that ‘normal’ was the problem at the heart of this, wasn’t it? What, exactly, would ‘normal’ look like now? What *should* it look like now?

“Shut up, brain!” Meg muttered. “No more questions tonight!”

As she reached for the bedside lamp, Meg glanced at the framed painting of Watercolour Meg hanging across the room beside the mirror.

Watch out world, here I come!

Apparently Watercolour Meg didn’t like the idea of ‘normal’ any more than Real Meg did, because the sassy blonde was still goading her with her mad imaginary words.

Amused by this silly idea, Meg pulled up the duvet, flicked out the lamp, and hoped she’d fall asleep quickly before her mind starting pondering any more unfathomable questions.

MEG KNOCKED on her boss's office door and this time waited until she heard a grunt, which she interpreted as an invitation to come inside. Pushing open the door, she saw Bill frantically tapping at his phone screen. Even from across the office, Meg could make out the sounds of the action film he was watching on the phone, the noise of explosions and gunfire and shouting only ending when Bill at last jabbed his finger at the correct button on the screen and paused the video.

Bill cut her a look, a frown etched across his forehead. "Yes, what is it, Meg?"

"You asked me to drop by for a quick update today at four o'clock," Meg reminded him

Bill's gaze swept to the clock on the wall, his eyes widening when he saw the time there. "Oh, right. I didn't realise it was so late. Got a bit caught up with work, you know."

He shuffled a few papers on his desk, as if this might make it look like he had actually been hard at work instead of watching a film on his phone. Meg suppressed a sigh.

"Well, like I said, you asked for a quick update," Meg said, stepping further into the office. She gave him a brief summary of the progress she'd made with the audit work he'd asked her to complete, explaining where there were gaps and where further digging into the meeting minutes would be needed.

"There's probably another two days of work ahead," Meg finished. "The index is a bit of a challenge because of how the

action points were recorded at some of the meetings, but I should be able to compile an explanatory memo that will account for any inconsistencies in the language used and the decisions taken.”

“Right, okay, fine,” Bill said. “Just tell me when it’s finished.”

As usual, his level of interest was close to zero. Once Bill had delegated work to someone, he didn’t much care how they did it, only that it got done so he could show it off to his superiors and claim all the credit.

“Once you’ve dealt with the audit stuff,” Bill said, “I need you to go through all the digital files in the shared folders we’re using for the reorganisation management and rename the documents using a master title template.”

Meg stared for a long beat. “What?”

Bill looked up from the paperwork he was still pretending to be working on and gave her a look like she was stupid. “All the files in the folders. They’re out of order and they’re all using different title styles. It’s no good. It needs tidying up. I’d like you to sort it out. You’re good at that kind of thing.”

Meg listened while he explained further about this new and utterly soul-destroying job he wanted her to handle. Just when she’d thought there was light at the end of the tunnel as far as the reorganisation paperwork audit was concerned, Bill had found something else even more depressing for her to do.

“The point is, the files should’ve all been named and saved using an agreed master style from the start,” Bill finished. “But they weren’t and now it needs to be put right.”

In other words, Bill should’ve ensured everyone knew about the proper naming convention when the reorganisation first began generating documentation, but he hadn’t done that and now the oversight had come back to haunt him.

Or haunt Meg, more accurately. She almost opened her mouth to ask why she was being given all this grunt work to sort out, but knew it was a pointless question. Bill was her manager and didn’t have to justify the decisions he made

about the work he asked her to do. Meg also understood that if the failure to keep the records in good order was Bill's mistake—and she was one hundred per cent sure it was—then it wouldn't do her much good to force Bill to explain why this had happened in the first place.

Like most incompetent managers, Bill maintained the delusion that he was actually very good at his job, even if he was the only one who seemed to believe it.

Still, the new work task annoyed Meg, infuriated her, actually. The winter sun holiday she'd begun fantasising about two nights ago leapt into her head. Galvanised by this latest insulting piece of work Bill had given her to complete, Meg decided it was time to alert the useless cretin that she planned on taking some holiday time very soon and he better be ready to sign off on her annual leave request.

“Bill, listen, I thought I'd let you know that I'm planning on taking some time—”

Before she could say another word, Bill's desk phone rang. Bill held up a finger to silence her and grabbed the receiver. He listened to whoever was on the other end of the phone for a moment before putting his other hand over the mouthpiece and glancing back at Meg.

“This is a rather important call, Meg,” Bill said. “Can we finish our discussion later?”

Meg had no choice but to nod and close the door behind her. Ten minutes later, Bill hurried out of his office, pulling on his coat as he headed for the stairs, apparently finished for the day even although it wasn't even yet four-thirty.

At her desk, Meg sighed. There wasn't much she could do about the dull work Bill kept shovelling in her direction, but she could make sure he listened to her when she alerted him to the fact that she planned to take some much needed holiday time.

She made a mental promise to go into his office first thing tomorrow morning and inform him that she wanted some time off and hoped there'd be no trouble getting him to sign off on

her leave request. He'd been difficult in the past with other employees about what he considered 'late notice' of holiday time, not because it was actually 'late notice' but because he just liked being difficult and petty-minded about things.

Before she trawled any further around the travel company websites, she wanted to know she could actually jump in and book something without having to worry about Bill being difficult or kicking up a fuss.

Meg worked for another half an hour and then shut down her computer. She was meeting Harry Doyle straight after work for the coffee they'd arranged to have together. After the unpleasant surprise Bill had sprung on her with this extra load of brainless work, she was tempted to ask Harry if he'd rather have a drink in the pub rather than a coffee at the café.

Something more fortifying than a latte seemed in order to revive her spirits.

* * *

"Sure, a drink in the pub sounds good," Harry said when Meg met him near Hamblehurst market square twenty minutes later.

"Good. I'm buying."

Harry gave her a puzzled look as they crossed the market square towards one of the cobbled lanes that spurred off it, where Meg knew there was a small and cosy pub that wouldn't be too busy.

"Hey, are you okay?" Harry asked as they walked. "You seem a little upset."

"I'm not upset, no, it's just..." Meg blew out a breath. "It's been one of those days at work."

"Sorry to hear that. Are you sure you want to have this drink tonight? If you've had a stinker of a day and just want to get home, I understand."

"No, I'm looking forward to it. And anyway, we're here already."

Meg opened the pub door and Harry stepped inside with a nod of thanks. As she'd hoped, the pub was nice and quiet,

with plenty of empty tables. She didn't feel like jostling for space or shouting to be heard tonight.

"What can I get you?" Harry asked when they reached the bar.

"I said I was getting these."

"You get the next round. I'll get us started."

His smile made it clear the matter wasn't up for discussion. Meg asked for a white wine, a large one she added as an afterthought, which made him laugh. While he waited for the barman to serve the drinks and take his money, Meg found a table beside a roaring open fire and settled down in a chair. After the raw, damp chill of the February evening, the warmth of the fire was welcome.

She was still rubbing her hands together and savouring the heat when Harry brought their drinks over. With a twinge of mortification, she noticed he'd opted for only a half pint of lager, and the small glass made her enormous serving of wine look even larger than it already was.

As Harry sat down, he noticed her eyeing up their glasses.

"I hope you don't mind if I stick to a half," he said. "The thing is, I'm catching a flight tonight and need to keep my wits about me if I want to make it to the airport in time."

"A flight?" Meg asked. "I thought you said you weren't leaving Hamblehurst for another couple of weeks?"

"That was the original plan. But an old friend got in touch last night and asked if I might be able to cover a two-week art class that's about to begin in Paris and which has just lost its teacher. My friend, Hugo, runs a business that offers holidays that combine residential art courses with cultural tours of Paris. One of his freelance artists had to pull out at the last minute because of a family emergency and Hugo was struggling to find someone he could trust and who he'd worked with before and who was free for the entire two-week course that's about to begin. He reached out to me, and I could tell he was frantic and worried he might have to cancel the holiday bookings and issue refunds, which wouldn't be good

for business, obviously. As all the legal loose ends are sorted now with my mother's house and estate and all that stuff, and as I've finished teaching my own art classes at the community centre, I said I could take over the class for him."

"That's good of you to help at such late notice." Meg glanced at Harry's pint. "Are you sure you've got time for a drink?"

Harry nodded. "My flight isn't until ten o'clock. So long as I'm on the seven-fifteen train up to Heathrow, I should be fine."

Naturally, Meg hadn't expected to find out Harry was leaving Hamblehurst quite so soon, and certainly not tonight. "You really do just jump at every opportunity life throws you, don't you?" she said with an impressed smile.

Harry returned her grin with one of his own. "Who could say no to a two-week stay in Paris while being paid to help people enjoy a spot of leisurely painting? I'd be mad to turn it down. Hugo runs a good business and I worked freelance on his painting courses a few years ago, so I know what he expects me to deliver. Plus, because it's all last minute, Hugo and his wife are letting me stay in their guest room in their fairly spectacular Parisienne apartment, and I can't say I'm not looking forward to spending time with them. I haven't been to Paris for a while and I've missed it."

The two unexpected pieces of news—that Harry was not only leaving Hamblehurst that very night, but that he was jetting off to Paris and throwing himself into teaching an art course—had a similarly unexpected effect on Meg.

That flicker of attraction she felt for Harry Doyle disappeared in an instant.

And in its place came a new realisation.

It wasn't *Harry* she'd felt an attraction for, handsome though he undoubtedly was.

It was his *life* that had seduced her.

Yes, she could admit to herself that when she first saw him at the craft fair a few weeks ago, his good looks and easy

charm had got her heart beating faster, and when she'd finally placed how she'd recognised him, and remembered him as the eighteen-year-old lad who'd once played in a band alongside Johnny, that flickering attraction had burned a little brighter.

She hadn't liked the conflicted feeling of the attraction, to be sure, but as she'd chatted with Harry at the craft fair, then at the art class in the community centre, and then when they'd got together for dinner, she'd enjoyed the excitement of spending time with a man who actually made her heart beat faster.

Yet something hadn't sat quite right with those feelings, and now, as she listened to Harry talk a little more about his impromptu trip to Paris and the class he would be teaching and the new art he hoped to create himself while he was there, Meg realised that it was this man's wandering, carefree life that had seduced her the most.

And, if she was being completely honest with herself, when they'd parted last time after sharing dinner together, and there'd been that one delicious moment outside her house on Foxglove Street when Meg thought that Harry had been about to kiss her on the lips rather than on the cheek... well, if she was being honest with herself, there had never been anything other than friendship in his eyes in that moment.

Just as there was nothing more than friendship in his eyes as he looked at her right now.

They were nothing more than two people whose paths had crossed twenty years after they last saw one another. Moved and shocked at the news of Johnny's death so long ago, Harry Doyle had naturally asked to spend time with Meg while he was in Hamblehurst, for old time's sake.

For old time's sake and nothing more.

It was a relief to realise this. Thanks to the frustrating and unsettled feelings that had gripped her lately, Meg had begun to imagine an attraction to Harry that she simply didn't feel. Understanding how her mind had leapt towards such a ridiculous place almost made her laugh at the sheer hilarity of it.

Across the table, Harry was still talking, telling Meg more about this friend, Hugo, who he was about to meet up with in Paris and sharing some of the backstory about how they knew one another.

“So, anyway,” Harry said, waving a hand as if apologising for dominating the conversation. “An unexpected couple of weeks in Paris will be a great opportunity to paint some new pieces in one of the best cities in the world for artists. I haven’t painted the Sacré-Coeur in winter before and I hear it’s beautiful in February. Atmospheric and ethereal and perfect for a palette of white and grey and pale blues and...” Harry smiled. “And I’ll shut up now or I’ll keep yapping on and you’ll start to wonder when I’ll finally give you a break and go and catch my train.”

Meg laughed. “I’m enjoying listening to you talk, Harry. Honestly, the life you lead just blows me away. The idea that you can just get up and go somewhere new and make the most of whatever you find there... well, it’s amazing.”

“Taking off for Paris on a whim makes me sound a lot more exciting than I usually am,” he said with a modest shrug. “If my friend hadn’t got in touch about this art course he desperately needs a teacher for, I’d be staying here in Hamblehurst for a little longer.”

A pensive look crossed his face. “It’s been a tough few months here, if I’m being honest. Losing my mother was hard. We weren’t as close as some mothers and sons, but seeing her so ill and then watching her pass away...”

His throat caught and Meg saw his eyes glisten. Moved by his obvious emotion, she reached across the table and squeezed his hand.

“Of course it was hard. Your mother passed away and that’s heart breaking, Harry. Then dealing with everything that comes after that, clearing out her house and selling up and all that stuff. It’s a wrench and it’s tough. Now that you’ve sorted things out with the solicitor and settled her affairs and so on, perhaps time in Paris is just what you need. The way you’ve talked about it, it sounds like it’s one of your favourite places.”

Harry nodded. "It is. Paris is beautiful. I love it there. But it's an expensive place to live, which is why I don't live there. A chance like this to move on from here, move on from Hamblehurst now that my mother's house is sold and so on, and spend time in my favourite city in the world... well, it feels like it couldn't have come at a better time."

"I'm glad you've got this chance. It sounds perfect for you."

Harry smiled and sipped his lager, then seemed to think of something. "Oh, in case I forget to say this before I go, I promised to look into local art classes for you." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of notepaper. "There's another artist who wants to take over the art class slot I was running at Hamblehurst community centre and she seems like a decent and competent woman, although from what I've learned about her, she's more of a hobby artist than a professional. Her work is okay, though, and I'm sure if you went along to more of the classes being held there, you'd enjoy it well enough. However, if you felt like venturing a little further afield, there's a young female painter who lives over in Winchester and who does really exceptional work. She's running weekend painting courses next month and I've watched some of her YouTube videos. I think you'd enjoy her classes."

Harry passed the piece of paper across the table and Meg scanned the details scrawled there about the painter he was recommending and how to get in touch with her.

"Thanks, Harry, I appreciate this," Meg said, pocketing the information.

"Do you think you'll do more painting, with either of these two artists or with someone else?"

Meg thought about the question. "I'm not sure, actually. I enjoyed the class you taught and had such a lot of fun, but..." She trailed off and shrugged. "I'm still trying to decide if it's the right hobby for me."

"For what it's worth, you have a great eye for painting. And in the end, all that matters is whether you enjoy doing it,

and—”

Harry was interrupted by his phone beeping on the table. When he glanced at the screen and read the notification that had arrived, he frowned.

“It looks like there are some train delays on my route up to Heathrow,” Harry said, looking unhappy. “According to the train app, some of the services are running up to thirty minutes late. The train I’m booked on looks okay for now, but...” He glanced up and gave her an apologetic look. “I don’t want to risk waiting and end up missing my flight because of a problem with the trains. There’s an earlier train I can catch and I think that might be a good idea.”

“Of course, that makes perfect sense. No point sitting around here when you could already be on your way and hopefully avoid the delays if you can.”

“You don’t mind if we cut tonight short? I’d hoped we’d have at least an hour before I had to leave.”

“Don’t be daft. We’ve almost finished our drinks, anyway.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Meg rose from the table and Harry followed. As they left the pub, he explained that all he had to do was return to his mother’s house to collect his luggage before going to the train station, and how, if he was quick, he’d catch an earlier train and hopefully make up the time for any delays on the line.

Meg nodded, agreed it all made good sense, and wished him luck for the journey.

“It’s been great seeing you again, Meg,” Harry said outside the pub. “I only wish we’d caught up sooner. If I’d known you still lived here when I first came back to Hamblehurst, we could’ve got together more often.”

“We made the most of the time we had,” Meg said. “That’s what matters, right?”

“I’d love to keep in touch, Meg.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.”

They’d already swapped numbers and connected on social media. Meg was sure they’d like one another’s posts and swap messages from time to time, and she’d enjoy that very much.

But already she sensed that this was a man who she probably wouldn’t ever see again. She hadn’t thought of him in the twenty years since they’d last been in each other’s company and the truth was that they led very different lives. Harry Doyle had been a bright and brief flash of unexpected light in her life during a dark winter, but now that he was leaving, she felt no lingering sense of loss.

They hugged outside the pub, a solid embrace filled with the last remnants of a lost-lost teenage friendship and the bittersweet taste of farewell.

“Take care, Harry,” Meg said when they stepped back from one another. “And have a safe journey tonight.”

“Thanks, Meg. You take care, too. And keep up the painting, if it makes you happy.”

Meg smiled and Harry pulled her close again and brushed one last chaste kiss on her cheek. And then, with a wave, he hurried off in the other direction to collect his luggage and catch his train and return to the life he loved.

Only when he’d vanished from sight did Meg turn and walk off in the other direction.

Steering herself towards home, she thought about Harry dashing off to Paris, seizing an opportunity that had come his way following what had obviously been an upsetting and difficult few months after his mother’s death. She thought, too, about how Harry hadn’t exactly let the grass grow beneath his feet while he’d been staying in Hamblehurst. He’d jumped in to run the art classes at the community centre, and had taken a stall at the craft fair to sell his work, and those were just the things Meg knew about.

Even while struggling with grief and dealing with his mother’s estate, Harry had kept his chin up and kept doing the things he loved, the things that made him who he was.

