

BOOK 3

A Cherry Blossom Lane Series



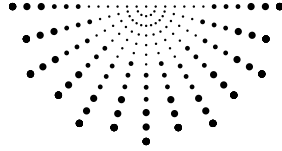
The
Eternal Bachelor

LIZZIE CHANTREE

THE ETERNAL BACHELOR

CHERRY BLOSSOM LANE SERIES.

BOOK THREE



LIZZIE CHANTREE



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The Eternal Bachelor is written and edited in British English rather than American English. This includes spelling, grammar and punctuation.

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From Lizzie X

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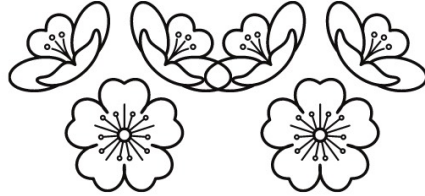
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CHAPTER ONE



Demi rubbed her tired eyes and counted to ten. This was becoming a daily routine. Something needed to change soon. She looked forlornly out of the window of her tiny office, if you could even call it that, at the back of her dad's industrial garage. The business badly needed its own café to keep customers onsite and to bring in more money, but all she could see were piles of metal and junk, and areas of lost opportunity. It was a huge building that had potential to bring in customers for miles around, but stubbornness ran in her family – and her dad flatly refused to change a thing.

She moved the beautiful architectural and interior images she'd commissioned to back up her argument. Her dad had barely glanced at them, or her carefully written plans and cost breakdowns either. He was set on persuading Demi's long-term boyfriend, Allan, to take over the family-run garage, even though Demi herself was more than qualified and could run the place in her sleep.

The pounding headache she'd had for days was back. She gulped down some tepid water from the glass on her desk and winced at the bitter taste of metal that seemed to seep into everything there. The place needed an injection of cash, a deep clean and an image overhaul. Demi's dad, Len, had never really considered her for the position of managing director, but as far as she was concerned his age-old insistence that a man should run the place needed to be filed away with the rest of the relics of the past.

Taking the first image and holding it up to the window, Demi could envisage how bustling their forecourt could be. She only meant to transform the unused spaces they already had. The garage and workshop were situated on an industrial lot which was pretty remote, set alongside other big warehouses on an area of old marshland just outside the Essex town where they lived. The marsh had dried out long ago, but the wild fields of tall grasses all around meant there was nowhere to get a coffee or food. If they had a place for customers to wait for their cars in comfort, other businesses in the area might also use their services.

The garage was surrounded by fields on three sides. Her idea was to utilise the wasted space and bring the garage up to date with a declutter and reorganisation of stock. She also wanted to add catering to their offering – a comfortable coffee shop where customers could wait for their cars. This would mean people spent more money onsite.

Demi had spoken to her best friends, Sasha and Poppy, who worked together in Cherry Blossom Lane – a beautiful tree-lined road that led up to a bustling village – and they had both loved the idea. Sasha, who ran her own social media business, had introduced hot desks at her boyfriend Ollie's gyms recently and these had worked brilliantly. Customers could work at small workstations with great WIFI before and after workouts. She'd suggested Demi try it at the garage to keep customers in situ for longer, and Demi was sure it could work alongside the café. They could fit about four desks along one wall, meaning customers could plug into the internet and work while they bought food and drinks and waited for their cars. For a small fee, they could settle down with their laptops and work remotely in a setting that overlooked the picturesque fields at the back.

Ollie was one of the locally renowned Taylor 'heartbreak brothers'. Most of the women Demi knew swooned and tripped over their own feet when one of the brothers was in town. The eldest, Ollie, owned two gyms, one locally and one in Cherry Blossom Lane, so he was often around. Middle brother Dylan had just married Poppy and they lived and worked in Cherry Blossom Lane as well. Demi loved visiting

them. It had inspired her to finally try to pursue her own dreams, even if it meant staying put where she was and not starting out on her own. This was something she thought about a lot – when she allowed the ideas to creep in.

The only brother left living locally was Miles. He was a tech entrepreneur who serviced supercars. He'd been featured in countless magazines, labelled as one of the UK's hottest bachelors. This made him blush and roll his eyes at her, while running his hands through his dark hair, mussing it up and making him appear even more sexy, judging by the way any female in his vicinity swooned.

Demi smiled at last. Miles had always been one of her best friends. Their group had all grown up in this small town and gone to schools near each other. They'd become close friends, and now four of the original group had paired up! Demi supposed she and Allan were also part of the original friendship group. With Anne moving to America, there was only Miles left who was single.

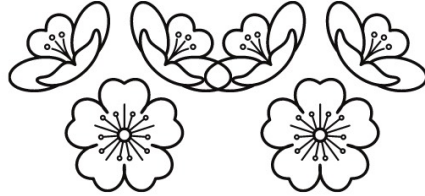
Luckily Demi had missed the Taylor brother obsession that her friends all had. She'd met Allan at a party the group had gone to, and they'd been inseparable ever since. She also vaguely recollected kissing Miles at that party, but luckily he'd gone home with someone else and since then they'd been nothing but best friends. Most of the women he dated were stunning and clever, but they never stayed round long enough for Demi to get to know them well. He was an eternal bachelor, she supposed, and he didn't seem to be too unhappy about it either.

She carefully folded the drawings and put them away in her desk drawer. Someone had left her a mug of coffee earlier, but it didn't look very appealing. She sniffed it gingerly and wrinkled her nose, her tight dark curls bouncing around her face like a halo.

When would her dad and Allan start to take her seriously? Allan was reluctantly coming around to the idea of running the place, but he thought her ideas were ridiculous too. She loved him, but he was more interested in keeping the status quo than making changes to the garage, which frustrated the hell out of

her most of the time. She opened up her laptop and brought up the previous six months of sales figures, holding her breath, as if they might have improved from the last time she'd looked. Something was going to have to change soon, or there would be no business for Allan to take over anyway.

CHAPTER TWO



Miles grinned at one of the workers adding finishing touches to his brand-new site on Cherry Blossom Lane. The little village at the end of the road was up and coming and his sister-in-law, Poppy, had seen its potential years ago. Her office was at the other end of the lane and so was Ollie's new gym. The village now had bars, cafés and shops and a vibrant community that was growing, as developers like Poppy's business partner, Jared, swooped in to scoop up land to build on. Poppy was a designer who specialised in wellbeing and she kept Jared's entrepreneurial ideas in check when they got out of hand. Together they created homes that breathed new life into people the minute they stepped through the door, re-energising homeowners after a long day. It was genius, as far as Miles was concerned.

He'd bought the space at the other end of Cherry Blossom Lane the previous year. Now he had huge barns with up-to-date security, and sparkling offices to house his computers. He had a team that serviced supercars, but he also wanted a smaller offering for locals. He had plans for the other buildings and a few ideas for facilities he could offer, but he hadn't finalised his thought process yet. One piece of the puzzle was missing.

He knew that Demi had been to night school recently to do a business management course. She now pretty much ran Len's garage, without getting any say in things or any credit either. It riled him more than he liked to think about. Ollie had told him to leave it alone, but he wouldn't be much of a friend if he didn't speak out. He'd been silent long enough. Ollie had

just rolled his eyes and shaken his head at his brother's idiocy and then patted his shoulder in sympathy at his predicament, but Miles wasn't usually the type of person to dither about a business decision and he wasn't about to start now. Matters of the heart were trickier, but his patience had pretty much run out. Neither Dylan nor Ollie had had easy paths to happiness. Miles wasn't about to give up on his dreams, either.

He knew that Demi would resist him at first and that she'd have to talk his ideas through with her parents and Allan – although she had no need to, when she pretty much kept the place afloat, from what his contacts told him. She was their only tangible asset, other than the building itself, and she was the reason why customers returned.

Len was short sighted when it came to Demi's abilities, but Miles had grown up around Demi and her family and knew that her mum, Tianna, would support her. She was feisty and strong, and her Jamaican heritage was infused into their home, which was welcoming and vibrant, just like the women of the family. Len was great and was equally proud of his Essex roots, but he was more set in his ways and blindly followed what he thought was the right path. Demi was a beautiful mixture of them both.

Her smile was breathtaking, in Miles's opinion, and she was self-deprecating and the kindest person he'd ever met. She'd stop to help someone in the street if they had too many bags of shopping, even if her own arms were already full. Because of this, she sometimes forgot to be kind to herself, and put everyone else's feelings before her own. Tianna, didn't want her daughter to be overlooked and had encouraged Demi to study at night school and find her own path, but Miles knew that Allan resisted change too. He had a great job and got paid well for minimum effort and responsibility, as far as Miles could see. He just loaded any worries onto Demi's shoulders and walked away smiling, knowing that she would always find a solution while he spent hours at the gym with his mates. She was tired now, though, and her energy was waning. This had created rows at her parents' house. Miles knew that Demi was suffering because of it and trying to make peace. She hated

arguing and took all the stress of the business on to help her family.

Miles walked into his office, which had views across open fields to one side and his brand-new supercar empire and Cherry Blossom Lane on the other. He sat at the natural wood desk that his brother Dylan had made as a gift to celebrate his new premises, and ran his hand along the surface. His brother was a master craftsman, creating bespoke furniture ranges that were sold worldwide now. The prices he charged were astronomical, but people couldn't seem to get enough of his work.

Miles smiled. Then his stomach growled to let him know he'd forgotten breakfast again. He was incredibly proud of his brothers and the amazing women they had in their lives. Dylan's wife Poppy was a mental health advocate and designer of the moment and Ollie's partner Sasha was feisty and outspoken and fast becoming a brand expert to the stars. Miles worried that Demi saw all this, but was shrouded in clouds of doubt about her own abilities, because of her unsupportive dad and partner. She confided in Miles about how hard things were for her and it crushed him that she wouldn't let him help her.

Making changes to his own life had been a huge step for Miles, but it was something he'd been planning for a while. His patience was running thin, waiting for things to change for Demi. He was a man of action, either setting his plans in motion, or shutting up about it and moving on. But he couldn't keep pining for something that wasn't his. He was a grown-ass man and if the girl of his dreams wasn't happy, then maybe it was about time she saw there were other choices. He took a steadying breath, wishing he didn't feel about sixteen years old again, and picked up the phone. He hated feeling vulnerable and was terrified of losing his best friend.

'Hi Miles,' Demi answered his call. He could hear the strain in her voice and his grip tightened on his phone. His resolve wavered. Was he doing the right thing? He hoped so. He knew she'd be genuinely happy to hear from him, as they had been best friends for years, but he'd always felt that he was riding an avalanche towards her. She'd never taken the

time to look up and really see him, though. She didn't need saving and he knew that wasn't his role, but he wanted to take her along for the ride with him and watch her fulfil her own dreams. He just hoped that, at the end, they included him somehow. He knew she was in love with Allan, but he also thought that Allan loved himself more than he loved Demi. If things had been different, Miles would have respectfully stayed away, but he couldn't sit on his feelings any longer when he felt that Demi wasn't being treated with the love she deserved.

'You okay?' he asked, not masking the concern in his tone. He could picture her smiling at him for worrying about her. She always said he fussed too much. His heart started to beat faster in his chest, the way it always did when he spoke to her. He'd felt this way about Demi since a party they'd gone to together after school. He'd hoped the kiss they'd shared in a quiet corner might mean something to her, but she'd left with Allan. His ego had taken a hit. He'd never quite recovered from seeing her fall in love with the other guy. The rest was history. She always teased him because he was in the year below her at school, but in fact she was the youngest in her year and he was the oldest in his, so they weren't that far apart in age. He'd been desperate to impress her, but maybe he'd been too young? Allan was Demi's age and he'd swept her off her feet from the start. He liked to look after himself and was always at the local gym. Demi was the complete opposite and only went along to sit in the café and catch up on the latest gossip. Miles had never understood what held them together.

He had been too inexperienced to know how to handle rejection and had rebelled for a few years by dating anyone he could. Then he had fallen into a pattern of spending time with Demi as friends. It was sweet torture and had pretty much hindered every relationship he'd had, without her ever knowing it.

Now he was very much a grown man, and he was fed up with spending time either with cars or with his nose in a book. After a few relationships he had enjoyed, he still put spending time with Demi over everything else – even his tech empire,

which was a dangerous game to be playing when it involved so much investment and funded his lifestyle.

He wasn't a frivolous man. Everything he had, he'd worked damn hard for and he was gradually starting to notice the trappings of success and finding time to enjoy them. Women seemed to like his new status, but that didn't interest him. What did was discovering new technologies – implementing them and seeing his customers get excited and enjoying what he offered them, which was often an adrenaline buzz from having the best of something in the world. Demi was the only woman who had his heart and although it frustrated the hell out of him at times, he hadn't yet found a way to cure himself, even if he had wanted to. She was cute and goofy and his heart seemed to beat to a different rhythm anytime she was near.

'I'm fine,' she laughed, regaining his attention instantly. This was her standard answer, but today he wasn't about to let her get away with that platitude.

'I need your advice,' he said, tapping his fingers on the desk in agitation, and then stopping. Dylan would tut at him if he knew. Then he rolled his eyes. Dylan wasn't even there, and Miles had more important things to think about than his brother. Like persuading Demi that he was the man of her dreams... or helping her to follow her own path and away from Allan – he'd take either.

'You need my advice?' she sounded surprised.