Meg admired that. She wondered about the artist's details Harry had given her, and whether she'd go along to any more art classes. It was kind of him to gather the information for her, considering how busy he must've been while getting ready to leave. Perhaps she'd go along to an art class at least one more time, and that way she could thank Harry for going to the trouble for her and let him know how it turned out.

Yes, she'd do that, and she'd book her winter sun holiday too. Those two things together would give her plenty to look forward to.

And yet, even with these decisions made, Meg still couldn't shake off that gnawing, unsettled feeling, as if she hadn't quite solved the problem of whatever it was that plagued her mind these days.

Frowning at herself in irritation, Meg crossed the high street and trekked along the pavement towards home.

SOMETHING ODD WAS GOING on in Bill Hilburn's office.

It was late afternoon on the following day, and Meg had tried a handful of times to speak to Bill and let him know she'd be putting in for some annual leave. But every time she knocked on his door, he gave her a frantic look and said he was too busy to talk and told her to come back later.

The man had been buried beneath mounds of paperwork and hunched in front of his computer screen all day and actually appeared to be doing some real work instead of only pretending. That in itself was unusual and Meg couldn't help but wondering what had prompted Bill's sudden motivation and work ethic.

Talking to Bill before submitting her holiday time request was only a courtesy. If she didn't get to speak to him before the end of the day, she'd just go ahead and fill out the online form in the council's employee dashboard, and Bill would simply have to make his peace with the dates she chose.

Last night, while scrolling on her tablet, Meg had found a few late holiday deals that she quite liked the look of. When she'd told her mother about her ideas for taking a winter holiday and whether she'd like to come with her, Liz had applauded the plan and said she'd love to tag along, assuming she wouldn't be in the way.

Now all Meg had to do was finalise some time off work and actually book a holiday somewhere. Harry Doyle's swift departure from Hamblehurst had reminded her that you had to

get on and take action if you wanted certain things in life, and that endlessly thinking it over wouldn't get anything done.

Buoyed by this thought, Meg rose from her chair and headed towards Bill's office once more, determined this time to tell him about her holiday request, whether he had time to hear it or not. But she'd only taken a few steps across the open plan office when Bill's door flew open and he came charging out, pulling on his coat as he walked towards the stairs with his phone clutched in his hand.

"Bill, before you go, I wanted to let you know—"

"Sorry, I can't talk right now," Bill said, barely even glancing up from his phone screen as he rushed past her and barrelled through the doors that led to the stairwell.

Meg blinked and caught the eyes of a few colleagues, who looked just as astonished as she did at their manager's sudden departure.

"Wonder what's got into him," said one of the other women sitting at a nearby desk.

"If he's leaving early, then I'm leaving early," said another with a throaty laugh.

This prompted everyone in the open plan office to peer at the clock on the wall and start tidying their desks and shut down their computers. There were still twenty minutes to go before the end of the working day, but no one seemed to care about that.

Bill Hilburn really did set a bad example to the rest of the team he was supposed to be managing, Meg thought as she, too, finished composing an email and got ready to leave. Before turning off her computer, she opened the council's employee dashboard and navigated to the place where she could submit holiday requests. After selecting a two-week block in March, exactly one month away, she confirmed the leave request and logged out. If she waited any longer to book time off, it wouldn't be a winter sun holiday she'd be going away on—it'd be a spring break, which sort of defeated the whole point of the exercise.

As far as her leave request was concerned, her useless manager would either have to like it or lump it, Meg decided, as she grabbed her coat and bag and headed out into the darkening February afternoon.

* * *

During the day while Meg had been inside at work, the weather had turned raw and a sudden freeze had descended on Hamblehurst. As rain had swept in overnight and left the roads and pavements wet and filled with puddles, the plunging temperatures meant icy streets and slick conditions underfoot.

As Meg left work, she saw people slipping and sliding along the street, grabbing at lampposts and railings to stay upright. The winter seemed intent on keeping everyone on their toes this year, quite literally, she thought, as she picked her way towards the high street and regretted not wearing her sturdier boots that might have given her more traction.

After stopping off at the mini-supermarket on the high street to pick up a few groceries, Meg turned onto Foxglove Street. The pavement was even more treacherous there, glazed lethal white as frost and ice formed beneath the freezing air and the open sky.

Destabilised by the shopping bag she carried in one hand, Meg's foot skated across a hidden slick patch and her heel slipped, almost sending her flying.

“Eek!”

“Oh, Meg! Be careful!”

She avoided falling, if only just, and glanced around to see who'd called out her name. Walking a few feet behind her, Meg saw her Foxglove Street neighbour, Olive Nimmo.

“I thought you were about to go crashing to the ground,” Olive said, carefully catching up with her across the icy pavement. “Are you all right?”

“I'm fine, thanks,” Meg said with an embarrassed laugh. “Just lost my footing for a second. I had no idea these freezing

temperatures were on the way or else I would've put on my proper winter boots."

"This winter has caught us all out many times," Olive said with a frown. "I thought last winter was bad, but this one just keeps surprising us." Olive slipped her arm into Meg's. "Let's keep each other upright, if we can. It's either that, or I'll have to cling to everyone's garden fences all the way back to my house."

"Well, if I start to fall over, just let me go," Meg said. "I don't want to take you down with me, Olive."

Olive chortled. "That would be quite a sight. No, I'm sure with us propping one another up, we'll manage just fine. I should've been back at my own house a while ago, but I dropped by to see my friend Walter, and as usual the time got away from us once we started chatting and putting the world to rights. If I'd realised it was getting so icy out here, I would've got myself home before now."

"When I was in the mini-market, I heard someone in the queue ahead of me say that the forecasters are predicting snow tonight," Meg said, peering up at the clear sky. "As there are no signs of clouds, I hope they're wrong. I've just about had it with snow this winter."

"I'm sorry to tell you that I suspect the forecasters might be right. When I looked out the window at Walter's house before I left and saw all this ice forming on the pavements, I checked the forecast to find out what was coming, and they seem quite sure that these clear skies will soon be filled with snow. Apparently there's a new weather system moving in or some such, and they expect at least a couple of inches of snow overnight."

"Oh, well, that's what I get for not paying attention to the weather forecast." Meg looked up at the sky again, and sure enough, she saw thick grey clouds now edging towards the rooftops on the horizon. "Snow falling on top of ice. That will make it fun to get around."

Olive laughed and gripped Meg's arm a little tighter as her foot slipped. "I'll be glad to get indoors and off these

treacherous pavements. I lost a very dear friend last winter after she took a nasty fall on the ice and broke her hip and never recovered from the surgery she required. I must say that knowing how quickly something like that can happen still makes me very nervous about these tricky conditions.”

“I’m sorry, Olive, I didn’t know you’d lost a friend.”

Olive nodded her thanks for these condolences. “It was a sad business, to be sure. Between losing my friend and struggling to contend with last winter’s weather, I did rather become something of a recluse. This year, I’ve tried to avoid the same thing happening again, and made sure I’ve got out and about during the dark months and kept in touch with people. However, finding myself navigating this treacherous street when it’s covered in ice wasn’t quite in my plans today. I’m glad I bumped into you, Meg, so you can help an old lady home.”

Meg laughed and took a tighter grip of Olive’s arm, although the older lady seemed far more sure on her feet than Meg did herself. A few moments later, they reached Olive’s front gate.

“Come inside and I’ll cut some homemade cake for you to take away with you,” Olive said as she fished her house keys from her pocket. “I baked a lovely Dorset apple cake yesterday and although I took some to Walter and shared a few slices with my neighbour Angela and her daughter Lindsey, there’s still far too much left for me to eat myself, and I hate the idea of it going to waste.”

“Thanks, Olive. I love apple cake.”

“Perfect. Is your mother still staying with you at the moment?”

“Yes.”

“In that case, I’ll give you a nice big chunk to take away, and you two ladies can enjoy it with your cup of tea tonight.”

Olive beckoned Meg inside the house and once she’d shrugged out of her jacket and switched on the lights, she walked through to the kitchen at the back. While Olive opened

a cake tin and showed off the beautiful apple cake nestled inside, to much appreciative oohing and aahing from Meg, she took the chance to set down her heavy bag of groceries and give her arm a rest.

“There, how does that look?” Olive asked, slicing an enormous wedge from the apple cake and tipping it onto a sheet of foil. “Will that be enough?”

“Gosh, Olive, that’s more than enough. Thank you.”

Olive wrapped the cake in the foil and tucked it into Meg’s shopping bag. “I hope you enjoy it, dear.” She smiled and then seemed to remember something. “Oh, I heard through the grapevine that you went along to one of the art classes that’s been running over at the community centre. Did you enjoy it?”

“I did enjoy it. But how on earth did you hear about that?”

Olive waved a hand. “You know what Hamblehurst is like for gossip. One of the ladies who goes along to my weekly lunch club at the pub happened to be at the art class too and thought she recognised you as a neighbour of mine.”

Meg smiled as Olive offered this explanation, amused at how news and gossip managed to circulate around the little town with such ease. “It was a lot of fun. We painted a self-portrait, which seemed a bit indulgent to begin with, but once we got going and started to enjoy it, I think we all had fun being creative and giving ourselves daft and exciting features. And the prosecco we drank helped us unleash our inner artist.”

Olive laughed at this. “I think it’s wonderful that we’ve got art classes running here in the town. According to what my friend told me, they only just started up late last year.”

“Yes, I think so. Although the artist who set them up has left now and someone else will be taking over, so who knows whether they’ll continue long-term. I suppose it all depends on the level of demand and how many people are willing to pay for that sort of thing. Probably depends on the teacher, too, and whether they’re any good.”

“Well, my friend from the lunch club did say that the teacher at the art class was excellent.”

“Yes, he was. Actually, it was a bit of a strange coincidence, because the teacher, Harry Doyle, was someone I knew back when I was a teenager. He was a friend of my late husband’s. They played in a band together. I hadn’t seen him, never mind thought of him, in years until I bumped into him at that arts and crafts fair I tagged along with you to go to a few weeks ago.”

Olive’s eyes widened. “Isn’t that something? What a coincidence.”

“I wouldn’t even have gone along to the craft fair if you hadn’t mentioned it, Olive.” Meg thought back, remembering the events of that day. “Come to think of it, if I hadn’t stopped by your house to drop off that letter than was delivered to me by mistake, you and I wouldn’t have got talking and my mother and I would’ve just gone off to find a café and have the coffee we’d planned, and I might never have crossed paths with Harry Doyle at all.”

“Thank goodness for wrongly delivered mail, in that case,” Olive said, grinning. “How nice that you reconnected with an old face from the past.”

“It was lovely to see him again after all these years and find out what he’s been up to,” Meg said, sounding rather wistful.

“But you said he’s gone now? This Harry Doyle person who was running the art classes at the community centre?”

Meg nodded. “He was only back here temporarily.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll keep in touch. And I must say, I’m thrilled to know I played even the tiniest role in helping you meet an old friend. The funny thing is, I only went along to the craft fair because Ellie from the library mentioned it to me when I was returning my books, and she was only popping along because her new housemate, Carrie, had managed to secure a stall there at the last minute to showcase her photography and design work. But for that, I might not have realised the craft fair was happening at all. How’s that for serendipity?”

Meg laughed. “You’re right, it’s funny how little things like that can end up having such a big impact. One minute I’m dropping a letter through your door that came to my house by mistake, and the next I’m crossing paths with someone I haven’t seen for almost twenty years and then turning up to their art class and going out to dinner with them and catching up on old times.”

Olive’s eyebrows lifted. “Dinner, too? Intriguing.”

“Just as friends, nothing more.”

“Well, as someone who is regularly teased about my friendship with Walter Montgomery, when there is nothing more to it than that, I’ll say no more.”

“It was nice, though, spending time with him before he left. Hearing about Harry’s life and all the places he’s lived and the things he’s done, well, it certainly got me thinking, put it that way.”

“Thinking about what?” Olive asked, giving her a thoughtful look.

“Oh, just about how Harry’s off to Paris now and then to southern Spain to see out the rest of the winter, while I’m freezing my backside off here in Hamblehurst,” Meg said with a laugh.

“It sounds like you need a holiday, in that case.”

“My thoughts exactly. My mother and I are planning to book something for next month. March can be a tough month while you’re waiting for spring to come and warm things up. But if it hadn’t been for those chats I’d had with Harry Doyle, I might not have decided I needed a winter getaway at all.”

Even as Meg said these words, they made perfect sense to her. And yet, she knew, just *knew*, that there was more to it than this, more to it than just her need for a winter holiday, but still she couldn’t pin down the deeper problem that surely lay within.

“That’s life, I suppose.” Olive smiled kindly. “It’s all the lovely little moments and strange coincidences that make it exciting and surprising. I sometimes think back to this time

last year and can hardly believe all that's happened to me since."

"What do you mean?" Meg asked, intrigued.

"Well, as I mentioned when you and I were outside just now attempting to walk along that treacherous pavement, I lost a dear friend last year after she fell on the ice and never recovered from the surgery. Between that bereavement and the terrible winter we had last year, I found myself rather cut off from the world and feeling isolated. When the spring arrived at last, I knew I had to get back out there and blow away the cobwebs, but after you've been alone for such a long time, it's not easy to... how shall I put it? It's not easy to return to the world outside your window and start living again."

Meg reached over and squeezed Olive's arm. "I'm sorry, Olive. I wish I'd known. I should've been a better neighbour."

But Olive waved this off. "Don't say that. You live at the other end of the street, after all, and you're a perfectly lovely neighbour, just as you are. Anyway, the reason I'm telling you this is because last April, I wasn't sure how to get going again, if I can put it like that. I'd lost touch with many people, one good friend had passed away and others had moved away, and I had simply lost my enthusiasm for life, much though it pains me to admit it, because I know it sounds incredibly self-indulgent to say such a thing when I was lucky enough to have no physical ailments or illnesses, and wasn't plagued with some of the worries that others must contend with."

"Sometimes we just feel a little blue," Meg said, knowing only too well what she was talking about. "I understand perfectly."

Olive gave her a grateful smile. "Yes, that's it exactly. I was feeling a little blue and unsure how to remedy the problem. And while I was casting around for ideas, wondering how to get back out there and mix with people again and how hard it might be and whether I'd be rebuffed, a most startling turn of events occurred, which changed everything."

"What happened?"

“I discovered that my next-door neighbour, Angela, was facing a terrible crisis. I hardly knew the young woman, as she’d only moved in less than a year earlier and she led a busy life, which meant we didn’t see each other much, but one day I heard her crying in her back garden. Although I knew it might make me appear rude and nosy, I stuck my head over the fence to find out if she was okay. It took her a minute or two to admit what was wrong, and I learned that a change in her circumstances meant she’d have to give up her little dog, Elsa, even although Angela’s daughter, Lindsay, doted on the creature. But as Angela was going through a divorce and returning to work full-time and struggling to handle her new financial realities, she couldn’t afford to pay a dog-walker to come and exercise the little creature while she was at work, and so had made the hard decision to surrender the animal to a rescue centre.”

“That must have been hard,” Meg saying, remembering from her own early days as a single parent after Johnny’s death just how hard it was to manage her finances and make ends meet.

“So, that’s what she was crying about,” Olive said. “When Angela’s daughter came home from school that day, she was going to tell her they’d have to give up the dog because Angela had to return to full-time work, and she knew it would break her daughter’s heart.”

Olive’s gaze turned distant for a moment before she continued. “Even although I didn’t know my neighbour well, her pain moved me. And I realised I could help, if I was willing to take a risk and put myself out there. So, I offered to walk the dog while my neighbour was at work. Angela wasn’t at all sure to begin with, naturally, considering we barely knew one another. But we agreed on a trial basis to see how it went.”

A broad smile stretched across Olive’s face. “And it went brilliantly. I was more than able to handle walking Elsa each day and Angela was able to avoid having to rehome her much-loved family pet and cause her lovely daughter terrible distress.”

“That’s a lovely story, Olive. Good for you for helping someone in need.”

“The reason I’m telling you this is because, from that one split decision I made to offer to walk my neighbour’s dog, my world has changed beyond all recognition. I met other dog-walkers in the park and reconnected with friends I’d lost contact with. In reconnecting with those friends, and making new ones, I eventually found the courage to take a giant leap and face my fears and get on a plane and go and visit my daughter and grandson and new baby great-granddaughter in Canada, something I’d convinced myself I was too old to do.”

“I had no idea you’d jetted off to Canada, Olive. That’s fantastic.”

“And in a few months’ time, I shall be returning there for my grandson’s wedding, an event I thought I’d miss when I first heard he was engaged because I was too scared of the long-haul flight at my age.”

“What a lovely thing to look forward to, Olive.”

“And that’s just one of the many lovely things that have happened because of one tiny decision made in the blink of an eye, to pop my head over the fence and ask my crying neighbour, who I hardly knew, if she was okay. If I hadn’t done that, and if I hadn’t offered to walk her dog to help her out of a sticky patch, I’m sure my life would look very different today and be far poorer, too.”