'I do,' he said gravely. 'Can you come to my offices on Cherry Blossom Lane at all?'

Demi laughed and he adored the sound of sudden lightness in her tone. Immediately his mood switched from dark to cheeky as he pictured Demi's smiling face and sparkling eyes when she saw his new site. He hoped she'd be proud of him and want to be part of his success.

'I'd love to!' she said. 'I've been desperate to snoop and steal your ideas,' she joked, making him grin and his heart melt a little.

He'd dated plenty of incredible women over the years, but he'd always felt something was missing. Knowing that he'd pretty much set up his whole new site to entice Demi to work with him, kind of gave him the answer he'd been hiding from until recently. His brothers needled him about his crush on Demi, but they couldn't talk – both were besotted with her best friends!

'I'd also like to know how one of the UK's hottest bachelors spends his day,' she teased, making him sigh and groan out loud. She was never going to let him live that one down. He was as surprised as anyone when an article had said that. The journalist who'd written it had batted her eyelashes at him and asked him a lot of personal questions, but he was used to that and had kept it strictly businesslike. How the hell she'd got that headline from their conversation he didn't know, but if it made Demi smile he didn't care, even if it meant months of teasing.

The journalist had contacted him a couple of times since, but the messages were more personal than her opening gambit and he'd politely declined the offer to chat over dinner. She was sleek and blonde and gorgeous, so he didn't know why he held back, but he supposed he just wasn't looking for another complication right now. He was focussed with laser precision on Demi, with her wild dark curls, beautiful smile, enquiring eyes and soft curves. If nothing happened and she married a man who didn't make her happy, then he'd have to give in ungraciously and move on... not that Allan seemed to want to marry Demi, even though Miles knew that was her biggest hope for her relationship.

Allan treated Demi like a possession, and it took all of Miles's willpower not to speak to him about it, man to man. It was hard to watch someone you loved thinking they were only worth that level of relationship. Demi was her own woman, though, and however much it pained him, Miles had kept out of it until now.

Miles had heard about Allan making a lot of late-night visits to a house in a neighbouring town and it hadn't sat well with him. He knew Demi was currently unaware of this and

although every cell of his body wanted him to be the person to tell her, he knew it might destroy her trust in him too. He'd heard the phrase 'don't shoot the messenger'.

The situation had spurred Miles to warn Allan to tell her himself – or Miles would do it. Allan had thrown Miles's friendship with Demi back in his face, and said he'd always known Miles was after his girl. If Miles told Demi, Allan had threatened, then he would simply say it was Miles's jealousy trying to break them up. He'd been so brazen about this that Miles had wanted to slap his silly face, but without proof and with the counter threat hanging over him, Miles's hands were tied. That was what he wanted Allan to think, anyway...

'How are things there?' he asked Demi tentatively.

He could picture her rolling her neck, with her shoulders slumping. 'Oh, you know. My dad thinks my business ideas are awful and it's still causing problems at home with Mum. She supports me and thinks he's, I quote, "an idiot."'

Miles threw back his head and laughed, relaxing finally. He could picture her looking out of the little window in her office. It was always packed full with junk from the yard that her dad hadn't found a place to store yet.

'When can you come?'

'Tomorrow?' she suggested. 'I'll see if I can stay at Sasha's flat over the road.'

'It's a date,' he said cheekily, and she laughed again.

'What time?'

'Whenever suits you,' he replied. 'I just lounge around here all day and let everyone else do the work.'

She laughed again, knowing he was as work-obsessed as she was. 'I'll be there by lunchtime.'

'Great! I'll order us some food.'

Demi giggled at this. 'You're just so posh now, Miles.'

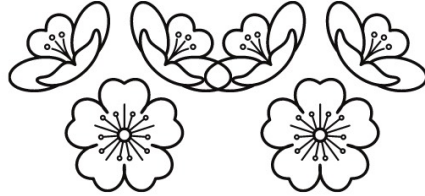
'I'm not,' he protested amiably. 'I just know how to treat the people that I love,' he said, and she went silent for a

moment.

‘I love you too,’ she said quietly. ‘You’re my best friend. You, Sasha and Poppy mean the world to me. Obviously Ollie and Dylan do too, but that’s a bit different.’

Miles paused for a moment and then rubbed his temples. He guessed it was a start, but one day he was determined to hear the start of that sentence – without the second half.

CHAPTER THREE



Demi gazed around in wonder. This was unbelievable! Miles had taken her on a tour of his property and shown her where the cars were serviced and their computer systems were updated or modified. They'd also seen the sleek reception area with a huge white desk along one wall. There was an indoor water installation like a relaxing piece of art beside it and the company logo emblazoned along the back wall behind it. There were sexy images of supercars in slim silver frames and she could see through one wall to a hub of activity, where staff sat answering phones and tapping away at computer terminals. The whole space felt airy and exciting, and it instantly made you want to be part of its creative bubble. Demi wished she could stay there forever.

‘What an inspiring space to work in, or visit as a client,’ she said in awe, walking around to take everything in and even sliding open a few desk drawers to peer inside, which made him laugh. ‘Even the insides of the drawers are tidy! Please don’t ever peek inside one at my place. They are probably full of old steering wheels and brake pedals,’ she groaned.

Miles took Demi’s hand and she looked at their linked fingers for a moment, before snapping out of it and following him to his plush office. She gasped as she took in the sculptural wooden desk in the centre of the space. There was a floor to ceiling bookcase at the back with a recess for a fitted bar and a sliding black door with a computer panel next to it, which she kept looking at as it was mysterious and sexy, like something out of a Bond film. The room was in dark, masculine colours, but still welcoming and expertly lit. She

assumed that Poppy had been integral to the design with her mood lifting light and sound panels. She wondered where they were hidden, as each surface was sleek and streamlined. She could see Dylan's influence too, and ran her hand over the desk admiringly. She had such talented friends!

Poppy's office was further up the road in Cherry Blossom Lane, while Sasha ran her social media empire from the same building, and lived in the flat above the studio. Sasha constantly advised Demi to leave her dad and start up on her own, but Allan always talked her out of it. He said it would be too much for her and that she'd be abandoning him and her family.

Demi knew she'd caused a lot of upset lately with her suggestions but, if they didn't come up with a solution soon, the business would disintegrate anyway. Her dad and Allan seemed to think that things would pick up naturally, but what if they didn't? She wanted to push Allan to make some decisions about their future. He still hadn't asked her to marry him, even though they'd been dating for a decade. And he was out late at night an awful lot lately. She was almost thirty now, and dreamed of having a family of her own at some point.

Allan didn't live at her flat, but he treated it like a hotel when he did stay over – which was most evenings, even when he was going out. She'd questioned him about his late nights, but something didn't feel right about his answers. He said that he'd been out to try and get them out of this mess at her dad's garage. Allan had always left that to her before, though, along with anything that felt like real work. She dealt with finances, stock control and even fixed the cars a lot of the time. He enjoyed schmoozing customers. To be fair, he was good at that, but there was more to the business than chatting all day.