Meg thought about Olive’s amazing story. “Life really is filled with surprises, isn’t it?”

“Yes, if we’re willing to take chances,” Olive replied. “We have to take chances on ourselves, do the things that scare us, and be brave enough to embrace change when it knocks on our door.”

“You’re very wise, Olive.”

“Only thanks to the lessons of experience. Anyway, I’m not sure why I told you all this. Thinking about how you popped that letter through my door a few weeks ago and how it triggered a minor chain of events that led to you

reconnecting with an old friend from your past, well, it made me think about how that one seemingly tiny decision I took last spring ended up changing everything for me and in ways I could never have imagined. Isn't it lovely when life surprises us that way?"

"It is."

Meg smiled, still thinking about Olive's story and how it resonated with her own encounters and experiences over these past few weeks. Her gaze shifted to the window across the kitchen, where she was stunned to see fat snowflakes falling outside.

"Oh, my goodness, it's snowing already!" Meg said. "That happened fast."

"It's already lying on the ground, too," Olive said, shuffling to the window and glancing outside. "The weather forecasters got it right, after all."

"I'd better get home before the conditions get any worse out there. Between the ice on the pavements and now this falling snow, it'll be a miracle if I get home without falling over."

Meg laughed and picked up her bag of shopping, adjusting the wrapped apple cake Olive had given her to stop it from being squashed by the heavier items inside. Olive accompanied her to the front door.

"You'll take care walking home, won't you dear?" Olive asked, peering out at the thick snowfall with concern.

"Of course I will. Thanks for the apple cake, Olive. See you soon."

"Bye, dear. And be careful in this snow!"

Olive waved her off and Meg resumed her journey home along Foxglove Street. The pavement underfoot was slippery as the snow whipped against her face. Pulling her scarf tighter around her neck, she navigated along the street, head down. The bag filled with groceries banged against her legs and she wished she hadn't bought so many items at the mini-market,

because the shopping was destabilising her with every step she took.

The story Olive had recounted about the chain of events in the old lady's life that had happened last year following that one decision she'd made—to peek over her garden fence and ask her neighbour if she was okay—kept whirling around in her head. It was true what Olive had said—life really could turn on the smallest thing.

Meg thought, too, of how posting that letter through Olive's door had led her to the craft fair and to a reconnection with Harry Doyle. She thought of the art class she'd attended, the mad self-portrait she'd painted, the dinner she'd shared with Harry, the things she'd learned about the man's life, and the odd thoughts and musings that had gripped her ever since—the questions about her own life, the direction she wanted to go in, and what she planned to do about the strange unsettled feeling that she'd struggled with for so many months.

There was an odd symmetry between her own story and Olive's story, Meg decided. The chain of events that had begun last year in Olive's life had led her to board a plane for a long-haul trip to Canada to visit her beloved family, something Olive had admitted she'd thought was beyond her.

And now Meg's own brief interlude, sparked by her reconnection with Harry Doyle, had led her to decide to book a winter holiday.

Meg frowned. Actually, the more she thought about it, there wasn't as much symmetry in the two stories as she might like to believe. Olive Nimmo had embraced something that had terrified her, something that she thought was impossible, and in doing so, had overcome fear in order to spend time with her far-flung family.

All Meg was planning on doing was going on holiday somewhere sunny. There was nothing terrifying or challenging about that, was there? The only thing that might make a winter sun holiday even remotely scary was the prospect of her mother letting loose at the hotel bar and forcing them both to participate in some ill-advised karaoke.

That amusing notion aside, there was nothing to be feared from a winter holiday spent lounging at the beach.

Meg wondered why this troubled her. She wanted a nice, relaxing holiday getaway. She *deserved* a nice, relaxing holiday getaway.

And yet... she *needed* something more than that, too.

Something challenging? Something new and exciting? Something to shake off the weird restlessness she'd felt for so many months?

Yes, she needed something that would do all those things. But what?

Meg's mind leapt swiftly to an image of the wardrobe in her bedroom and the box tucked on the floor at the back, the box she'd begun looking through a few weeks ago when her mother came to stay and Meg was clearing room for Liz's belongings.

She remembered looking at the old photographs in the box, and flicking through the other ancient things she'd stored there so long ago.

The tattered posters for the gigs Johnny's band had once played. The long-forgotten university prospectus Meg had pored over as a teenager. The knick-knacks and trinkets and mementos.

And the worn travel map she'd torn out of that old excursion brochure, the map she'd studied over and over, dreaming of one day winding her way through the beautiful French countryside as she enjoyed the adventure of a lifetime.

She couldn't get the image of that old travel map out of her head. It burned inside her mind like a beacon, each destination along the route lit up as if she could step into the map and find herself there in the blink of an eye.

The image was so bright, so vibrant, Meg almost forgot where she actually was—at least until the driving snow against her face and the slick ice underfoot brought her back to reality with a horrible lurch as she slipped on the pavement and almost fell flat on her face.

“Eek!” she yelled out, her arms pinwheeling as she fought for balance, the bag of groceries dangling from her arm threatening once more to send her flying.

Regaining her balance, she shook her head and glanced around to see if anyone had overheard her embarrassing shriek, but the pavement ahead and behind her was empty.

With a sigh of irritation, Meg adjusted the shopping bag on her arm and told herself to get her wits together before she did herself an injury. Instead of letting her mind wander to silly old travel maps stored in dusty old boxes, she ought to be focusing on getting herself home in one piece. It was dark and the weather was treacherous, and Olive Nimmo’s story of the tragic misfortune that had befallen her friend last year ought to serve as a cautionary tale and keep her mind focused on the remainder of the journey home.

Meg hauled the hood of her coat closer around her head to ward off the heavy snow and moved towards the edge of the pavement to cross over to her own side of the street. Stepping out between two parked cars, she glanced left then right to check for oncoming traffic before making her way across the road.

She was halfway towards the pavement on the other side when her foot hit a patch of treacherous ice. Her heel jerked forward and her legs went out from beneath her so quickly that Meg didn’t even realise she was falling until she’d almost hit the ground.

Her stomach lurched with the shock of the fall. To her right, she saw flashing headlights and heard the blast of the horn from a car speeding down the street towards her.

As Meg hit the ground hard, the honking horn was joined by the screaming brakes as the tyres fought for purchase in the ice and snow.

It all happened so fast, Meg only had time to wonder how she hadn’t seen the car coming when she’d stepped out to cross the road, why she hadn’t noticed the ice patch as she picked her way towards the other side, and how she could be falling so hard and so painfully and so *fast*.

Meg's backside hit the ground first, and she had just a tiny sliver of time to understand her head would hit the ground too before it actually happened.

There was a sickening crack as skull and road came together as the car headlights bloomed brighter and the screeching brakes and horn grew louder.

And then everything went black.

THE SNOW IS AMAZING, isn't it?

Meg wasn't sure where the voice was coming from. Everything sounded hazy and muffled and she couldn't see too clearly, either. The sensation in her body made her think of the sweet moments between sleeping and waking, when the mind was caught between two worlds.

Blinking to clear her vision, she looked around her. Then she blinked again, trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

The world was a perfect wintry snowscape as far as the eye could see. Thick snow dusted the rooftops and bare trees and streets and lanes and fields and hills. The sky was a deep winter's blue with a golden yellow sun setting on the horizon and painting pinks and purples across the fluffy clouds that drifted overhead.

Meg realised she was looking down on the world below, as if suspended somewhere up in the sky, although she had no idea how this was possible. She looked up at the blue sky and the candyfloss clouds above her and then down at the world spread out below her.

It was Hamblehurst she was looking at, Meg realised with a flash of recognition as she picked out the winding high street and the market square and the meandering river and the church steeples and the huddled lines of houses and cottages.

Her gaze swept across the little town, which was empty of people. There were no cars or buses, no trains at the station, no

pedestrians anywhere. Hamblehurst lay beneath its snowy blanket and blue sky and setting sun, silent and still and hushed.

The snow is amazing, isn't it?

Silent and still and hushed except for that voice Meg could hear. Where was it coming from?

She glanced around, searching for the source. Something about the voice was deeply familiar and comforting, and it tugged at her heart and her soul.

The snow is amazing, isn't it?

Meg glanced around once more and this time saw a figure materialising out of thin air beside her. As the form took shape, Meg gasped with stunned disbelief.

Johnny appeared before her, his smile soft, his eyes twinkling, his body a whisper that came in and out of focus, as if he was there with her, but also *not* there.

“Johnny!” Meg cried, reaching for him as her stomach tumbled with joy.

Her hands grasped thin air, her fingers sending puffs of something silvery into the cold sky as Johnny’s form wavered before stabilising once more.

I'm not really here, Meg, Johnny said with a smile. *And neither are you.*

Aching frustration and longing made her grab for him again. Another puff of silvery star stuff drifted through her fingers as she tried to take his hand into her own and found herself again clasping nothing. She let out a sharp sob.

It's okay, Meg.

Looking into his eyes, Meg felt a strange peace descend. It was okay that she couldn't take hold of her husband's hand. It was okay that she couldn't pull him close and sink into his arms and let his love wrap itself around her. It was all okay.

Yes, it's okay, Meg. Everything is fine.

As that strange and sweet peace took hold of her, she let her gaze linger on Johnny. He looked just the same as he'd done the last time she saw him—young and vibrant and so, so handsome.

“I miss you, Johnny,” Meg said.

I miss you, too. More than you'll ever know.

“I thought I'd forgotten what your voice sounds like. But now I can hear it again, I know I'll never forget.”

Meg watched Johnny waver in and out of focus for a moment and then looked back towards Hamblehurst laid out below them and covered in pristine white snow. She thought about the quiet, hushed town, the absence of people there, the dazzling arc of blue above her and the glorious setting sun that was casting golden shadows everywhere.

She thought of how she could be up here, looking down at Hamblehurst.

And she thought of Johnny's presence beside her, bringing comfort and peace.

A terrible thought gripped her.

“Am I dead?” Meg whispered.

Johnny offered a kind smile. *No, you're not dead. You hit your head when you fell on the ice. It's going to take a few minutes for you to wake up.*

Meg let out a whoosh of relief as her thoughts turned to her son, Jamie. “Are you sure? I can't leave Jamie on his own with neither of us there to look out for him, and even although he's all grown up now and off at university, he still needs his mum and—”

And he still has her. Johnny pointed down to where Hamblehurst lay below. *Look and see for yourself.*

Meg followed his outstretched finger and realised she could now see a cluster of people gathered on one of the streets below. It was Foxglove Street she realised, recognising her own terraced house further along. A woman lay flat on her back in the middle of the road surrounded by worried

onlookers. A car was stopped on the road, its headlamps washing the scene in bright light.

“Oh! That’s me down there!” Meg exclaimed as she peered at her motionless body on the road. “Are you sure I’m not dead?”

I’m sure, Johnny replied. That was a nasty crack you took to the head. Like I said, these things just take time to sort themselves out.

Meg’s attention was drawn to the other side of Hamblehurst where a flash of blue light signalled an ambulance was on its way to the scene. The vehicle moved slowly through the streets, sometimes seeming as if it was hardly moving at all.

Johnny must have noticed her confused expression. *Don’t worry, the ambulance is going as fast as it can. It just looks like it’s slow because of where we are. Time slips in and out of focus up here.*

He waved his arm, which shimmered as it disappeared and then reappeared. *Time slips from focus, and people slip from focus, too, see? Everything slips and shimmers and comes and goes.*

“I don’t understand,” Meg said.

That’s okay. No one really understands. But you don’t have to understand. Just let it happen.

“Why am I here? Why are you here?”

You’re here because you’re unconscious and your mind is wandering while it waits for you to wake up, Johnny said. I’m here because you need a push to take a leap into the unknown.

Meg frowned. “What do you mean?”

Before you slipped tonight and fell and hit your head, you were thinking about your life and why you’ve felt so restless lately and what you ought to do about it. You’ve spent the last eighteen years raising our son alone. You had to take care of everything, worry about everything, be prepared for every

eventuality, because I wasn't there to help you carry the load. You did an amazing job with Jamie. Now it's your time, Meg.

She cast her gaze down to the scene below her, where the people standing around her motionless body on Foxglove Street didn't seem to be moving at all, and the ambulance with those blue flashing lights seemed frozen in place on the other side of the town.

“But I don't know what I want to do next, Johnny.”

He smiled, that warm curve of his lips making her heart clench with love. *You don't have to know all the answers, Meg. Not anymore. You don't have to plan everything or know exactly what's coming next. It's okay to let go and just... be you for a while.*

“Just be me?” Meg frowned. “But what if I don't know who I really am?”

Johnny smiled again. *Then maybe it's time to find out.*

“How do I do that?”

You already know how. Trust your heart, Meg. It's time.

Johnny reached towards her and his hand brushed against her cheek for a sliver of a second that Meg wished could last forever.

Before she could speak, before she could try to grab hold of him and never let go, the moment began to collapse in on itself, time folding and unfolding, space spinning and tilting.

Down below in Hamblehurst, the blue lights of the ambulance flashed brighter and the vehicle sped up as it raced through the town.

On Foxglove Street, the people gathered around Meg as she lay on the ground began moving as if they were in fast forward.

In the middle of the road, Meg's eyelids flickered.

Above it all, the other Meg, the floating Meg, watched with dawning realisation about what was coming next. The version of herself that lay on the road, the one that was now

waking up, was tugging on the version of herself that was floating overhead, like a star's gravitational force pulling a planet ever closer.

You're going to be fine, Meg, Johnny said, and when Meg looked back towards him she saw he was vanishing before her eyes.

“Johnny! Don't go!” she cried out.

It's time for you to have an adventure, Meg. It's time for you to shine.

Johnny disappeared and Meg felt a brief flash of pain and loss that was quickly replaced by a contented peace. The space where Johnny had been folded and refolded as the blue sky and the pink clouds raced towards the setting sun on the horizon.

In the snow-covered world below, the streets and lanes and houses of Hamblehurst began folding in on themselves, like some magical origami performed by an unseen hand. The town folded and folded, the edges moving closer and closer to Foxglove Street and to where Meg still lay in the middle of the road.

The ambulance turned onto the street, its blue lights flashing and siren wailing. The people gathered around Meg waved their hands to catch the driver's attention, to show the crew where the scene of the accident was located.

From where she floated above, Meg watched herself on the ground, watched as her eyelids fluttered.

And then opened.

With one powerful and irresistible tug, Meg was no longer floating above what remained of Hamblehurst below as the folding world disappeared into the winter sunset.

Instead, in a single icy blast, she found herself lying on the road and opening her eyes as snowflakes fell from the dark sky and the blue lights of the ambulance streaked across the street.

“She's awake!” someone shouted. “She's awake!”

I'm awake, Meg thought, and closed her eyes again to ward off the pain blooming inside her head, a pain so huge that it obliterated the strange and beautiful dream she'd just had, even as she reached for it and tried to hold on to it because it didn't feel like it *had* been a dream, after all.

Meg, it's time to wake up, she heard Johnny say.

She opened her eyes again. Bright light filled her vision. And the world snapped back into focus.

THINGS HAPPENED QUICKLY after Meg woke up.

The paramedics rushed to treat her, check her vital signs, and ask questions about how she'd come to find herself lying on the ground. Meg muttered something incoherent about slipping and falling and not remembering much more than that before she'd been knocked out.

Taking no chances, the paramedics fitted a protective collar around her neck and refused to let her move while they shifted a spinal board into place. Meg listened as they asked the other bystanders how long she'd been unconscious and whether the car now idling a few feet away had struck her.

She heard the bystanders explain that Meg had been knocked out for several minutes before the paramedics arrived. The driver of the car recounted how Meg had slipped and fallen while crossing the street and how he'd had to brake hard to avoid hitting her once he saw her lying there in the wash of his headlights.

Meg tried to piece together these shards of information with her own experience of what had happened. It seemed to her that the car had been incredibly close when she'd fallen, but that wasn't what the driver appeared to be saying. Was he lying? Had he been driving too fast and almost run her over and just didn't want to admit it in case he got into trouble?

Meg was sure she'd checked the road before crossing and saw no vehicles in either direction, and yet the car now idling beside her had quite literally appeared as if out of nowhere.

Perhaps her own sense of what happened was skewed by the trauma of smashing her head on the ground. She wondered if she'd cracked her skull open and whether she'd need stitches or surgery or...

“Meg! Oh, my God! Meg!”

Meg recognised her mother's frantic voice and a moment later Liz appeared at her side. Her face was a contorted mask of fear and panic.

“Please don't touch the patient until we've secured her on the spinal board,” one of the paramedics said and caught Liz just before she launched herself onto the ground beside Meg.

“That's my daughter!” Liz shrieked. “What happened? Is she okay? Oh, God, is that blood on the ground?”

“Mum, I'm okay,” Meg croaked, even although uttering the words made her head throb with pain.

Hearing Meg speak seemed to calm Liz, if only a little, which meant the agony of speaking was worth it. Meg didn't want her mother to worry.