He said he was out networking and getting ideas on how they could improve their bottom line, but he didn't want to talk about them yet, so she'd had to let it go. She had an unsettling feeling that he was lying to her, and she wouldn't stand for that. She was starting to wonder if he had ever really loved her. The murmured worries that she'd overheard from her friends, and outspoken Sasha's direct questions, had

started to take root. Did Allan take her for granted? If he did love her, he'd spend less time at the pub 'networking' with his mates. He smelt of stale beer when he got home and then fell asleep and snored all night.

He'd started to moan that she wasn't attentive enough as well, which made her cringe inside and want to hide in a cupboard. He had never wanted to talk openly about their sex life before, so why now? She wasn't a prude by any means, but they didn't exactly have an open relationship where they discussed their needs. Most of that came from his refusal to discuss anything remotely uncomfortable, unless it was her failings. She came back to her flat utterly exhausted from fixing cars and doing the accounts. Her brain felt frazzled most of the time with the effort of trying to keep the business afloat and her boyfriend 'happy'. Allan hadn't made the effort to make her feel sexy and loved for a long time now, so her libido seemed to have left the room. It worried her constantly.

Demi shook herself out of her gloomy thoughts. 'It's beautiful, Miles,' she said truthfully, noticing that he was sitting on the edge of his desk and quietly observing her.

'But?' he asked.

'But nothing! It's breathtaking. I'm really proud of you.' She stepped closer to him and he opened his arms to her, as he always did.

They'd shared successes and failures over the years and it mostly resulted in a warm hug. This time, though, she could feel the beating of her own heart and she wanted to snuggle into his arms and cry. This was so unlike her, she never complained and took everything on the chin.

It wound her up when Allan said she was weak and always trying to smooth things over, when in fact she was strong. She was the one who quietly sorted everyone's problems out, didn't moan, ask for help or show her pain. She just added to the weight on her shoulders and dealt with it, so he didn't have to. Yet to him, she was too giving and compliant. He literally had no idea of her inner resolve and viewed kindness as something that let her get walked all over and drowned in

paperwork, whereas in fact she was standing tall and keeping them all afloat, trying to drag them uphill to safety with her. She didn't need constant praise from Allan, but she did need him to understand her and view her as an asset, not a drain. She was beginning to see that there was an imbalance in their relationship.

Miles looked down at her and brushed her curls out of her eyes. 'The place is missing something, though,' he said.

'It is?' she asked. 'What?' Her eyes darted around the perfect room in confusion.

'You,' he said simply, as if she should understand.

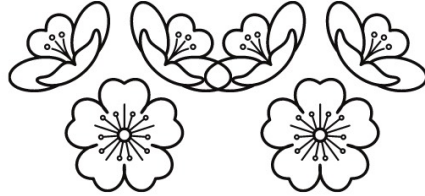
'Me?' She stepped out of his arms and frowned, looking around to see if she could pinpoint anything she could contribute to this incredible space.

Miles smiled and his eyes twinkled, making her stomach lurch for some reason. What the hell was going on with her bodily reactions? She loved him dearly and his smile could light up her day, but she bit the inside of her lip. She couldn't quite put her finger on a sudden shift in energy. He really was too handsome for his own good.

'Yes, you,' he grinned. 'I know we talked about your ideas for your dad's place, but we both know how reluctant he is to change, however much we all love him. I want you to join me here instead.'

Demi's jaw dropped open, and she put a steadying hand on the desk for support. She stared at Miles as if he'd lost the plot, which he clearly had. Had he fallen over and banged his head during construction, she wondered?

CHAPTER FOUR



Miles knew that he had to tread carefully. Demi was very protective of her dad and Allan. But he could also see how much of a toll the whole situation was taking on her. It was also causing problems with the rest of the family, as far as he could tell. Both his mum, Fiona, and Demi's mum Tianna, were good friends. He'd heard that the whole idea of Allan running the garage was causing everyone to argue.

'I want to expand,' he said casually now to Demi.

Demi looked incredulous. 'But you've just moved here and built this. It's huge!' she gestured around the room and then threw her hands up in exasperation.

'I know,' he placated. 'But I have room to expand even more here. It was always my aim. I need you to help me with phase two.'

Demi seemed bewildered and he motioned her to a chair. He sat down opposite her, but behind his desk in case she kicked him. It would be out of character for Demi, but she was pushed to her limit at present with stress at work and he wasn't taking any chances with his shins.

'Perhaps if you stepped away from your dad's workshop, he could see what an asset you are, and find out once and for all if Allan is up to the job? You could help me here instead.'

He held his breath waiting for her response. She was chewing her lip and he ran his tongue over his own to moisten his suddenly dry mouth.

‘How could I help?’ she asked, confusion filling her face. She wrinkled her nose and seemed deep in thought.

‘Your idea about a café, and hot desks,’ he said, choosing his words carefully. ‘They would be ideal here. I have ample room and your plan is genius.’

He had negotiated hundreds of high-powered deals, but he felt sick about the possible outcome of this one. He wanted her by his side more than he wanted anything, even if it meant a different kind of partnership.

Demi blushed and it made the freckles that were scattered across her nose stand out. Her curls bobbed around her face. She fidgeted in her seat and tugged at the pretty sky-blue top she was wearing, giving him a swift glimpse of the skin at the base of her neck.

‘But... you could just use the idea, as Dad won’t. I don’t mind.’ She looked around and got up to stare out at the forecourt. ‘You’re right that it would work well here,’ she said thoughtfully, her voice sounding wistful.

‘It’s your idea,’ said Miles with a flash of anger suddenly. Why was she so happy to hand her schemes away? He was fed up with people ignoring her and not showing her how much she was worth. She shouldn’t be content to give her carefully considered plans away. ‘It’s also brilliant.’ Her eyes went wide with shock. ‘It would work well for your dad – if he decided to invest – but it could be even better on a bigger scale. Perhaps if your dad sees us make a success of it, he might rethink his decision and make some changes before it’s too late.’

‘You want me to work for you?’ she asked, turning to face him.

Miles clenched his hands into fists and fought the urge to kiss her. The compulsion to wrap his arms around her had been getting so much stronger lately that he was at a loss what to do about it, other than to sweep her into his life and bed and never let her go. Then he’d love her so hard that she’d forget who Allan was, or how he had treated her. A fire had lit in Miles’s belly. Now Demi tilted her head to one side and frowned at his change in demeanour.

‘No, I don’t want you as an employee,’ stated Miles clearly, so that she wouldn’t misunderstand. ‘I want a partnership.’