While the paramedics worked to move the spinal board into place, Meg listened to the voices spilling around her as the ambulance crew coordinated their movements and a couple of bystanders took Liz aside and explained what seemed to have happened. Meg thought she recognised a few Foxglove Street neighbours, but the pounding in her head made it hard to concentrate on what was going on around her.

All she wanted was to close her eyes to shut off the thumping inside her brain.

“Don't close your eyes, Meg,” said one of the paramedics, a man with a kind smile and a gentle voice. “It's important that you stay awake now. You've suffered a head injury and until we get a better idea of what the damage is, we need you to keep your eyes open so you don't fall asleep.”

“Okay,” Meg said, wanting to oblige if only to stop the man from talking because the talking only made the pain inside her head worse.

“We’re going to lift you up now, Meg, okay?” said the other paramedic, a young woman who’d taken her pulse and fitted the neck collar before tucking a blanket around her once they’d secured her on the spinal board.

The paramedics arranged themselves on either side of her and in one fluid movement they picked up the spinal board and carried Meg to the ambulance. As they moved along the road, Meg saw from the corner of her eye that a police car had arrived on the scene and uniformed officers were interviewing the driver of the car that had screeched to a halt on the road. Meg had enough time to clock the man’s stunned and ashen-faced expression before she was whisked away.

Once Meg was secured on the bed in the back of the ambulance, Liz was allowed to join her. The young female paramedic got in beside them and closed the doors and a moment later the engine started.

A thought suddenly gripped Meg.

“Oh, I had a bag of shopping, Mum!” she said. “And my handbag! I don’t know where it is!”

“Don’t worry about any of that,” Liz said. “One of the neighbours picked up your bags. She passed your handbag to me and says she’ll keep a hold of your shopping bag until we get back.”

“Okay, that’s good,” Meg said, relieved. As the ambulance began moving, the motion made her want to close her eyes and sleep. She felt her eyelids flutter.

“No sleeping allowed in here, missus,” said the paramedic with a bright laugh. “We need you alert and on your toes.”

“Sorry,” Meg said, blinking in an effort to ward off encroaching sleep.

“Tell me how you ended up on your backside on the ice,” the paramedic said. “Fancy yourself as a bit of a Winter Olympics speed skater, do you?”

Meg laughed, and even although the movement hurt her head, she was smart enough to understand the paramedic’s strategy was to keep her engaged and keep her talking.

“I was just trying to cross the road,” Meg said, her voice quiet to minimise the pain reverberating inside her head. “The ice on the pavements was bad enough, but with the wet snow on top, it was even more treacherous. I thought I was being careful. I stepped out onto the road, got halfway to the other side, and then the next thing I knew I was falling. It happened so fast.”

“I thought you’d been hit by that car that was idling in the middle of the road when I got there,” Liz said. “Every worst-case scenario possible raced through my head.”

“The car didn’t hit me, but it felt like it came out of nowhere,” Meg said.

“Don’t take my word for it, but I heard the driver saying he’d just pulled out of a parking space on the street when he saw you cross in front of him and then fall over,” said the paramedic. “It sounds like he had some trouble braking because of the conditions.”

“It all happened so fast,” Meg said, and winced as a bolt of pain seared through her skull. “Can you give me anything for the pain?”

“Not until we’ve checked you over at the hospital, I’m afraid,” the paramedic replied. “You’ve got a nasty bash on your head but it looks like a superficial flesh wound right now. Until we’ve ruled out anything more sinister that we can’t see, we’d rather not give you anything just yet, not unless you’re in crippling agony. Can you cope with the pain for now?”

“Yes,” Meg said. Although her head was screaming, she could cope with it if that was the paramedic’s preferred course of action. She’d just have to grind her teeth and get on with it.

The ambulance sped on. The paramedic kept her talking, with Liz chipping in to the conversation, and they soon arrived at A&E. As a head injury patient, Meg was quickly wheeled into a bay where a team of nurses and doctors began attending to her.

There were more questions, tests, examinations, and a visit to the CT scanning machine which the doctor requested as a

precaution because of Meg's continued wooziness. Then there was a wait for results, during which Meg had to fight very hard not to close her eyes and sleep.

Liz kept her chatting, rabbiting on about everything and nothing in order to distract her. Meg's mother had wanted to phone Jamie right away to let him know Meg was in the hospital, but Meg vetoed that idea. There was no point alarming her son with news of a hospital admission when there was nothing he could do about it, and it was better to wait until they had confirmed news about Meg's condition before phoning him.

Anyway, the longer she waited in A&E the more sure she was that no terrible injury had befallen her and that the CT scan results would confirm no internal damage to her brain. The fact that she'd been unconscious for two minutes while lying on the ground warranted proper medical examinations, she understood that, but although Meg felt woozy and tired and sore, she didn't feel like anything sinister was happening to her body and with every passing minute she felt her wits slowly returning.

When the doctor arrived thirty minutes later and confirmed as much, Meg felt a wave of relief wash over her. The fall and knock she'd sustained weren't nothing, though, the doctor warned her, and she'd have a stinker of a sore head for a while. The cuts to her skin beneath her hair didn't require stitches, just some cleaning up. She'd probably also feel pain on her backside and hips from where she'd hit the ground, but her thick coat had provided some padding to mitigate the damage.

The doctor concluded by confirming he was happy to discharge her, while listing a series of potential complications she should be on the look-out for once she got home, such as extended periods of nausea or dizziness, for which she ought to seek further medical assistance should they arise. As far as painkillers were concerned, the doctor prescribed just simple paracetamol, explaining he didn't want her to take anything stronger while her brain recovered from the trauma it had sustained.

With her mother's help, Meg prepared to leave the hospital. Once their taxi arrived, Meg took careful steps out of the A&E department, feeling a little like Bambi walking for the first time. Between the shakiness in her legs and the pounding in her head, she felt like the world was tilting with every step.

"Let's get you home," Liz said, shuffling into the back of the taxi beside Meg.

"I can hardly wait," Meg said with a soft sigh of relief as the vehicle turned for the exit.

* * *

It was past nine o'clock when they got home to Foxglove Street. Meg had lost all track of time since the accident. Pulling on her warm pyjamas and dressing gown felt like pure bliss after the night she'd had. The quiet stillness of home comforted her following the drama of her accident and the endless noise and chatter and beeping machines of the A&E department.

After changing into her pyjamas and poking tentatively at the bump and cuts at the back of her head, Meg went downstairs where her mother had brewed tea. Cupping the mug in her hands, Meg savoured every mouthful. Hot, strong tea had never tasted so good.

Once she felt like she had her wits about her again, Meg gave in to her mother's pleas to let Jamie know about her accident and subsequent visit to the hospital. A text message to her son confirmed he was up and about and not too busy with his studies that he couldn't talk on the phone.

A brief conversation brought him up to date. Although Jamie was naturally shocked at first to hear the news of his mother's fall, Meg appreciated his calm tone while she explained what had happened. Once she'd answered his questions and assured him she was fine, they agreed to talk again the next day, Jamie having sensed his mother's obvious fatigue after the evening's events.

“He’s one a million, that boy,” Liz said once Meg ended the phone call. “Not even a hint of panic when you told him what had happened.”

“I’m grateful for that. I wouldn’t have had the energy to calm him down if he’d got upset. Anyway, in the end it was just a nasty tumble on the ice and a bump on the head. I probably didn’t even need to go to the hospital.”

“Of course you did. There’s no point taking chances, not when you were out for the count on the ground. I for one am glad you’ve had a thorough checking over.”

“Maybe too thorough,” Meg said, wincing as she shifted on the sofa and felt a sharp ache ripple across her back. “Those doctors and nurses did an awful lot of poking and prodding.”

“Good. That’s what they’re supposed to do. I expect it’ll take a few days for you to shake off the bruising and tenderness from the fall, not to mention your head wound. In the meantime, I’m here to look after you.”

“I don’t need looking after, Mum,” Meg said with a soft laugh.

“Of course you do,” Liz replied with a tut. “Everyone needs a little looking after from time to time. You looked after me when I was burned out of house and home thanks to my silly, careless friend, and now I’ll look after you while you recover from that nasty tumble on the ice.”

“I’m sure I’ll feel better after a good night’s sleep.”

“I expect so. Have a nice lie in tomorrow and I’ll bring you breakfast in bed once you wake up.”

Meg let out another careful laugh, amused by her mother’s fussing but also not wanting to risk inflaming her headache. “I won’t be having a lie in. I’ve got work tomorrow.”

Liz looked appalled by this remark. “You’ll be going nowhere near that office tomorrow, young lady. You’ve had a serious knock on the head, and you were unconscious on the ground for who knows how long! And you’ve got cuts and scrapes on your head and bruises all over your back. There is

no way I'm allowing you to go to work tomorrow. You need to rest and recover."

"But I can't take a day off just because I fell on my backside."

"Of course you can. You're not going into work tomorrow and that's all there is to it. The fact that you're even suggesting it makes me wonder if they did that CT scan properly at the hospital and whether you haven't knocked yourself sillier than we thought."

Meg couldn't help laughing at this, even although it hurt.

"When was the last time you had a sick day, hmm?" Liz demanded. "I bet you can't even remember. What's your manager's number at the office? I'll phone them first thing tomorrow and let them know you won't be coming in, and that way you can stay in bed until you feel ready to get up and about."

Meg was about to protest again, but Liz had already commandeered her phone and was scrolling through her contacts. Resigned to obeying her mother's orders, Meg helped her find her Bill Hilburn's direct phone number at the office so she could make the call on her behalf the next day if Meg overslept.

The idea of sleeping late was actually quite appealing. Already, Meg was fantasising about snuggling down beneath the bedcovers and falling fast asleep.

"I think I'll get myself upstairs," Meg said, finishing her tea and rising from the sofa.

The moment she got up, her head spun and a flash of memory seared through her brain. In her mind's eye she saw a vista of deep blue sky arcing above a silent snow-covered town as a dazzling winter sun set on the horizon and...

... and she saw *Johnny*, smiling beside her as they both floated in the crisp cold air.

"Meg? Are you okay?"

As Meg clutched her throbbing head and closed her eyes against the bolt of pain, her mother leapt from the armchair and dashed to her side.

“What’s wrong?” Liz demanded. “Do you feel faint? Or sick? The doctor said we ought to phone the A&E department if anything like that happened.”

Liz was already reaching for her phone and the contact leaflet the doctor had given them with the discharge paperwork, but Meg reached out a hand to stop her.

“I’m fine, Mum. I don’t feel faint or sick. My head’s just incredibly sore and tender, especially when I move, and...”

“And what?” Liz frowned, clutching Meg’s arm as if she expected her to keel over at any moment.

“It’s nothing,” Meg said, rubbing her temple. “I just had a funny memory pop into my head when I stood up, that’s all.” She frowned, then added, “Except I’m sure it wasn’t a memory. More like a strange dream or something.”

When Liz gave her another worried look, Meg continued.

“It was a weird sort of image like you’d have in a dream, where nothing makes much sense,” Meg said. “And I was with Johnny. We were... well, it sounds stupid, but we were floating in the sky together. Floating over Hamblehurst. The town was covered in snow and everything was so quiet and so still. The image flashed into my head so fast when I stood up, and it felt like a memory, but of course it can’t be a memory, not if we were floating in the sky.”

Meg laughed quietly, aware of how ridiculous this all sounded.

“It feels like some odd dream I must have had at some point, now that I think about it,” Meg said. “A strange sort of dream that was eerie and lovely at the same time. Although I can’t remember dreaming about something like that lately...”

She trailed off, almost remembering something but not quite able to grab hold of it.

“I think I must have dreamt about something like that when I hit my head and was out cold on the ground. The image feels fresh in my head, like it just happened. And I think Johnny said something to me in the dream.” She closed her eyes, trying to remember. “What did he say?”

Liz gave her another worried look. “You had a nasty bump on the head, love. It stands to reason there will be all kinds of strange thoughts rattling around up there right now.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Meg laughed. “Still, I wish I could remember what it was all about, the dream I had. I’m wondering if it even was a dream and not just a bunch of mad thoughts bouncing around like loose balls in a pinball machine.”

“I think it’s time to get you upstairs and tucked into bed,” Liz said. “You need some proper rest.”

Meg couldn’t disagree with that. After saying goodnight to her mother, she went upstairs, brushed her teeth, and climbed into bed, letting out a long sigh as she nestled into the pillows. The fall on the ice and the knock to the head might not have constituted a life-threatening accident or major health emergency once all was said and done, but it had left her sore and exhausted just the same.

She couldn’t wait to fall asleep and let her body start the healing process, even if she did dread to think of what the bruises on her hips, bum and back would look like tomorrow. She thought about how badly she’d hit her head, and wondered if she’d have a cartoon-style lump sticking out the back of her skull tomorrow.

Meg was about to turn off the bedside lamp when she realised the blinds at the window weren’t fully closed. With an annoyed sigh at herself for not noticing this before she got comfortable, she threw back the duvet and got out of bed.

As she reached for the toggle that operated the blinds, she glanced through the gaps in the slats at the wintry world beyond her window. The snow had continued falling throughout the evening and there was now about a foot of the white stuff covering the street and gardens. A car passed on

the road, crawling at a snail's pace on account of the conditions, its tyres kicking up a spray of slush.

Meg peered along the street to the spot further along where she'd fallen like a sack of potatoes to the ground. Just thinking about how she'd lain on the icy road for those long minutes, unconscious and waiting for the paramedics to arrive and administer aid, made her shiver all over. No wonder she couldn't seem to get warm tonight. The biting cold temperature from the frozen road had drilled into her bones while she'd lain there, out for the count.

She was about to do what she'd got up to do—close the blinds—so she could return to her warm cosy bed, when a flash of movement out on the dark street caught her eye.

It was the fox, darting along the pavement, its red coat burning like an ember in the night. The creature stopped outside Meg's front garden and snuffled at something buried beneath the snow, before chomping on whatever it had found there, perhaps an abandoned piece of burger or a few stray chips dropped to the ground by a take-away munching passer-by.

Meg wondered how many times she'd now seen the pretty little fox over the past few weeks. Three times? Four? Perhaps five? The distinctive markings on the animal's tail convinced her it was the same animal as before. Every time she spied the scurrying creature from her window, she felt thrilled and privileged to see it. Urban foxes might not exactly be rare, but it was still a treat to see one right outside her window.

The fox finished chomping on the food it had found and licked its lips. It snuffled around in the deep snow for another few seconds, checking for any missed morsels, then looked down the street one way and then the other, as if deciding in which direction to go next.

And then the fox turned and looked straight up to where Meg stood peering out of the window.

Her heart raced with joy as the animal looked directly at her for a long, long beat, tilting its head as if seeking a better angle at which to stare.

Meg didn't know why she found such pleasure in seeing the sweet fox when it passed along the street on its nocturnal adventures, but she did. And after the drama and trauma of the last few hours, and the resulting aches and pains now lodged in her joints and muscles, she needed this lovely moment of connection with the wild fox and the strange bump of happiness the sighting brought her.

Outside, the fox stretched its front legs, glanced back up at Meg's window one last time, and then scurried off along the pavement and out of sight, leaving only the neat track of its paw prints behind in the deep snow.

Meg peered up the street, looking for any sign of the animal weaving in and out between parked cars or leaping over a garden fence across the street, but saw no further sign of the creature. The only clue that it had been there at all was the trail of paw prints in the snow and the warm joy it had left behind in Meg's heart.

Closing the blinds, Meg returned to her bed. She snuggled back into her pillows, pulling the duvet up tight around her, and switched off the bedside lamp.

With a soft sigh of relief as her body once more relaxed into the comfortable mattress, she closed her eyes. After only a few moments, she felt herself beginning to drift off as a wave of sleep washed over her tender body and sore head and exhausted mind.

And as sleep claimed her, the dreams began.

MEG'S DREAMS that night were deep and rich and filled with mystery.

Bright images flashed and strange scenes unfolded, each one materialising from those preceding it before melting into those that followed.

Meg dreamt of walking through heavy snow towards an uncertain destination, following a set of fox tracks towards the horizon where a blazing winter sun was sinking into the earth.

When she reached the end of the country lane that meandered beside frozen fields, the fox tracks stopped at a fence and disappeared. Meg looked up, shielding her eyes from the falling snow, and saw the sleek outline of a fox in the distance, looking back at her.

The fox barked once, turned tail, and fled into the dark woodland beyond.

Meg continued walking. The setting sun disappeared and a twilight blue sky arced above her, studded with a hundred million stars to light her way.

Looking down, she saw the fox tracks had reappeared. She followed them once more. But she soon realised it wasn't the fox tracks she was following at all.

Instead of walking through the snow, she discovered she was walking across the surface of a map, following a route through the illustrated contours and geography, like a character

in an animated film. Ahead, she saw waypoints and signposts guiding her route to the adventures that lay beyond.

The fox appeared, trotting beside her as she navigated the map, a companion for the journey. Enjoying the creature's company, she continued on her way from waypoint to waypoint, from signpost to signpost, watching the strange map-world appearing and disappearing before her eyes with every step.

Meg reached a tiny town and found a tiny café where she bought a tiny cup of coffee to sip at a tiny table on the pavement outside. Wherever she was now, it was sunny, the heat welcome on her face. She felt at peace as she sat there, savouring her coffee while her fox companion munched on morsels it found on the ground at her feet, licking its lips with satisfaction once its snack was finished.

Meg rose from the tiny table at the tiny café and adjusted the backpack slung over her shoulders. Until that moment, she hadn't realised she was carrying such a thing. She peered off into the distance, looking at the signposts that stuck up out of the map she was walking through and wondering where to go next.

Below her feet, the map began to shimmer and then vanished completely. Her fox companion let out a farewell bark and vanished, too. Meg found herself no longer navigating the strange and wonderful map, and she felt a stab of anxiety.

What next? she asked herself. *Where should I go? What should I do?*

No sooner had these questions raced through her head than a new reality snapped into place around her. The vanished map was replaced with the snowy scenes she'd encountered at the start of the dream. Snow covered everything as far as the eye could see—roads, rooftops, trees—and sparkled with a brilliant silvery glow beneath a lemon yellow sun.

Meg was above the world. Floating. Watching. Waiting.

The snow is amazing, isn't it?

She turned at the voice, and this time she knew who she'd find beside her.

Johnny floated at her right-hand side, so close, but so far away at the same time. Meg reached out towards him, reached for his hand, but couldn't get near enough to touch him.

The snow is amazing, isn't it? Johnny asked again.

Meg turned to look back at the world spread out below her. She recognised the town as her home, Hamblehurst, with its winding roads and meandering lanes and pretty houses.

This all feels so familiar, Meg said, waving a hand towards the snow-frosted town below her, and the vast arc of blue sky overhead and the setting sun in the distance. *I've been up here before, haven't I?*

Something like that, Johnny said. *You took a nasty knock to the head when you fell over, Meg. It'll take time for your brain to sort things out. There are so many thoughts flying around. So many decisions to make.*

Decisions? Meg asked, wondering what he meant.

What will you do next, Meg? Johnny asked.

I don't know, she replied.

Yes, you do know, Johnny said.

He gestured to the world below. In a beautiful, shimmering *swish*, the snowy world of home below began to fold in on itself, like a magical origami paper trick. Meg knew she'd seen something like this before, but couldn't remember where or when, only that it was familiar, and that it was telling her something... if she could only figure out what.

The snowy folding world vanished and was replaced by the wonderful and mysterious map world through which she'd just walked earlier in the dream. The lines of the route appeared, an animated series of red dots that traced a journey between the waypoints and signposts that featured on the map.

And there, in the middle of the mesmerising map, was Meg, walking along with a backpack over her shoulder and a bright look of happy determination and joy on her face.

Floating Meg looked down at Map Meg. Map Meg looked up and winked.

Come and join me! Map Meg called out to Floating Meg up above.

A bubble of excitement—of *possibility*—raced through every cell in Meg’s body. Still floating up above, she turned to Johnny and smiled.

It’s time for you to have an adventure, Johnny said. *It’s time for you to shine.*

And then he vanished. The blue sky and the setting sun vanished. The map world below vanished, taking with it the waypoints and the signposts and the blinking red dots that marked the route to some unknown destination.

And the dream snapped to an end.

* * *

Meg woke in her bed to winter sunshine slipping through the edges of the window blinds. Tendrils of the dream remained and she held tight to them, not wanting them to disappear.

The snowy dream world of Hamblehurst that had dissolved into that strange and beautiful map along which she’d trekked, and the sweet fox whose footprints had guided her, and Johnny floating beside her high up in the sky and speaking words of comfort and encouragement...

It was all completely crazy, as dreams so often were. But buried within it were the seeds of something important, something meaningful, something Meg knew she *had* to do.

As she blinked fully awake, she began to understand what that *something* might just be.

For a long moment, she lay still in bed and closed her eyes again, letting the disappearing whispers of the dream wash over her before she lost her grip on them altogether. Savouring the warmth of her bed and the deep pleasure and mystery of the dream she’d woken from, Meg felt a mixture of peace and excitement roll through her body.

She thought of her dream-self walking through that wonderful dream world, following the route through the mysterious map that had appeared around her. She thought of how that map world had appeared out of the snowscape at the start of the dream and how the sweet and lovely fox had accompanied her on the journey. She thought, too, of how the snowscape had reappeared once the map world vanished again and how she'd found herself once more floating up into the vast wintry blue sky with Johnny at her side as they'd gazed down at everything that lay below.

With a satisfying mental *click*, Meg connected the dream she'd just woken from in which she'd floated in the sky above a snow covered Hamblehurst while Johnny floated beside her, with the dream she'd had while lying unconscious on the icy ground after her terrible fall in the middle of the road.

The floating dreamworld she'd escaped to while injured and unconscious was the same dreamworld she'd revisited last night in the cosy comfort of her bed—that much she'd grasped and understood.

Had Johnny appeared in those dreams in order to tell her something?

It would be easy to dismiss such a bizarre idea as nothing more than the product of fright and trauma, and chalk it up to the brain protecting itself and processing what had happened after the hard knock she'd sustained when her skull had cracked against the ground.

And maybe that was part of the explanation. But Meg wanted to believe there was more to it, too.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd dreamt about her late husband. He'd been gone for so long now and he rarely, if ever, appeared in her dreams anymore.

For him to appear twice in as many hours, and at a time of upset and drama and injury, was surely too much to ignore?

With her eyes still closed, Meg held onto the words Johnny had uttered in the dream.

What will you do next, Meg?

It's time for you to have an adventure.

It's time for you to shine.

His words brought comfort and encouragement. They brought a burst of excitement, too, and Meg smiled as she opened her eyes again and allowed the memories of the dream to slip away and the reality of the new day to surround her.

Thoughts flickered and ideas swirled. Meg's gaze travelled to the cupboard on the other side of the bedroom and her mind turned to what lay inside the old box she'd unearthed a few weeks ago.

The old map, torn from a travel brochure so many years before, then stuffed away and forgotten as life took her in new and unexpected directions.

Meg suddenly wanted to look again at that old raggedy map. She wanted to look at it very badly.

She shifted, intending to swing her legs out of bed and get up, but the moment she moved, she was slammed by a tsunami of aches and pains. The wonderful, magical dream and the memory of seeing Johnny there beside her and her sudden desire to look at that old map from that old travel brochure had made her momentarily forget what had happened to her last night.

There was no forgetting now. Her back hurt. Her hips hurt. Her *bum* hurt.

But her head—that hurt worst of all.

“Arrgh,” Meg muttered as she lifted her head from the pillow and felt a sticky, tearing sensation at the back of her skull. “What the...”

Glancing at the pillow, she saw spots of dried blood where her head wound had seeped overnight, causing her hair to stick to the pillowcase.

“Oh, that’s just great,” she grimaced, rubbing at her sore scalp and tracing her fingers along the edge of the scrapes and cuts there. The lump that had developed overnight wasn’t as big as she’d feared—thankfully she wouldn’t look like some

unlucky cartoon character who'd just had an anvil dropped on her head—but there was still a fair bit of swelling beneath her fingers.

She dropped her hand and stopped rubbing the wound, not wanting to inflame the tender area any further. Shifting her legs, she groaned as her hip joints protested against the movement and her lower back creaked and cracked as if she might snap in two at any moment.

Meg had fallen hard on the icy road last night, she knew that much. But she'd had no idea her body would hurt so much this morning.

Perched at the edge of the bed, Meg felt around on the floor with her feet until they found their way into her slippers and then she just sat there for a moment, eyes closed and wincing while she adjusted to the unbelievable stiffness in her hips and legs.

She remembered what her neighbour, Olive Nimmo, had told her yesterday evening, when Meg had accompanied her home so the older lady could give her the homemade cake she'd baked. Olive had mentioned her friend who'd fallen on the ice last year and hurt herself so badly she never recovered from the surgery required to put her back together again.

Although naturally sympathetic to this tragic story and moved by Olive's obvious sadness at the loss of her friend, Meg now truly appreciated just how treacherous an unexpected fall on the ice could turn out to be. While an older person might be more fragile and liable to sustain serious injury, Meg hadn't truly understood just how painful a bad fall could be, no matter how old you were.

Despite taking care as she'd navigated the ice, Meg had still succumbed to the conditions and done herself a serious injury, one she felt in every joint and muscle in her body this morning. As she sat wincing on the edge of the bed, waiting for the wave of aches and pains to subside, Meg thought about what Olive had told her about her poor friend who'd passed away and found herself seized by a terrifying thought.

It could have been much worse.

Meg could've broken a leg or a hip. She could've cracked her skull wide open. She could've hit her head even harder on the ground and ended up with brain damage.

She could've stepped out onto the road a few seconds later and ended up being hit by that car that was pulling out of the parking space while she was lying there helpless on the road.

Any number of alternative scenarios could have ended with Meg suffering far worse injuries that she was wincing about right now. She was lucky only to have these assorted aches and pains that would surely pass in a day or two at most.

Yes, she was lucky, Meg decided. Very lucky. Luck had been on her side when she'd gone crashing down onto the icy road, even if it hadn't felt like it at the time.

She realised something else, too. Luck had allowed her to escape into those wild and mysterious dreams she'd had, the first one immediately after the fall and the second while she'd slept in her bed.

If she hadn't fallen and ended up unconscious, she would never have gone off into that strange snowy world where she'd floated in the bright blue sky with Johnny at her side, and she never would have revisited the dream last night in bed and found herself exploring that wonderful map world, either.

Strange though the dreams undoubtedly were, Meg knew there was a message contained within them, a message she wanted to understand.

A message she wanted to *learn*.

Her gaze travelled once more to the wardrobe across the bedroom. Now that she had the measure of the pains rattling through her body, she knew to take it easy when she moved. Gingerly, she pushed herself off the bed and crept across the carpet towards the wardrobe, determined to retrieve the box that was stored there and look for that old torn map that lay inside.

Meg opened the wardrobe door and was lowering herself towards the storage box at the back when she heard a shriek from across the room.

“Meg! What on earth are you doing?”

Turning carefully, Meg saw her mother standing in the open bedroom door with a breakfast tray in her hands and a look of utter astonishment on her face.

“I just need to get something out of the wardrobe,” Meg said, once more reaching slowly towards the box on the floor at the back.

“Come away from there this instant!” Liz cried. “Have you lost your mind? You aren’t supposed to be hauling heavy boxes out of wardrobes in your condition. Honestly, what’s the matter with you?”

With a noisy tut, Liz set the breakfast tray on the chest of drawers and shooed Meg back into bed.

“I thought I heard you waking up and wanted to bring you breakfast like I promised, and instead I find you trying to rupture yourself.”

Meg laughed softly. “I’m not trying to rupture myself.” She accepted the tray her mother slid onto the bed beside her, appreciating the aroma of hot buttered toast and fresh coffee. “Thanks for this, Mum.”

Liz waved away her thanks. “You’re welcome. How did you sleep?”

“Fine. Better than fine, actually. I didn’t wake up until about ten minutes ago.”

“Good. You needed a proper sleep. Now, get that breakfast down you.”

Liz looked on approvingly while Meg bit into the toast and sipped hot coffee. As she folded Meg’s dressing gown, which had slipped off the end of the bed during the night, her gaze travelled to the open door of the cupboard.

“What were you looking for in there that couldn’t wait until you were feeling better?”

“Just something I happened to find when I was rooting around in there a few weeks ago when I was making space for

your things while you're staying here with me," Meg said. "I wanted to take another look at it."

"Take another look at what, exactly?"

"Just something..." Meg trailed off, considering her words. "Just something I'd forgotten about until recently and that sort of popped back into my head."

Liz frowned. "You're being rather cryptic."

"Sorry, I don't mean to be. It's just that I'm thinking that... well, I'm not quite sure what I'm thinking, actually."

"No wonder after that head knock you took last night." Liz huffed and folded her arms. "Perhaps you need to have another nap after you eat your breakfast."

"What I need is a hot shower to freshen up. I'm not tired anymore after sleeping until..." Meg glanced for the first time at her phone and saw the time. "Half-past ten! Are you kidding?"

"You needed every minute of it, too, I'm sure."

Meg couldn't remember the last time she'd slept past seven in the morning, never mind half-ten. She'd been asleep for over twelve hours.

"And before you ask, yes, I phoned your office and said you wouldn't be in today," Liz said. "I dialled the number you gave me, but it wasn't your manager who answered. It was a woman. Jane somebody-or-other. I forget her surname."

"Jane Todd?" Meg asked.

"That's it. Jane Todd."

Meg frowned. "I wonder what she was doing answering Bill's office phone? Jane is Bill's boss and we don't usually see much of her in our department."

"Well, maybe this Bill person is off sick too today and it's all hands on deck over there at the council. At any rate, this Jane woman was very kind and asked after you and said she's very sorry to hear about your accident. She told me to tell you that everyone there is asking after you and that they hope you

feel better soon. She also said you should take as much time as you need to recover.”

“That’s nice of her. I’m sure I’ll be feeling much better tomorrow and I can get back to work.”

Liz laughed at that. “Tomorrow is Saturday, love.”

Meg blinked in surprise. “So it is. I completely forgot.”

“You really did knock yourself for six when you hit your head if you can’t even remember what day of the week it is. Anyway, at least you’ll have a few days to recover before Monday arrives, and maybe by then you’ll be feeling more like yourself again.”

As Meg nibbled at her toast, she felt a wave of relief at the realisation she had a couple of days’ recuperation time ahead of her. It hadn’t occurred to her last night that the weekend was so close and that she might only be taking one day off work after all. Her thoughts had been all over the place. They still were all over the place, if she was being honest with herself.

Her gaze returned to the cupboard across the bedroom and Liz’s gaze travelled with hers.

“Meg, if I see you rooting around in that cupboard trying to lift anything heavy again, I’ll be very cross with you,” Liz said with a scowl.

“I’m not a total invalid, Mum. I was just trying to move a box, that’s all.”

With a sigh, Liz rose from the bed and walked to the cupboard, flinging the doors wider. “Is that the box you’re after?” she asked, pointing into the wardrobe.

“Yes, but there’s no way I’m allowing my seventy-three-year-old mother to lift a box for me—”

“I’m perfectly able to judge what I can and cannot lift, thank you very much,” Liz said, reaching further into the wardrobe where she grabbed hold of the box and yanked it out across the floor. Gripping the handles, she hefted it up and set it down on the linen bench at the bottom of the bed.

“It wasn’t so heavy,” Liz said, looking pleased with herself. “Do you want me to get something out of here for you?”

“No, I’ll take a look myself later. Thanks.”

Liz gave her another puzzled look. “Suit yourself. Are you sure you’re feeling okay? I must say I find it a bit odd that after suffering a terrible fall and a head injury last night that was bad enough to render you unconscious and send you to hospital, the first thing you do on waking this morning is attempt to dig into some old storage box buried at the back of your bedroom wardrobe.”

“I’m fine,” Meg laughed, although when her mother put it like that, she could see where she was coming from.

“All right. Well, finish your toast and drink your coffee and then you can have that nice hot shower you said you’re looking forward to. I’ll pop some fresh towels into the bathroom for you.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

As Liz turned for the door, Meg called out again. “I mean it, Mum. Thank you. For everything. For looking after me last night and coming with me to the hospital.”

Liz looked across the room with a soft expression on her face. A smile creased her lips as she walked back over and leaned down to press a kiss on Meg’s forehead. “You’re welcome, sweetheart. I love you.”

“I love you too, Mum.”

Liz swept another soft kiss on Meg’s forehead, mindful of her tenderness, and then left the bedroom. Meg finished her toast and as she sipped the last of her coffee, she got back out of bed—oh so carefully—and edged towards the storage box her mother had set on the linen bench. Removing the lid, she rifled through the contents, removing the old photographs and other bits and pieces she’d looked at just a few short weeks ago the last time she’d dug around inside the thing.

After a few moments, she found what she was looking for—the old excursion map she’d torn from the student holiday

travel brochure twenty years ago, depicting a tourist route through the south of France.

Meg studied the brochure page and the illustrated map it contained. A jolt of satisfied surprise hit her when she looked at the details of the map and saw that the route was plotted with a series of bright red dots that looked just like those she'd seen in her mad dream. The illustrated signposts that marked the map and showed the major waypoints on the route were also similar to those she'd walked past in her dream.

At the bottom of the brochure page there was a photograph of a little French café with outdoor seating and vintage-style writing on the signs and windows. This, too, looked just like the dream café where Meg had stopped off for coffee as she'd wandered along on her strange and lovely journey. The other photographs depicted on the page showed a montage of typically French scenes—vibrant countryside, rolling green hills, luscious vineyards—that reminded her of some of the images she's seen while fast asleep and dreaming.

The uncanny similarities between the map world she'd navigated inside her dream and the actual brochure map and accompanying photographs were remarkable.

It was possible, of course, that these images had simply got stuck inside her head from a few weeks ago when she'd glanced at the tattered old brochure page when she'd first rummaged through the storage box, and the images had then found their way into her feverish dreams following the trauma of her fall and head injury.

Meg knew this was a perfectly reasonable explanation. But she also knew there was much more to it than that.