‘In all this?’ she asked looking around and frowning again.

Miles laughed and went to take her hand. She grounded him. He kissed the back of her wrist briefly, like he’d done a million times before and she blushed at her own words.

‘Not quite,’ he said with a smile. ‘In the café and hot desk area. Plus, if you want, there is still space for us to service and refit local cars. You can design it however you like. I want to encourage more customers to come here. Cherry Blossom Lane is currently the place to be,’ he winked and finally she laughed. ‘You being here will bring more people to the site and help spread the word about my high-end car business. You can run your side of things. I’ll even give you your own office. And I’m happy to discuss terms.’

He grinned and, although he’d have agreed to any of her terms, he was still a businessman and knew the new arrangement would be good for both of them.

‘An office like this?’ she joked, giggling suddenly, her eyes dancing with mischief as she wandered around touching surfaces and picking up books.

‘Yes,’ he said, clearly surprising her as she paused mid-giggle. ‘Like this. With bookshelves and no car parts in sight. How you work in that environment is beyond me,’ he said and then winced when her smile slid. ‘Sorry,’ he reached for her hand again but she stepped away, a cloud passing across her face.

‘I don’t need your charity,’ she said, anger touching her voice. Then she flushed, as she rarely raised her tone to anyone. Miles leaned in and took her hand anyway. He led her to the office next door, which he purposely hadn’t shown her yet. She stood in the doorway and appeared lost for words for a moment.

‘It’s definitely not charity, Demi. I’m a businessman. I don’t do things that aren’t going to make commercial sense.

I'm expecting this venture to make a profit. You'll add to my portfolio and give me a new income stream. That way, when I finally settle down and have kids, I can afford to keep them in chocolate and books,' he joked, remembering that as a teenager she'd always had a nose in a book and a stash of chocolate buttons in her bag.

He heard her catch her breath at the mention of children. They hadn't ever really discussed marriage and families. In fact, they'd always deliberately avoided the topic. It was a sore subject because of Allan's reluctance to make a commitment to Demi. Miles was actually thankful to him for that one thing. The stupid man didn't know what he had in his hand.

Demi thought for a while. 'It will take investment,' she said slowly, but he could see she was already considering how it could work.

'I can afford it,' he said simply. 'Your dad wants Allan to run the garage and you're stifled. Our mums talk to each other every week and they're worried about you.' He winced as heat flared on her face and she hung her head. 'They worry about me too!' he tried to lighten the mood. 'They think I'm eternally single and too career driven,' he smiled and he saw a small lift at the corner of her lips. 'It's time to let your parents sort their own problems out. And perhaps we can start something exciting and new?'

'I don't know what to do,' said Demi as they wandered back into his office and stood looking out at the field of wildflowers to one side.

'Do you want to run your dad's business?'

'They need to sell it now,' she said truthfully, and he winced.

'It's that bad?' he took her into his arms again and kissed the top of her head. She let him comfort her and her arms wound around his waist.

'Yes,' she said. 'He just won't talk about it. If he continues to bury his head in the sand, then it won't be worth anything anyway.'

Miles pulled back from her and she let him go. ‘Could you buy it?’

‘No. I barely take a wage. I couldn’t invest in your new idea either,’ she said sadly.

‘You don’t need to,’ said Miles. ‘Your investment will be your expertise.’

‘You know as much as I do about cars, Miles,’ she scoffed, tutting at him.

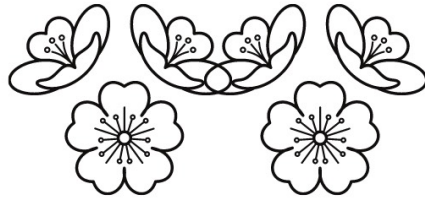
‘I know about supercars,’ he answered. ‘That’s my forte. I know nothing about catering and running a garage. I know the café will be new to you, too. I don’t have time to learn, or employ and train the staff. I know you were going to ask Poppy’s mum and Chris to help with that on your own site. Maybe they could start here instead? They could help us set up a team and train them. Chris could even become a consultant to the build. He’s run his café in our hometown for as long as I can remember. We don’t have to know everything, we just have to hire the right people to help us. That’s where you come in. It’s your idea. I want you to follow it through here.’

He motioned for them to go and sit at his desk again, as a staff member popped in with freshly-made sandwiches and a tray of coffee and hot chocolate with marshmallows in it. He knew Demi and Sasha loved marshmallows, so he’d ordered a supply in case they stopped by, which was something his brothers both laughed about. Miles couldn’t help it if he was a thoughtful kind of guy. Perhaps they could learn something from him – but then, they were the ones with fulfilling relationships while he pined after his best friend, so perhaps not.

‘Will you think about it?’ he asked, as he handed her a delicious-looking sandwich. The bread was fresh and crusty and was brimming with salad and cheese. She took it and smiled at the towering hot chocolate before sniffing it and sighing at the chocolaty slice of heaven.

‘Yes. I’ll think about it.’

CHAPTER FIVE



Demi stood at the counter of the coffee shop in the pretty little village at the end of Cherry Blossom Lane. Poppy had mentioned that the town had been very sleepy when she'd first bought her design studio, but it was becoming a bustling community and Demi wondered what it would be like to be part of it. She adored her hometown, but perhaps it was time to move on?

This coffee shop had become a regular meeting point, just like Chris' café used to be when they were younger. The added bonus was the handsome barista. Demi smiled at him shyly as he handed her a hot chocolate and winked at her. It felt good to be appreciated, even if it didn't mean much coming from a stranger. She'd been arguing with Allan more and more, as he hated the fact that she'd been seeing Miles every few days. She'd tried to reassure him and calm him down, but he was unreasonably agitated about her seeing Miles for some reason.

She'd tried to get him to listen to her plans and explain why her dad's garage was failing, but she was met with a wall of silence. She sighed and sipped the warming drink, wishing the weather would perk up, as she needed to feel the sun on her face. She was spending a lot of time indoors and the rain outside seemed to fit her mood. She felt like she was crying inside, but she refused to scream and wail at her partner and her dad's stubbornness. She was finally thinking of herself first.

Allan would be happy when she made a success of Miles's plans, and maybe he'd then be ready to settle down, Demi

thought, although she realised the idea wasn't quite as comforting as it had been. The thought of a lifetime with Allan suddenly filled her with fear. The longing for stability and social acceptance that she'd once thought she needed seemed to be seeping away with her dreams for the garage. She had come to realise that it didn't matter if she was married or not, if she was in a committed relationship. Hers had just never felt that secure, and that was why she'd craved that next step. It was a bit of a revelation and had shaken her to her core. Everything she'd thought she understood about her relationship was suddenly very confusing.

After all the arguing with her parents, she was afraid for them too. There were no certainties in life. She'd dreamt of a marriage like her parents' since she was a young woman, but now she was beginning to realise how different Len and Tianna really were. They'd been a team about everything when she was growing up, and that was she wanted from a partner. She could now see that Allan had never really treated her like an equal. She actually felt happier when he wasn't in her flat now, when all she'd ever done before was yearn for his company. Did that make her a bad person? She knew she wanted to be loved and valued, but perhaps she could achieve that anyway, by loving herself.

She decided that she didn't need validation from Allan any more. Although approval from her parents was a huge pull for her, she knew they'd love her whatever she did, even if it took her dad a while to come round if she did decide to work with Miles. She just hoped that leaving the business would give her dad what he wanted, would help the business improve and get her parents' marriage back to normal. She hated the fighting and could see they did too.

She sniffed her hot chocolate, daydreaming and enjoying the sugary scent, and then jumped as a hand touched her shoulder. She turned, to see Sasha standing behind her. Sasha looked amazing in a fitted red dress that Demi recognised as a designer outfit, even though it was fairly casual by Sasha's new standards. Her long dark hair was smoothed over her shoulders and fell in waves down her back. Sasha mixed in very exciting circles these days and her social media feeds

were full of photos of her with up-and-coming influencers, or famous clients. Demi fleetingly wondered if they could collaborate somehow with Miles's new venue, and then shook her head as it was still a pipe dream right now.

'You ok?' asked Sasha, a frown on her face. She flicked her hair out of her eyes and looked round for an available table. Sasha didn't frown too much these days as she was dating the eldest Taylor brother, Oliver. Their other best friend Poppy had married middle brother Dylan and was always smiling too. Demi wished they'd let her in on their secret, as she didn't feel like she'd smiled much with Allan lately. He'd often come in and slouch on the couch and ask what was for dinner, even though she'd worked all day too – in the same place! His mum still ironed his clothes as well. He was perfectly capable of doing it himself, but he batted his eyelashes at his mum and she scuffed his shoulder and complied every time! Most of Demi's tops were stretch to fit. Allan seemed to have missed the memo about people doing their own chores. He did take his mum out a lot to say thank you, though, which was lovely because it meant that Demi spent less time with her. She had never really taken to Demi because Demi 'stole' her son's time, and Demi did her best not to wince with every tongue lashing she invariably got from her future mother-in-law. Demi shook her head because she tried so hard to please Allan's mum, but nothing was ever good enough for her.

Every bit of Demi's spare cash went back into the garage without her dad knowing. She bought all the kitchen and cleaning supplies out of her own meagre wages and had bought expensive accounting packages to make sure every detail of the financial side of the business was up to date, so that she could see exactly how long the business had left. It wasn't long. Allan had also refused to buy a bigger place together with Demi, but had practically moved into her small place, without taking on any of the responsibility.

Demi followed Sasha to a vacant table, wondering how her friend always managed to grab one, however busy a place was. People would get up and give Sasha their table. Her sultry Italian looks made men drool and they were always asking her

out. Now Ollie was in her life, she never even seemed to register when another man was near. It made Demi's heart soar for her, but also wither a little, as she'd never had that same total security with Allan. She loved him so much, but always felt like she didn't quite measure up to his expectations. It left her on edge and doubting herself.

They turned as Poppy arrived, her straight blonde hair swinging jauntily around her shoulders, her eyes darting around to find her friends until she spotted Demi. She grinned, waved and signalled that she would grab a coffee and join them by pointing her hands in the direction of the handsome barista. He was expertly taking orders and handing them to his colleague, who looked at him dreamily and blushed when he glanced at her.

'So?' asked Sasha, never one to wait on ceremony. She raised one eyebrow in question and clearly wasn't waiting for Poppy to join them. Demi had stayed at Sasha's flat in Cherry Blossom Lane overnight, but Sasha had been busy with work and then flopped into bed exhausted, so they'd barely had a moment to chat.

Demi sipped her drink and tried to hide her face from her friend's piercing gaze for a moment. 'I'm just tired, that's all.'

Sasha tutted and sipped her own drink, then smiled and waved at a customer as they walked by. Lots of local business owners had Sasha running their social media now, so she was always bumping into someone she knew. Most of Poppy's clients ran big commercial or residential builds, so her office was full of fun and laughter too. Demi bit her lip and tried to picture such joy in her own job, but failed.

'What's happening?' asked Sasha, placing her mug on the table and moving slightly so that Poppy could join them. 'Sorry it was a bit hectic last night,' she apologised.

'I did ask to stay over at the last minute,' grinned Demi, nudging Sasha's shoulder.

Poppy arrived with a bustle of kisses, greetings and delicately floral perfume. Demi breathed in the scent and tried to calm her nerves. Poppy's whole business ethos was good

mental health and being around her often made Demi re-evaluate her own stress levels. Poppy had been through hard times, with her mum needing care for her own health, and had still managed to come out the other side and prosper. It made Demi's own problems seem miniscule, but however hard she tried they just ate away at her. Both her friends looked her way and waited expectantly.

'I've tried to help Dad's garage, but he's so frustrating and set in his ways. Allan ignores my ideas, and won't step up to help either,' she said, cringing at the fact that she was complaining about the people she loved dearly. 'I'm exhausted with the arguing,' she sighed, her body slumping further into her seat. Both Poppy and Sasha took hold of Demi's hands and gave them a gentle squeeze of support, so Demi knew she wasn't alone, and to encourage her to tell them more.

'Miles called me yesterday.' Both of her friends kept their faces carefully neutral, but she saw them share a look that she didn't understand. 'Allan seems to hate me spending time with Miles suddenly, even though he's been one of my best friends since we were teenagers,' she added in confusion.

'Perhaps Allan is a tiny bit jealous of your relationship with Miles?' asked Poppy gently, twiddling the spoon on the saucer of her drink.

'But why?' asked Demi. 'We're just friends. Allan has loads of female friends and I don't mind.' Poppy and Sasha shared another look but this one made Demi's stomach tighten in alarm. 'Should that be a problem?' she asked.

'Of course not,' said Poppy, lowering her tone and glancing around surreptitiously. 'It's just that you mentioned that he's out a lot with his other 'friends' lately. Do you know where he is?'

Demi frowned and shook her head. 'He said he's trying to work out a way to save the business, but he never comes home with a solution,' she said sadly. 'But Miles wants me to join his business as a partner.' She dropped that bomb and suddenly everyone was talking at once.

'What?' asked Poppy.

‘What the hell?’ asked Sasha. ‘You can’t be serious?’

‘Why didn’t we all think of that?’ said Poppy in awe. ‘What an inspired idea.’ She was bobbing up and down on her chair in excitement and Demi couldn’t help but laugh.

‘How would that work?’ asked Sasha, suddenly gulping down her hot chocolate as if she needed sustenance. ‘He’s already worth millions.’