Closing her eyes, she remembered how Johnny had appeared in her dream and the way he'd floated beside her above the snowy vista below. She remembered how his smile had made her heart soar, just like it always did all those years ago when they'd been so young, all those years ago before tragedy struck.

It's time for you to have an adventure, Johnny had said. It's time for you to shine.

Meg felt a hot tear escape down her cheek, but it wasn't a tear of sadness. Instead, gratitude filled her heart as she opened her eyes and looked at the old holiday brochure page still clasped in her hands.

“Thank you, Johnny,” she murmured.

And then she rose from the bed to make a start on what she wanted—what she *needed*—to do next.

AN HOUR LATER, refreshed after her shower and dressed in comfortable soft clothes to protect and cushion her bruised back and hips, Meg went downstairs and found her mother in the kitchen scrolling on her tablet.

“Oh, you look much better!” Liz said with a wide smile. “A nice hot shower must have done you a world of good.”

“It was bliss. Just what I needed.”

“I made a pot of tea five minutes ago and it will still be warm. Can I get you a cup?”

“I’d love that, thanks.”

While Liz poured tea, Meg pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and gingerly lowered herself onto it. Her eye caught a bunch of beautiful flowers in a vase on the counter.

“Where did those come from?” Meg asked, nodding towards the flowers as her mother set a mug of tea down on the table.

“Your friend, Sophie, dropped by this morning, hoping to see you before she went to work, but you were still asleep. She says she’ll come over later tonight instead to check up on you. She brought those flowers and this card.”

Liz pushed an envelope across the table. Meg removed the get-well card from inside and read the message Sophie had written.

Hope you feel better soon, my lovely friend. Maybe you need to come back to yoga class with me so you can work on your balance and stop falling all over the place like some mad circus clown?

Sophie had added a winking face and series of kisses at the end of this cheeky remark, making Meg laugh. Perhaps Sophie was right and she should give yoga another try?

No, she hated yoga. Hated it with a passion. That ship had sailed.

Meg passed the card to her mother so she could see what she'd found so funny. After reading the get well message and laughing, Liz propped the card up on the table so they could enjoy the illustration on the front.

"Do you think you might give yoga another go, like Sophie suggested?" Liz asked.

"Not a chance." Meg saw the look on her mother's face. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, would you mind if I went along with your friend to her yoga class? I was just thinking it might be rather fun."

"Be my guest. I can't say I ever found it fun myself, but that's my problem, not yoga's problem. Millions of people around the globe can't be wrong."

Liz chuckled. "I think it might be nice to do some more exercise and get myself into better shape. Yoga might just be right up my street."

"I'm sure Sophie will enjoy your company."

"Good. When she drops by again this evening to see you, I'll mention it to her, and see if she's willing to put up with an old fogey being her yoga buddy."

Meg laughed and drank some tea.

"Sophie wasn't the only visitor you had this morning," Liz said. "A couple of other neighbours dropped by to wish you well, including that nice lady, Olive Nimmo, from down the street. She said she heard what happened from one of her

neighbours and also mentioned that you and her had chatted last night right before your accident.”

“We did. We bumped into one another as we walked along Foxglove Street, and she invited me in so she could cut some homemade cake for me to take home with me.” Meg frowned. “Oh no, I don’t know what happened to the lovely cake Olive gave me or the shopping bag I had last night right before I fell on the ice!”

Liz held up a placating hand. “One of your neighbours took your shopping bag last night after you fell. I explained that to you before we got into the ambulance, but considering all that was going on, it’s no surprise that you’ve forgotten. She dropped it off this morning when she popped round to see how you were.”

Liz got up and walked to the kitchen counter, where she picked up a foil-wrapped wedge of cake. “Is this the cake your neighbour, Olive, gave you?”

“Yes, that’s it,” Meg said, relieved to know the lovely home baked cake hadn’t ended up ruined on the road.

“That explains it. When I unpacked the shopping and saw this at the top, I wondered where it had come from. It obviously wasn’t something you’d bought at the shop. I peeked inside and I must say it looks like a wonderful apple cake. Olive Nimmo didn’t say anything about giving you some cake to take home, as she was mostly concerned about you and the accident you’d had.”

Liz peeled back the foil wrap on the cake and smiled before wrapping it up again. “We can enjoy this nice cake with some coffee later this afternoon. You deserve a treat.”

Her mother sat back down at the kitchen table and was about to start scrolling again on her tablet, where Meg could see she was searching estate agency listings as her quest to find a new home continued. Before Liz could return to the screen, Meg spoke.

“Mum, there was something I wanted to ask you.”

“Okay.” Liz switched off the tablet. “Are you very sore? Do you need me to run to the pharmacy for more painkillers?”

“No, it’s nothing like that.”

Meg clasped her tea mug, measuring her words. In the shower, she’d had them all lined up nicely in order, but now that she was about to utter them to her mother, doubt was setting in. The last thing she wanted was to say something that might confuse her mother, especially after the fright she’d given her last night, thanks to her stupid accident on the ice.

“Okay, this will probably sound a bit strange,” Meg began. “It might even sound, um, like I’ve lost my marbles.”

Liz blinked. “Well, let me be the judge of that.”

“Alright, let me try to explain. I had this really weird dream last night. Actually, I think it was the same dream I had when I was unconscious on the ground after I fell on the ice. Dreams always make perfect sense when you first wake up, don’t they? But after a while, the details and the meaning start to drift away and it becomes a little muddled and...”

Meg realised from her mother’s expression that she wasn’t making much sense.

“I dreamt I was with Johnny and he was trying to tell me something,” Meg said. “I haven’t dreamt about him in years, but he was there last night, and he was there when I was out for the count lying in the middle of the road, too. He told me it was time for me to have an adventure.”

Liz listened to this, her face giving away nothing. “Well, it stands to reason that after going through something traumatic, like a terrible fall and a hard bump on the head and a trip to the hospital, that you might have some strange and unexpected dreams.”

Meg nodded. “There was more to the dream, too. There was... well, I won’t bore you with the details. Dreams never make much sense to anyone other than the person who had them. The point is, I can’t get this dream out of my head. And I think there’s a reason for that.”

“Okay, I’m listening.”

“Ever since Jamie went off to university, I’ve been feeling a little lost. You already know that, because I’ve told you all about it. I’ve tried to fill my life with things to keep me busy and give me some direction, but nothing ever feels quite right. I went to yoga with Sophie, and kept going even although I didn’t particularly enjoy the class. I started seeing Ian, and I kept on seeing him even although there was absolutely no spark between us whatsoever. I finally quit the yoga class when Sophie told me to stop going along, and things ended with Ian when he broke up with me, and I’m glad I’m no longer doing things I don’t enjoy or spending time with people I don’t enjoy.”

Meg waved a hand and frowned. “But still there’s been something niggling at me, and that odd restlessness hasn’t gone away, even when I’ve found other things to fill my time.”

“We all go through periods like that in life, Meg. It’s only natural. You mustn’t worry about it too much, especially when you’ve got some serious physical healing to do right now after what happened last night.”

“I know, but...” Meg drew in a deep breath, determined to get to the end of what she wanted to say. “Something happened in the dream I had last night that got me thinking. That’s why I wanted to look inside that storage box in my bedroom cupboard. Do you remember when I was seventeen, before I started seeing Johnny and before I fell pregnant with Jamie, how I had plans to go to university after I finished my A-levels and plans to go travelling, too?”

Liz’s eyebrows lifted. “Of course I remember. Well, I should clarify that, of course, I remember your plans for university and how upset I was once I found out you were pregnant and you wouldn’t be starting a degree course after all.” Liz waved a hand as if dismissing the old hurts. “Although I can’t say I remember anything about any travel plans you might have had. That said, finding out that your teenage daughter is pregnant and getting married and about to welcome a baby into her life instead of earning a university degree does rather put most other things into the shade.”

Meg laughed at her mother's wry expression. "When I visited all those university open days back then, I happened to pick up a brochure from a student travel company. Most of the packages were miles outside my budget, and I'd planned to work during the summer before I started university anyway to earn some extra money to keep me solvent. But I figured I could study the travel itineraries and put together my own little trip. I'd always wanted to visit the south of France and see the vineyards and the beautiful countryside and pretty towns and villages and all that sort of stuff."

Liz gave her a surprised look. "I had no idea. I don't remember any of that."

"It's possible I never said much to you about it. It was all just a vague idea at that stage and before I got any closer to planning the details, I ended up pregnant."

Meg shrugged, keen not to dwell on the past but to focus instead on the future.

"Anyway, once I got busy becoming a wife and a mother, there were new priorities to think about. I always assumed that at some point, once Jamie was older, I'd find a way to study for a degree, and I think I probably assumed that the three of us would have so many wonderful holidays to look forward to as a family that it wouldn't much matter that I didn't get to have my fun summer of travel as a student. But then Johnny died and everything changed."

Liz gave her a sad smile across the table and patted her hand.

"Until lately, I hadn't thought about those old days for a long time," Meg said. "I didn't dwell on not going to university or not getting my indulgent time as a student backpacker. I had too many other things to think about. But lately, those old thoughts have come back, those old memories, and the dreams I once had."

Meg smiled at her mother. "I think it was bumping into Harry Doyle at that arts fair a few weeks ago that started it. And then talking to him over dinner made me remember other things from the past, too, and painting that mad self-portrait

got me thinking about who I am and what I'm doing. If you hadn't bought me that ticket to the art class, maybe none of it would've happened."

"None of what? I'm still not sure what you're trying to tell me."

Meg drew in a deep breath before she spoke again. "I've decided it's time to have an adventure, the sort of adventure I thought I'd have back when I was seventeen and dreaming of travelling around France like some wandering free spirit."

Liz blinked again in obvious astonishment. "You're going to go backpacking around Europe?"

"Not quite," Meg admitted with a laugh. "I don't think I'm up for roughing it the way I would've been when I was eighteen. But I want to do something fun, something exciting, something... a little out of the ordinary. Something to shake me out of this restlessness I've had for much too long. I thought I just needed a nice holiday somewhere in the sun. But now I realise I need something more than that."

Meg drew in another deep breath and continued. "I know that what happened yesterday was just a silly accident, a silly fall on the ice, and although I was unconscious and although I'm sore this morning and have a bunch of horrible bruises and my head feels like it's been crushed inside a vice, I know it wasn't exactly a life or death situation. But the accident has got me thinking just the same. If I'd fallen just a little differently, things could've been much worse. If I'd hit my head harder, well, who knows?"

"You mustn't dwell on scary what-ifs."

"I'm not dwelling on them. Just acknowledging them. Right before I fell over, when I was chatting to Olive Nimmo, she told me this tragic story about her elderly friend who fell last year on the ice and hurt herself so badly she needed surgery, and the poor woman never recovered from it and died."

"Oh, dear. That's awful."

“I know. It *is* awful. It’s easy to think, well, she was an older lady and these things happen even if they are awful and tragic, but after I fell over last night and ended up knocked out and in the hospital, it really made me think that we just never know what’s coming.” Meg waved a hand and sighed. “And I can’t help but thinking about Johnny, too. One minute he had his whole life ahead of him with his tiny son and his new wife and then, in a single instant on a dark road on a rainy night, it was all over.”

Meg saw the pained look on her mother’s face and quickly continued. “We all assume we’ve got all the time in the world to do all the things we want to do. And then something happens to make you realise you shouldn’t take anything for granted because you never know what lies ahead in life.”

Liz’s expression softened as she mulled this over. “You’re right, of course. Sometimes it does take a jolt in life to wake us up and get us moving. As someone who recently had to flee a burning building, I can certainly attest to that.”

Meg laughed and drank some tea before speaking again. “I’m sure everyone has moments like these in life. The question is what you do with those moments.”

“That’s very philosophical. And so what do *you* plan to do with this moment of epiphany? I feel sure you’re working up to telling me something and I’m desperate to find out where this is all going.”

“After I had my shower this morning, I spent some time digging around online before I came downstairs. I found some amazing specialist travel companies that offer holiday packages for people who are looking for something more adventurous than just a couple of weeks on the beach, but who don’t want to just wander around aimlessly, either. One company I found offers a two-week adventure tour around the south of France, going at an easy enough pace and with lots of comfortable accommodation and plenty of cultural stops thrown in for good measure. There’s walking and hiking, visits to vineyards and old historical sites and art galleries and wonderful restaurants. The tour is limited to about twenty people and everyone travels together from place to place with

a guide who organises the excursions and deals with all the arrangements. It has all the fun of an adventurous trip doing exciting new things without any of the headaches of dealing with travel plans and unexpected problems. There are plenty of free days included, too, so the travellers can do whatever they want to do—more trekking, more museums, more excursions, or just lounging around taking in the scenery while enjoying a coffee.”

Meg couldn't keep the grin off her face. “I think it's just what I'm looking for, Mum. It's a fun adventure, seeing somewhere new, but with the travel and accommodation stuff all sorted out, so I don't have to worry about it. It's more than a beach holiday, more than just a week at a nice hotel. It's an adventure. And I think that's what I need. In fact, I *know* it's what I need.”

She thought of Johnny in her dreams last night and the words he'd whispered to her. *It's time for you to have an adventure, Meg.*

The tour package she'd found online felt like it fit the bill perfectly. No, it wasn't the wild and free-spirited journey an eighteen-year-old might want. But Meg wasn't eighteen. She was a grown woman who'd just sent her son off to university and now she wanted a bright burst of fun and adventure in her life, an adventure that would whisk her away for a while and let her just... be whoever she wanted to be.

“It sounds wonderful, Meg,” Liz said. “And I think if that's the sort of holiday you want, then that's what you should have.”

Meg was relieved her mother seemed to understand. “It's more expensive than the last-minute holiday getaways I've been looking at so far, and I'll have to raid my savings to afford it, but I think it will be worth it. It sounds like a once-in-a-lifetime experience, Mum.”

“Well, I certainly agree with that, based on what you've told me so far.”

“I've still got a bit of research to do, and I want to look into this travel company and find out more about this trip they

run, but they've got spaces available at the end of March, when we were planning on going away, anyway."

"What a lovely stroke of luck."

"If I do a little more digging into the holiday package and figure out the full costs, do you think it's something you'd be happy to go for, or were you really looking forward to the sunny beach holiday we'd already agreed on?"

Liz studied her for a long moment, her gaze thoughtful. A curious smile caught her lips when she finally answered.

"Meg, I think this sounds like a trip you ought to take on your own."

Meg's smile vanished. "You don't want to come with me? You don't like the sound of this trip?"

"No, it's not that at all. This trip sounds wonderful, at least from what you've told me about it so far. And it goes without saying that I'd love nothing more than to spend a lovely holiday with my daughter. But listening to you talk about this strange dream you had, and those old plans you made all those years ago for a backpacking trip before you started university... well, it seems perfectly obvious to me that this is an adventure that *you* need and that it's one probably best enjoyed without your ancient mother tagging along."

"You're not ancient, Mum, and—"

"I think this trip should be something special that *you* do for *you*," Liz said firmly. "All these excursions and treks and cultural visits and whatnot that are part of the holiday—Meg, it all sounds fantastic, and it sounds like something you ought to savour on your own terms. You wouldn't have dreamt of having your mother tagging along if you'd gone backpacking when you were seventeen, would you?"

Meg conceded the point with a shrug.

"And while this trip you're now thinking about is a far cry from the sort of trip you might have taken twenty years ago, you're still doing it for the same reasons. Fun, adventure, escape, and self-discovery. No one wants their mother hanging around for any of that, believe me."

Meg let out a quick laugh, even although it hurt her sore back and hips. “You know I’d love it if you came along with me.”

“Thank you for saying that. But in your heart, you know this is something you want to do by yourself. So, if you’re worried about ditching me and the beach holiday we’d talked about, don’t be. We can always take ourselves off together for a sunny holiday some other time.” Liz nodded towards the tablet open in front of her on the table. “And if I’m being honest, with spring just around the corner and the housing market starting to pick up, I’d really like to focus on finding a new place to live at last. Perhaps removing the distraction of a holiday on the horizon will help me do that.”

“Well, I understand that. Of course I do. But I was the one who asked you to come on holiday with me, and it feels a bit rude to ditch you because I’ve changed my mind about the plans.”

“It’s not rude, don’t be silly. And if I stay here and do some serious house hunting while you’re off on your lovely French adventure, then it means I can keep an eye on this place for you while you’re gone.”

Meg couldn’t deny the attraction of that idea, but still...

“I can see you trying to find some other way to convince me to come with you,” Liz said. “Let me save you the trouble. I’m not coming with you, and that’s that. We’ll have a little break together later in the year once I’ve sorted out a new house for myself. In the meantime, you get this French adventure thingy booked before the spaces all disappear and you’re left disappointed.”

“Okay, I will. Thanks, Mum.”

Liz patted her hand. “Good. I’m glad that’s settled.”

“I know in the big scheme of things going off on a two-week holiday to France doesn’t exactly constitute a major life change,” Meg said. “And considering all the huffing and puffing I’ve been doing lately about needing something new in my life, this might seem like it doesn’t really fit the bill. But

something just feels right about this, even if it is only a couple of weeks in France.”