Poppy smiled and rolled her eyes and Sasha sat back as if she was exhausted from the exchange. She seemed a bit contrite about the million-dollar question, but only slightly, and they all grinned suddenly and moved closer together, linking hands again. ‘You’ll be perfect together!’ said Sasha happily and they giggled like teenagers. ‘If Miles hadn’t left with that other girl at the after-school party, you and Miles might have been a thing, anyway.’

Demi gasped and Poppy almost spat out the sip of coffee she’d just taken. ‘Sasha!’

‘Well, it’s true. I’ve always wondered what would have happened if you’d gone home with Miles instead. Then we could all be sisters-in-law!’

Poppy’s head whipped round. ‘Are you and Ollie getting married?’ she gasped and held her hand over her mouth, as if she was holding her breath for the answer.

‘Don’t be daft,’ laughed Sasha, but then her cheeks flushed and she dipped her eyes. ‘We do talk about moving in together, though.’

Poppy jumped up and hugged her and Demi did the same.

‘That’s brilliant news, Sash!’ said Demi, genuinely happy for her friend.

‘It was just a figure of speech,’ said Sasha, batting them off, but clearly enjoying the attention. ‘So, back to you and Miles becoming partners,’ she winked at Demi, who flushed as well and shook her head at her friend’s antics.

‘*Business* partners,’ she clarified. ‘I have a boyfriend.’ She pretended not to notice Sasha wrinkling her nose and then

covering it up with a swift sip of hot chocolate. ‘I wouldn’t be involved in his current business...’ both friends lips drooped and she laughed. ‘But... I would open a garage and café on his premises – like I wanted to do at Dad’s. He’ll keep his supercar business separate and hopefully I’ll bring in extra income for us all. He wants to encourage locals to use the site and spread the word about his existing business.’ She took a moment to catch her breath and gauge her audience, but they were both looking at her with rapt attention. ‘He doesn’t want to run it himself, and even mentioned incorporating your hot desk idea, Sash.’

‘Oh my God, this is perfect!’ said Poppy in excitement, clapping her hands and waking a baby who’d been slumbering in a pram on the next table, and now let out a squawk of protest. Poppy quickly apologised to the mum, who gave her a dirty look and then soothed her baby back to sleep. Poppy winced and lowered her tone, but couldn’t keep the excitement out of it. ‘We’ll all be back together again, but in Cherry Blossom Lane. We won’t have to travel for over an hour to see you.... Oh, but what about your dad?’ she added, the mood dropping as if a cloud had just masked the warmth of the sun.

‘And Allan?’ added Sasha helpfully, and they all frowned.

‘I don’t know,’ said Demi honestly, looking into her mug and realising sadly that she’d polished off her drink. ‘I haven’t told them yet. I’m assuming they will just carry on without me for as long as they can. They don’t see me as an asset, so I’m just in the way.’

Poppy shook her head at their stupidity. ‘They are idiots not to value you, Dems,’ she said, then paused for a moment. ‘What if your business fails?’

‘Which one?’ asked Sasha candidly and they all grinned suddenly. Demi realised her friends were worried about her as well.

‘My dad’s business is failing anyway. He won’t listen to me and I can’t stand by and watch it implode any more. They will probably just blame me for that as well! Maybe if I succeed with Miles, my dad and Allan will be able to see the

concept works, before it's too late to implement it there. I can't see any other way to galvanise them into action,' she said helplessly. Poppy leaned in and gave her a warming hug, which she received gratefully.

'That's amazing,' said Sasha, 'you've got to do it, Demi. Look at how my business has flourished. That might not have happened without Poppy. I'm not too proud to admit that, or take the help.'

'Your business is skyrocketing because you made those opportunities, Sasha, not me,' said Poppy truthfully. 'I just gave you a starting point, which is what Miles is offering Demi. Both of you add incredible value to any business. My offer to you wasn't as altruistic as you think. I saw your potential when you didn't, Sash. We can all see that Demi needs to spread her wings now, too.'

Both Sasha and Demi were stunned into silence for a moment, and Poppy sat back with her hands in her lap, with a smug 'my work is done' look on her face.

'I guess Jared did the same for you,' said Sasha, mentioning the sexy blond property developer Poppy worked with. He'd signed her up for some amazing projects when her business was new and helped it grow. She'd helped him too. Now their brands were entwined, and it brought new custom for both of them.

'He also wanted to get into your underwear though...' winked Sasha and they all burst out laughing. Jared had professed his feelings for Poppy after they had known each other for a while. He'd waltzed into Poppy's life and changed it forever, but Poppy hadn't wanted that sort of relationship.

'He just tried to grab a good thing when he saw it. It's why he now works with you as well, Sasha,' said Demi. 'How's that going?'

'He drives me mad!' said Sasha and they all laughed. Jared was known for changing his plans at the last minute after he'd had another inspired idea. It gave everyone around him a headache. Sasha wasn't afraid to tell him what a pain he was, but now she pretty much ran his social media with her own

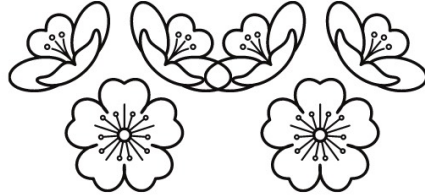
small team, she put up with it. Jared loved her for telling it to him straight, and they all worked well together. He was usually right about any changes he wanted made, so they couldn't grumble too much. 'It's a good job we all love him anyway. Do you know he's dating a French supermodel now? Poor Verity is beside herself. She's been mooning over him for a while now.'

Demi shook her head and thought of their friend Verity, who ran a little designer boutique in town. She'd started off by designing T-shirts and handbags, but Poppy had helped her to expand her brand and Sasha's skills with marketing had brought in a different level of custom. 'Jared's an idiot. Verity would be perfect for him!'

Poppy pushed her chair back and headed towards the coffee queue. 'We need more coffee and hot chocolate if we are going to plan your next move, Demi. Verity will have to sort herself out for now. Do it,' she threw over her shoulder at Demi, who smiled and knew they were back to their original topic.

'She's right,' said Sasha. 'Do it... or him!' she added cheekily, and Demi burst out laughing.

CHAPTER SIX



Demi stood at the entrance to what was to be her new place of work, and tried to ease the butterflies that had taken up permanent residence in her stomach these days. Miles hadn't hung around and as soon as they'd thrashed out the details of how their collaboration could work, he'd set it in motion. She had a sneaky suspicion that he'd been planning this for quite a while, but couldn't put her finger on why.