“The heart knows what it wants, and yours wants this. Enough said. And who knows? Maybe you’ll meet some exciting new friends on the trip, or visit some amazing places that will be the trigger for new changes in your life?”

“Maybe. I’d like that. But mostly, I think I’d just like to feel that I’m doing something... new and out of the ordinary. Well, new and out of the ordinary for me at least.”

Meg felt a soft peace inside her heart as she said these words. For so long, she’d been restless and stuck in life, bored and unsure about what she wanted to do next to kick herself into a new gear. While a two-week trip might not be in the same league as the changes other people might make—such as quitting their jobs or moving to a new country or starting a new business or finding a new romance—Meg knew this was the right thing for her right now.

She would set out on the fun adventure she never got to take all those years ago, albeit with some adjustments and additional comforts.

She’d have an adventure. Step out of her ordinary life and treat herself to a taste of the unknown in a country she’d always dreamed of visiting.

And perhaps with a wonderful change of scenery around her and new people and exciting new things to do each day while she spent time in France, she might just find some clarity and perspective on those other parts of her life that weren’t quite where she wanted them to be either—such as her dreary job which no longer fulfilled her the way it once had, and her underwhelming love life which was so far beyond pathetic that it wasn’t even funny.

But those other things—her job, her love life, and all those things she knew needed a bit of shaking up—all those things could wait.

Right now, all she could think about was the little adventure she’d decided to embark on and the fun she might

have. It was time to seize the moment and act on instinct and, with the guidance of those strange and lovely dreams she'd had, see where it all took her.

With a bump of excitement in her stomach, Meg kissed her mother and thanked her for understanding her change of plans, then went back upstairs to fetch her laptop and check out the travel company a little more, before raiding her long-suffering savings account and treating herself to a long overdue trip of a lifetime.

ON MONDAY MORNING, Meg arrived at work still feeling a few aches and pains from her tumble on the ice but much improved after a weekend spent resting and recuperating under her mother's watchful eye, and with a constant stream of kindly neighbours popping by to ask after her and wish her well.

The bruising on her backside and hips looked hideous, and the tender spot on her scalp where her head had connected with the icy road still had some healing to do, but Meg was ready for work. She was also ready—in fact, she was eager—to log onto the employee dashboard and make sure Bill Hilburn had approved the time off she'd requested before she'd left the office last Thursday.

As Meg had already booked herself onto the trip to the south of France that was running at the end of March, she could only hope Bill hadn't decided to cause a fuss about her leave request. If he started making up any nonsense about how she hadn't given sufficient notice of the holiday time and that he'd have to reject her request because of it, she'd give him a piece of her mind.

And if he didn't back down, she'd tell him to shove his job.

Okay, well, she might not do that exactly. Just because she'd booked an exciting French adventure holiday didn't mean she was about to turn into a wild daredevil who tossed her entire life up into the air without a second thought.

Still, as Meg turned on her computer and glanced at the various bits and pieces of paperwork that had landed beside her keyboard for her attention while she'd been gone, she enjoyed a brief moment of fantasy as she imagined the thrill of telling Bill Hilburn that she was quitting her job.

The idea of no longer having to produce all those endlessly dull reports and pointless documents that Bill always had her working on held a certain attraction she couldn't deny.

And yet, as she looked around the council office and saw her other colleagues arriving—almost all of them nodding their hellos and asking if she was recovered from her accident and insisting they let her know if she needed any help—Meg knew she'd miss these other people she worked with if she had a hissy fit and quit.

She'd miss working for the council, too. In some small way, she felt she was making a contribution to the greater good with the work she did here, helping her fellow residents of Hamblehurst by making sure their local services ran properly.

Well, that was the theory, at least. If it wasn't for Bill Hilburn and his total incompetence, everyone who worked here might actually get more useful work done, instead of running around seeing to an endless stream of pointless tasks generated by Bill's managerial failures.

But there was no point thinking about any of that right now, not when there was an email backlog to deal with thanks to her absence on Friday, and all those meeting minutes Bill still had her compiling and indexing, along with all the other stupid tasks he generated because he was a clueless plonker.

After chatting for a few moments with her kind colleagues and answering their questions about Thursday's fall on the ice and trip to hospital, Meg settled down at her computer, checked her email to see what was what, and then opened the employee dashboard to find out if Bill had approved her holiday request or not.

Before she could log in, the door to Bill's office swung open across the open plan space, but it wasn't Bill who Meg

saw emerging from inside.

Instead, it was Jane Todd who walked out from the office and made a beeline straight for Meg's desk.

“Good morning, Meg,” Jane said when she reached her. “I thought I saw you arriving a few minutes ago, and I wanted to make sure you feel well enough to come back to work after the nasty accident you had last week.”

Meg saw the obvious concern in Jane Todd's expression. A member of the senior leadership team at the council, Jane Todd was a skilled and accomplished administrator who'd worked in various local council roles throughout her thirty-year career as a civil servant. Meg admired the older woman, whose flair for management and excellent people skills had taken her far. She only wished it was Jane Todd she worked directly under, instead of the hapless Bill Hilburn.

“I feel fine, thanks for asking, Ms Todd,” Meg replied. “I wouldn't have come into work if I thought I wasn't up to it. Taking Friday off and then having the weekend to rest did me the world of good.”

Jane nodded at this, apparently satisfied. “Well, if you feel unwell or tired and need to leave early today, please don't hesitate to let me know. When your mother spoke to me on Friday, she said you'd hit your head quite badly and you were unconscious for a while, and that isn't something we want to take any risks with. What matters is your health.”

“Thanks, Ms Todd.”

“And please, call me Jane.”

Meg smiled and nodded even as she wondered why Jane Todd was having this conversation with her at all. Surely it should be Bill who was out here asking after her health and making sure she was fit for work? As if reading her thoughts, Jane nodded in the direction of Bill's office.

“Would you mind stepping into the office with me for a moment, Meg?” Jane asked. “There's something I need to talk to you about in private.”

Meg nodded and rose from her desk to follow the older woman, but she was gripped by a sudden flush of anxiety about why she wanted to talk to her in private. Was there a problem with her leave request after all? Or was something wrong with all the reams of council reorganisation paperwork that Bill had her working on and Jane Todd had somehow caught wind of it and thought that Meg was somehow responsible for the mess?

She'd know by the look on Bill's face when she got inside his office. If he was about to land Meg in hot water and attempt to pass the blame onto her for his own administrative failings by somehow pointing the finger at Meg because of the paperwork he'd belated got her to produce, then she figured she'd know once she saw whether Bill had his trademark slippery expression on his face or not.

But when Meg followed Jane Todd into Bill's office, she realised that they were the only two people there. Bill was nowhere to be seen and when Jane took Bill's seat behind the desk, she could only wonder at what might be going on.

"Where's Bill?" Meg asked as she sat down, testing the waters. "Is he off sick?"

"No, he's not sick," Jane replied. "He's um... well, I suppose I should just get straight to the point. Bill has been suspended with immediate effect pending the outcome of an ongoing internal inquiry."

Speechless at this revelation, Meg could only stare. "Oh, my goodness. What on earth's happened?"

"I'm afraid I can't say too much because of confidentiality issues. However, I can say that the council has uncovered a number of very serious administrative errors in relation to the ongoing reorganisation process, some of which might constitute grounds for dismissal. Naturally, we must follow due process in investigating any allegation or suspicion of gross misconduct when it comes to our staff. For the time being, the official line is that Bill Hilburn is on gardening leave while we investigate these matters and establish what has happened and what has gone wrong, and what, if any,

responsibility Bill must bear for these egregious mistakes. Following a meeting late on Thursday afternoon between Bill and myself and others on the senior leadership team, Bill was asked to leave while enquiries continue.”

Meg sat stunned in her chair while Jane Todd trotted out this explanation. It took her a few seconds to realise that her surprise was mostly down to the idea that Bill’s complete and utter incompetence might have actually caught up with him at last.

She remembered how Bill had run out of the office late on Thursday afternoon, just when she’d been about to ask him about taking some annual leave. The man’s sudden departure and distracted state now made more sense.

“I understand that Bill has had you working on some strange paperwork auditing tasks lately?” Jane said, lifting a sheet of paper from her desk and peering at it over the top of her glasses.

“Well, yes, that’s true. He said there were some problems with the council’s meeting minutes and we needed to clarify some of the notations and action points and bring everything together into a master index so that we could trace decision making across the various council committees that have dealt with the reorganisation process.”

Jane waved a hand at this. “Officially, I’m saying nothing about these paperwork tasks Bill assigned to you, not while an investigation is under way. Unofficially, however, I’ll say this. It’s utter tosh.”

Meg let out a surprised laugh at the woman’s brutal honesty.

“The man is a clueless idiot and has become a serious liability to the efficient functioning of this organisation,” Jane continued. “The fact that he’s had you working on this stupid and entirely pointless task simply proves it. I’m sure it will be disheartening to hear this, but he’s had you working on something that was never going to be of any use to anyone. That he asked you to do this in the first place will be just one of many pieces of evidence we’re currently putting together to

prove that the man has no idea what he's doing and ought to be sacked as a matter of urgency."

"Gosh, I don't know what to say," Meg said, truthfully.

"I've been watching Bill Hilburn for a while and have long suspected that he's not only lazy and incompetent but has actually caused some serious problems inside the council, problems that have had real-world consequences for the local people we're supposed to serve," Jane said. "However, suspicions are one thing. Concrete proof is something else entirely. It's taken time to get to this point where we're able to put Bill on gardening leave while these investigations continue. Bill has a lot more to answer for than just asking employees to work on pointless paperwork tasks. We've also uncovered some questionable activities regarding his departmental expenditures, but if I say any more than that, I'll be the one in trouble next. I'd appreciate it if this conversation remains between us, Meg."

"Of course."

"My view is that the evidence we've already collated against Bill is enough to get rid of him. I don't think he'll be back here ever again. Which leaves us with an urgent vacancy here in this department."

Jane leaned over the desk and removed her glasses. "I'm aware of what a valuable employee you are, Meg. Any sensible manager worth his or her salt would have promoted you long ago, but Bill being Bill, he was happy to keep your light hidden beneath a bushel because it was handy for him to have someone he could pile work onto when he didn't want to do it himself. That ends now."

Meg blinked, wondering what on earth might be coming next in this astonishing conversation.

"I'd like to offer you Bill's job," Jane said.

"*What?*" Meg squeaked. "Seriously?"

"Of course. It would be a temporary position initially until we officially relinquish Bill of his duties, which I know will only be a matter of time. You've worked here for years, Meg,

and you know this place inside out. You're the best qualified person for the job and I know you'll be brilliant at it. The circumstances surrounding the vacancy means we don't have to open it up to outside applicants. I may not work here in this department on a day-to-day basis, but I keep my eyes open and my ears to the ground and you've impressed me and others with your abilities, Meg."

"Wow, I don't know what to say."

"Well, naturally I hope you'll say yes. Instead of dealing with stupid administrative tasks generated by Bill Hilburn, you'll be taking on a proper managerial role and helping to shape and lead our policies and the public services we deliver to our communities. You'll be playing a key role here. Does that sound like something you're interested in?"

"Yes, it does, absolutely," Meg said, unable to keep the utter astonishment from her voice. "But what about the council reorganisation processes? I hope you don't mind me being honest, but if Bill has messed things up there, then I don't want to be the one held officially responsible for trying to unpick all the problems you say he's caused."

Jane's lips curved into a smile. "I like your honesty, Meg. We need more of that around here. And to answer your question, no, you won't be on the hook for any of Bill's errors. In fact, the council management team have decided to pause some aspects of the reorganisation process, probably indefinitely. We are acutely aware that things aren't going in the right direction and we might as well say so now before things get any worse. Sometimes these plans look great on paper but once you start to put them into practice..." Jane waved a hand. "Well, we've both worked here long enough to remember previous reorganisations with, uh, sub-optimal outcomes."

Meg nodded, understanding from her careful words that Jane Todd had almost certainly been against the current reorganisation from the beginning.

"Anyway," Jane continued, "you don't have to worry about getting mixed up in any reorganisation processes or politics."

Once we kill most of that off, we'll be getting back to doing what we ought to be doing here, which is delivering quality local services to the people we serve in our communities."

"That's great to hear. But I've never worked as a manager before."

Jane waved this off. "We have plenty of training programmes we can send you on to bring you up to speed with both the technical and leadership side of things. I have every confidence in you and believe you'll be a great asset to this organisation and our local community. Oh, and don't forget there's a salary increase, too."

Now Meg really was lost for works. Jane Todd must have finally noticed her gobsmacked expression because she let out a soft laugh.

"I've put together a job description and a summary of the key responsibilities," Jane said, passing a document across the desk. "I've also listed some training programmes we'd like you to undertake if you accept this job, and some of the policy and service priorities we need to pay more attention to. Why don't you take some time to look this over and we could meet again to discuss any questions you have?"

Meg accepted the document and glanced at it before nodding. This was completely overwhelming and totally unexpected.

But as she cast her eye across the new responsibilities she'd have, Meg realised it was also *exactly* what she wanted, and what she'd wanted for a very long time.

If she took this job, she'd be doing the sort of work she truly wanted to do—helping shape council policy priorities and service delivery, identifying urgent needs in the local community and working out what to do about them, and helping to build a team in her department that had suffered for too long at the hands of a man who didn't know what he was doing and had no interest in the greater good he was supposed to be serving.

The job offer had appeared out of nowhere and was an enormous surprise. Given how the council worked, she'd assumed Bill Hilburn would continue in his role forever, happily exploiting an organisation that had never found it easy to get rid of useless people.

Now, Meg's assumption had been proved wrong—and she also had the opportunity to do the sort of work she'd always hoped for the chance to do.

"I'd love to do this job!" Meg told Jane, clutching the paperwork she'd handed over. "Thanks for offering it to me. I don't need to look over any of this material. The answer is yes!"

Across the desk, Jane Todd grinned. "I was hoping you'd say that. Still, I want you to read everything I gave you and then we'll talk further. Given the circumstances of Bill's departure, I'll be running things directly here for a few weeks, and if you are certain you want the job, we'll organise a hand-over period so you feel comfortable getting up to speed."

Meg rose from the chair, almost dizzy with excitement. "Thank you, Jane."

"You'll do a terrific job, Meg. I'm sure of it."

Meg turned for the door and was about to go when she remembered the annual leave she'd requested last week.

"Uh, Jane, considering you've just offered me this wonderful job, this might sound a bit cheeky, but I filled out a request for some holiday time last week and—"

"I've already approved it," Jane said, cutting her off with a smile. "Don't worry, we'll make sure your holiday fits in around your new job and new responsibilities. Are you off somewhere nice?"

"Actually, I am, and—"

The phone ringing on the desk interrupted her. Jane glanced at the incoming number and then back at Meg.

"I'll have to take this call, I'm afraid. It's my contact over in Human Resources, getting back to me with some urgent

procedural points regarding Bill's suspension. Let's talk later today and we can chat about the new job and you can tell me more about this holiday you're about to go on. How does that sound?"

Meg smiled. "It sounds wonderful."

In a daze, Meg walked back to her desk and sank into her chair. She glanced again at the job description document Jane Todd had given her, scanning the contents and the key responsibilities she'd soon take on.

It all felt like a dream. A wonderful, blissful dream.

Not only was the useless Bill Hilburn on his way out the door, but she'd be taking his place. Meg knew she could do this job and do it well. Her heart clip-clopped inside her chest with excitement and joy.

How quickly things can change, she thought. At the start of the new year, she'd hoped for better things to come, but in the weeks that followed she'd felt like she was just treading water and going nowhere fast.

She'd been dumped by the man she'd been unenthusiastically seeing. She'd felt trapped in a job that didn't fulfil her but which she didn't really want to leave. And she'd felt like nothing very exciting ever seemed to happen and might never happen again.

After years of single parenthood and doing everything in her power to raise her son alone and give him every chance for a brilliant future, Jamie's departure for university had left her feeling adrift and wondering what to do next in her life.

And then, in the midst of the coldest and snowiest winter she could remember, she'd fallen on the ice and hit her head and knocked herself out for the count... but in the aftermath of that painful misfortune, something amazing was suddenly happening.

She'd taken the plunge and committed to a holiday adventure of the sort she'd once longed for as a wide-eyed seventeen-year-old.

And now, in a flurry of revelations from which she was still reeling, she'd just landed the job of her dreams.

Things were finally looking up—and Meg couldn't keep the smile from her face as she turned her attention to her computer and got back to work.

* * *

When her working day was over, Meg left the office and headed for home, but soon found herself turning in the opposite direction from Foxglove Street and walking instead towards the cemetery.

The grey February light was fading fast as she passed through the iron gates and followed the path to Johnny's grave. A thaw over the weekend had melted most of the ice and snow that had covered Hamblehurst the week before, and Meg was glad to feel secure underfoot after Thursday's calamity.

When she reached Johnny's grave, she stopped and let the peace of the graveyard settle over her. Some people found such places to be spooky and unsettling, but not Meg. Although she no longer came here as often as she once used to, her visits to her late husband's grave still made her feel still and calm inside. The tall trees that stood winter bare, the gentle birdsong that danced on the chilly air, and the dignified headstones that lined the mossy earth all the way back towards the church on the other side that rose like a sentry over the souls of the dead, all these things brought Meg comfort and peace.

She closed her eyes for a moment, letting the events and revelations of the day—and of the past few days, too—settle around her. Remembering the dreams she'd had when she'd floated in an impossibly blue winter sky with Johnny at her side, she reached out and touched her fingers to the frozen cold stone that marked his grave.

"I dreamt about you, Johnny," Meg said quietly. "I dreamt about you twice. The same thing both times. We were together, floating in the sky above a winter wonderland. The whole world was covered with snow. Everything looked so pretty."

Pausing, she sighed and smiled. “And I think you were trying to help me find my way.”

A crow swooped overhead and landed in the dark bare branches of an oak tree, where it emitted a throaty call. Moments later, a second crow joined the first, and the two birds shuffled together on the branch, cawing at one another before proceeding to preen the glossy black feathers on their lustrous wings.

Meg remembered seeing two crows the last time she’d come here, too. They looked down at her with their clever, dark eyes, as if taking the measure of her.

“Whenever I come to see you lately, Johnny, I’ve had crows for company,” Meg murmured. “And back home, I keep seeing this lovely little fox passing by the house. I dreamt of the fox, too, when I had my mad dream last week, the one you appeared in, Johnny. Maybe it’s a sign. Although I’m not sure what it might a sign of, exactly.”

The crows in the tree watched her carefully, tilting their heads this way and that, before cawing again in unison and then lifting up into the darkening grey sky, their strong wings beating and carrying them off into the trees at the southern edge of the cemetery and out of sight.

Meg thought of the crows, lifting off and flying away. She thought of the lovely fox outside her house, scampering along on its nocturnal journeys and leaving behind only its sweet paw prints on the snowy ground.

She thought, too, of the crazy dream in which she’d left tracks of her own as she’d navigated the twisting and turning map in which she’d found herself as she slept.

“I think I’m finding my way again, Johnny,” Meg said. “In the dream, you told me it was time for an adventure, and I think that’s what I’m about to have.”

She thought of the trip she’d take next month to France. She thought of the new job she’d just been offered. No, she wasn’t upending her life and starting again or becoming an entirely different person to the one she’d been before. But in

ways that were important and meaningful *to her*, she was taking some big leaps into the unknown and doing things that excited her and scared her and made her feel alive.

Alive and ready for adventure.

“Maybe those crazy dreams I had really were just the result of me falling over and banging my stupid head on the ground,” Meg said. “But thanks for being there, Johnny. And thanks for giving me a push in the right direction.”

It's time, Meg. It's time for you to shine.

Meg heard Johnny's voice so clearly on the cold wintry air. If she closed her eyes, she would've believed he was standing right beside her.

She savoured the moment, savoured the sensation of his presence, imagined or otherwise.

And then he was gone.

Meg huddled inside her coat. The damp February day was drilling into the soles of her boots and night was creeping into the sky. It was time to go.

Brushing her fingers across Johnny's worn headstone one last time and blowing a kiss into the air, Meg turned for the cemetery exit. She had exciting news to share with her son and her mother and her friends, exciting news about a new job and a bright future that she'd thought was out of reach, and she couldn't wait to get home to Foxglove Street and celebrate properly with those she loved.

There had been so many strange wintry weeks since she'd sat alone on New Year's Eve and promised herself that the year ahead would be filled with good things. Now, at last, that promise was coming true.

EPILOGUE

EARLY ONE FRIDAY morning at the end of March, Meg looked out her bedroom window to where the sunrise was painting a riot of pink and orange across the dawn sky. She'd barely slept a wink last night and her stomach buzzed with excitement, because today she was setting off for her grand holiday adventure to the south of France.

Her suitcase was packed. Her passport, travel money, and tickets were neatly laid out on her chest of drawers along with the holiday itinerary she'd printed out. Her flight was scheduled to depart Heathrow at ten-fifteen, and she planned to catch an early train from Hamblehurst to make sure she arrived at the airport on time.

As she brushed her hair and checked her make-up in the mirror, she wasn't surprised to see a flash of movement outside her window on the quiet street below. Her old friend, the pretty fox, scampered along the pavement, the early morning sunshine catching its thick fur and turning it a burnished golden colour. Meg smiled as she watched the creature continue along the pavement, not even stopping to glance up in her direction as it had done so many times before.

The fox is in a hurry to get somewhere, Meg thought. Much like myself.

Meg tucked her travel documents into her bag and grabbed her suitcase. Her gaze fell on the bold blonde-haired watercolour self-portrait she'd painted at the art class a few weeks earlier. Seeing that image of herself gave her an amused

smile every time she looked at it—along with a lovely bump of encouragement that she was brave enough to grab life by the scruff of the neck and find the new path in life she so badly needed.

Life was all about taking chances and being open to the unexpected. But it was also about admitting to yourself when things weren't going in the direction you hoped, and being honest about what to do about it.

Meg knew she'd waited too long to shake things up after Jamie left home, had spent too long in the company of the hapless Ian in a relationship that was never going anywhere, and spent far too long in a job where her useless boss was only too happy to keep her stuck in place and going nowhere.

Meg also understood that she'd been a mere bystander when these situations had resolved themselves. Ian had broken up with her, not the other way around. And things had only changed at work because her boss had finally been found out for the incompetent fool that he was.

If she'd been braver, she would've moved jobs much sooner, even despite her soft spot for the local council. But being a single mother with a teenage son about to start university was a scary thing financially. Fear had kept her where she was. Meg knew she was lucky that things had changed had work, that Bill Hilburn was now gone, and that the management team had recognised her abilities and given his job to her instead.

She was grateful for that luck and the new job it had sent her way. But from now on, she was determined to make her own luck instead.

The bold, blonde-haired Watercolour Meg would never rely on the whims of the world to make her happy. She'd make herself happy. From now on, that's what Real World Meg would do, too.

Meg smiled at the brazenly confident woman in the painting and hitched her bag over her shoulder.

“Right then, I’m about to go off on holiday on my own for the first time,” she told her alter ego inside the frame. “Wish me luck.”

She was just about to leave her bedroom when her phone buzzed with a message from her son.

Have a good journey today, Mum. And have a blast when you arrive at the other end—you deserve it! Jamie x

Smiling, Meg tapped out a quick reply. They’d already spoken at length last night, because Meg wanted to make sure she was all caught up on Jamie’s news before she set off on holiday. She appreciated his thoughtful message before she left to catch her train. Knowing she’d raised such a sweet and considerate son, who’d wake up at the crack of dawn to send his mother a message before she went on holiday, filled her pride.

The second weekend after her accident on the ice, Jamie had come home for a few days to visit, just as he’d promised he would when he’d cancelled their Easter holiday arrangements. Meg had needed the reunion with her son even more than she’d realised, and when she’d pulled him into a fierce hug and felt tears flood down her cheeks, Jamie had understood how hard it had been for her to pack him off to university in the autumn and barely see him again for so long.

Much as she loved knowing Jamie was making his way in the world and doing great things at university, Meg also knew she had to be more honest with him about how much she missed him and how the months spent apart had been hard to handle. No mother could raise her son alone for all those years and then not miss him terribly when he trundled off to university and failed to come back for a visit for months on end.

They’d had a proper heart-to-heart conversation about that, and more, when he’d come home to see her and Meg felt better for being honest with him. She wasn’t smothering him by telling him she needed to see more of him. She was simply loving him, the way a mother should love her son. The fact that Jamie understood this immediately, and seemed sorry for

staying away so long, even if he'd had very good reasons for it, made her feel better and brighter about everything.

After exchanging a few more messages with Jamie, Meg tucked her phone into her bag and hauled her suitcase downstairs. She found her mother in the kitchen making coffee.

"I thought you'd need a good strong caffeine kick before you set off for Heathrow," Liz said. "God knows the coffee they serve onboard the trains can leave a lot to be desired."

"Thanks, Mum," Meg said, accepting the mug of coffee. "I know I'm probably leaving far too early and could catch a later train and have plenty of time to spare, but I'm too excited to hang around here when I could be on my way to the airport instead."

"Quite right. I'm just glad I got up early too and got the chance to see you before you go." Liz glanced at the clock on the wall. "Speaking of which, I'd better get a move on myself. I'm viewing that cottage this morning at eight o'clock and I don't want to be late. It took some persuading to convince the estate agent to let me see it early before it officially goes on the market, and I want to take advantage of that."

Meg drank some coffee and smiled at her mother. "It's a beautiful cottage, Mum. I think it might be just the place for you."

"Me too, which is why I don't want to risk letting it slip through my fingers by being late."

The cottage, a lovely compact semi-detached property on the outskirts of Hamblehurst, was absolutely gorgeous inside and out. Although viewings weren't supposed to start for another day, Liz had seduced the estate agent with her chain-free status and her clear motivation to act quickly if the property was right. Meg had admired the property photographs the agent had sent through and was thrilled at the idea of her mother finally finding the right home at last.

"Let me know how the viewing goes," Meg said. "I'll keep my fingers crossed."

“I have a very good feeling about today,” Liz said, her eyes bright. “I think this cottage is right for me and I think I’ll be able to persuade the seller that I am the right buyer. Perhaps by the time you come home from your wonderful holiday, I’ll be getting ready to move out.”

Liz made an elaborate fingers crossed gesture. “Much as I love living here with you, Meg, I miss having my own house. And I felt badly for poor Jamie when he came home last month and had to sleep on the sofa because I had occupied his bedroom.”

“I think he survived the ordeal,” Meg said with a laugh.

Liz pulled Meg into a hug and kissed her. “Have a wonderful holiday, darling.” She reached into her dressing gown and pulled out a folded bundle of banknotes. “Here are some euros. Buy yourself a glass of champagne when you arrive at the other end and make sure it’s the good stuff, too.”

“Mum, you don’t have to give me this!”

“It’s my pleasure to do it. So, you’ll accept it and you’ll treat yourself to some fizz to celebrate when you reach your hotel, and that’s that.”

Liz settled the matter by pressing the money into Meg’s hands and giving her a stern look. “If I can’t give my daughter a little bit of spending money to enjoy on the first proper holiday she’d had in years, then I don’t know what the world’s coming to.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

“You’re welcome. Right, I’d better get myself upstairs and into the shower.” Liz gave her another kiss and a hug. “Have a wonderful time, text me so I know how the journey is going, and I’ll see you in two weeks.”

Meg returned her mother’s hugs and kisses then waved her off upstairs. After finishing her coffee, she grabbed her jacket, checked the contents of her handbag one last time to make sure everything was in order, and then wheeled her suitcase to the door.

Her phone pinged just as she was locking up behind herself. Assuming it was another message from Jamie, she glanced at the screen.

But it wasn't a message from Jamie. It was a message from Harry Doyle.

Hope you have a great trip and a great holiday, Meg, Harry had written. You're going to love the Côte d'Azur! Sorry our paths won't cross while you're there, but who knows, maybe in the future?

Meg smiled at the message. She and Harry had swapped texts many times since he'd left Hamblehurst. He'd shared snippets of his time in Paris before he'd set off for Spain, sharing photos of the beautiful city in winter as well as some of the paintings he'd done while staying there. When Meg told him about the trip she'd booked, he'd said he was thrilled to know she'd be seeing a part of the world he loved and had shared tips and ideas for places to go and off-the-beaten-track attractions not to miss.

She was grateful for his suggestions, and grateful for his friendship, too, even if it was from a distance. And maybe Harry was right—who knew what the future might bring?

Meg slipped the phone back inside her bag. She'd reply to Harry once she was on the train, as she didn't want to be late arriving at the station. Wheeling her suitcase down the garden path, she closed the front gate behind her and set off along Foxglove Street.

The cool March morning was crisp and bright, with a hint of warmth in the air that told her spring was coming. After the snowy winter just past, Meg knew she wasn't the only person in Hamblehurst looking forward to the new season arriving.

As it was still so early in the morning, the street was quiet. Songbirds swooped overhead as a neighbour hurried to a car parked on the road and offered Meg a quick wave before hopping inside and driving off. A dog-walker ambled along the other side of the pavement. Curtains were opened at the front windows Meg passed by as the residents of Foxglove Street woke up and began their day.

When she met the curve in the road further down, Meg's eyes widened at the astonishing sight of a neighbour, Rosie Austin, shuffling towards her carrying an enormous bakery box in her arms and clutching bunches of brightly coloured helium balloons in her hands. Rosie's face was only just visible above the box as the balloons bounced around her head.

"Morning, Rosie!" Meg called out. "Do you need help carrying all that stuff?"

Rosie blinked and blew a wisp of hair out of her face and let out a soft laugh. The woman, who was around ten years Meg's junior, looked flustered but amused, too.

"Thanks, Meg, but I'm almost home now," Rosie said. "I should've made two separate trips for this lot, but we're always wise after the fact, right?"

"It looks like you've having a party?"

"Yes, a surprise birthday party, and I was daft enough to volunteer my house to have it in." Rosie's gaze strayed to Meg's suitcase. "Oh, are you off on your holidays?"

Meg nodded. "I'm jetting off to the south of France and I'm off to catch the train to the airport."

"Gosh, well don't let me keep you then. I'd better get going anyway. This cake weighs an absolute tonne. Have a fantastic holiday, Meg!"

With another laugh, Rosie jiggled the strings attached to the balloons in lieu of a wave goodbye and walked on. Meg started walking again too, glancing over her shoulder a few times to make sure Rosie made it back to her house okay with her heavy load. When she saw the younger woman push through her garden gate further along the street, Meg was relieved. If she hadn't been in a hurry to catch her train, she would've insisted on helping her neighbour carry home her heavy load of party things.

Meg picked up her pace towards the train station, breathing in the sweet fresh air and taking in the sights and sounds of Foxglove Street. In the early morning sunshine, with

the front gardens sparkling with dew, the place looked beautiful.

Meg loved this gorgeous street where she'd lived for so long, where she'd raised her son, where she'd recovered from grief and heartbreak after Johnny's death. This place was home, and she felt a sudden punch of love inside her heart for the sweetly winding residential road with its pretty houses and neat gardens and kind neighbours.

Perhaps it was the prospect of leaving for two whole weeks—all on her own—that made her strangely sentimental about the place. But she'd be back soon enough, she reminded herself, refreshed and energised and ready for whatever might come next in life.

And hopefully she'd have changed a little, too. That was what holidays and travel were supposed to do, after all, wasn't it? Expand your horizons and broaden your mind while also making you realise just how much you loved the home you'd left behind.

Meg's thoughts turned to the train she was off to catch, the flight she'd board at the airport, the holiday that awaited at the other end. She thought about the sights she'd see, the fun she'd have, the people she'd meet.

Turning off Foxglove Street, she headed towards the station as excitement swirled inside her.

The thrill of adventure was calling—and Meg was ready, at last, to answer it.

A MESSAGE FROM ALIX

Thanks for visiting Foxglove Street and I hope you enjoyed spending a few snowy weeks with Meg as she navigated her way towards the next part of her life and the new adventures waiting for her there.

At the end of the epilogue, we met Rosie, who was carrying home a rather large cake box and lots of lovely balloons – and you're now invited to *A Surprise Party on Foxglove Street*... although the party won't be the only surprise waiting in store for Rosie and her family...

If you'd like to keep up to date with new book news, then join my Reader's Club at alixkelso.com. You can also find me on Facebook and Instagram.

Thanks again for reading, and see you next time on Foxglove Street.

With all good wishes,

Alix Kelso

* * *

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* * *

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Enjoy another visit to Foxglove Street in the next book in the series:

A Surprise Party on Foxglove Street.

Rosie Austin is about to hold a surprise birthday party she hopes her will family love – but when a series of shocking revelations come tumbling out and unexpected guests turn up and threaten to ruin everything, she must do everything possible to stop the celebrations descending into disaster.

Prepare for a party like no other on Foxglove Street...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alix Kelso writes feel-good, uplifting stories about romance, friendship and family. When she's not writing, she loves reading, pottering in the kitchen, and enjoying long walks in the countryside.

Alix loves to hear from her readers, and you can find her online on Facebook and Instagram at @AlixKelsoAuthor

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Foxglove Street Series

Neighbours On Foxglove Street

Friends On Foxglove Street

Sisters On Foxglove Street

Autumn Leaves On Foxglove Street

Christmas Lights On Foxglove Street

Snowy Days On Foxglove Street

A Surprise Party On Foxglove Street

Mrs Wishmore Series

A Wish At The Daffodil Cafe

A Wish On Star Castle Lane

A Wish At The Christmas Village

The Fairhill Series

The Perfect Moment

The Next Forever

The Magic Hour

A Little Romance

The Story Collections

A Dog's Heart and Other Stories

The Food Of Love and Other Stories

A Dream Of Christmas and Other Stories

The Magic of Christmas and Other Stories

Home Sweet Home and Other Stories