Allan was sulking. He'd refused to listen to the details of her new plan and dismissed her claims that it was for the best for everyone. He'd called her selfish and self-obsessed! She had wavered many times and almost called Miles to back out, but she hadn't wanted to let him down too. She almost couldn't breathe when Allan was around now. She tiptoed around him. He didn't cuddle her unless he wanted sex, which he seemed to think made up for his stroppy behaviour, when it didn't. She wanted hugs and reassurance as well as the passion that they only seemed to find after an argument these days. He said he loved her, but his actions didn't match his words. She was fighting to save what they had, but her relationship seemed to be slipping through her fingers like grains of sand. She was grappling to hold onto it, but it fell away regardless and she was at a loss about what to do. She'd tried to make romantic candlelit meals, put on sexy underwear and tried to go to an actual gym class with him, but nothing had eased his bad mood. The only time he seemed happy was after a night out with his friends.

For the first time ever, she was putting herself first. She'd sat down with her parents and told them of the opportunity

before her. She had explained that she didn't feel that she was helping at the garage and that her dad might find things easier without her. In a way this had shocked him so much that he'd apologised for his behaviour, although they'd all agreed it was time for her to move on. He was still sombre, but her mum had been ecstatic. Demi had privately felt that her mum could have been slightly less jubilant to her dad's face, but she'd giggled and enjoyed the support anyway. Her mum was the best!

She adored her dad too and he had hugged her tightly to him, kissed the top of her head and told her that he accepted that it was time for her to follow her own path. He'd even tried to joke about how she'd put up with working for him for so long, but they'd all winced at that one, as she'd struggled for years.

Her dad loved Miles, though, and knew he was a businessman through and through. They often spent hours nattering about cars and she knew her dad admired his success. Her dad had commented that Miles wouldn't make this offer to Demi if he didn't think it would be a success and his site was the perfect place for it, even if it wouldn't have worked at his garage. Demi bit her tongue, believing that it would have worked anywhere, and just got up to hug him again.

They'd all been so relieved that the arguments were over that they had spent a wonderful night together eating fragrant spicy chicken, succulent vegetables and rice. Her mum had even held her dad's hand over the table and Demi's eyes had misted over. It had justified her choice, but she still quaked at the thought of such a huge change in her life. It was about time, though, and she was ready for the challenge, if she could just stop shaking with fear of the unknown for a minute, first.

It was a long walk up to Miles's office, as this was such a big site. She smiled at his smart personal assistant, Gerry, who jumped up and opened the door for her to go into Miles's domain. Demi soaked up the exciting atmosphere, after years of working in a pokey little back office. Here, everything had its place. The big desk dominated the room, but was softened by the shelves filled with books and the discreet lighting. The bar area was made of black granite and glass, and looked like

something out of a fancy interiors magazine. It had coffee-making facilities at one end and cocktail glasses at the other, so Miles didn't have to leave his office for drinks or for his coffee obsession. He liked his coffee strong and black, and she didn't know how he stomached the bitter taste. She liked her drinks to be chocolaty and full of cream and sugar, which he often teased her about too. The thought made Demi smile finally and she felt some of her nerves dissipate. She looked again at the intriguing black sliding door set into the back wall. Maybe he had a secret sex room, she pondered, trying not to snigger like a teenager.

Miles got up to welcome her, a big grin on his face. He was looking handsome in a pale blue shirt rolled up at the sleeves, exposing his impressive forearms. Miles wasn't muscly in a beefcake kind of way, but he certainly worked out and kept fit by running every day. His smart jeans complimented the look and she noticed the way they moulded his legs as he came to greet her.

She'd always appreciated how professionally he presented himself, as he was one of her best friends, but lately she'd realised just how good looking he was. No wonder so many women tried to entice him into bed. She shook her head to clear the sudden vision of Miles laying half-naked in tangled sheets and smiled at him, a flush warming her skin. He looked super sexy and just a little bit dangerous, but she didn't know why. She'd always had a slight edgy feeling whenever she saw him, but assumed it was because she wanted him to be happy and she worried about him. He was an eternal bachelor and seemed happy with his single life and casual dating. That lifestyle wasn't for her. She often worried that she was a bit prudish, but she could appreciate it was fun for someone else. His thick black hair was swept back over his ears and his dark eyes always seemed to penetrate hers and know what she was thinking. She hoped he couldn't this time! What was she like?

Her heartbeat ramped up a notch and she moved forward to be enveloped in their customary hug. He smelt divine. Spicy and masculine. She gulped and rested her head on his chest for a moment, listening to his heartbeat, which seemed to be as fast as hers was. Perhaps he was worried about how this would

work, too? Being hugged by Miles was one of her favourite things and it didn't seem like he was standing on ceremony now they were business partners. She always felt safe in his arms, even though there was that buzz of... she didn't know what.

He held her out at arm's length and grinned, taking in her fitted trousers and short-sleeved blouse combination. At work she often wore a T-shirt and dungarees, which were mostly covered in oil, but she'd made an effort to look businesslike today.

'I'm so glad you're here!' he exclaimed. 'I thought you might re-think and back out.'

'We signed a partnership deal,' she laughed.

'Oh yes,' he grinned back. 'Sorry about the mess everywhere at the moment.' Demi gazed around the immaculate office and raised an eyebrow.

'Not here!' he smiled. 'The rest of the site. The biggest barns have already been fitted out, but the smaller one is still under construction. My office – and yours – had to be completed first, so that we could actually get some work done.'

'Well, you obviously didn't design the other office for me,' said Demi jovially. 'I would have been happy in a room by the new garages and café.'

Miles paused for just a fraction too long and Demi frowned. He couldn't have designed the room for her, as they only just decided on the deal.

'Of course I'm happier with a room next to you!' she added quickly, in case he felt she wasn't glad to be there.

He took her hand and led her to her office. They often held hands, but now she was a bit self-conscious about anyone seeing them, when she'd never thought about it before. Maybe Allan was right to question it – but they'd done it since they were teenagers, so it was almost as natural as breathing to her. She often held Sasha and Poppy's waist or arm when they walked along too. She came from a family of huggers, so she

assumed everyone else liked contact as well, but perhaps that was weird to someone else?

Her office had a desk facing the door, like his, but to the side she had a huge window looking out at the new forecourt and she could also see the fields to the side of the property, which made her stop and catch her breath. She had three computer screens on her desk and sets of files and stationery, ready to be used. The back wall was a huge empty bookcase ready for her own reference books and other reads. She could already see the small supply of books that she'd had in her old office had been neatly stacked on one shelf. She'd thought she'd left them behind, and was puzzled over how they'd got there.

Miles's eyes twinkled with mischief. 'I asked your mum to sneak in and grab anything you might want here. She was only too happy to help. I knew you'd leave most things at Len's garage, but these are yours.'

Her mum had also added a little vase of flowers that her cousin's daughter had made her and painted in splodges of colour. Demi had worried that it wouldn't fit into her sleek new office, but somehow it did. It stood out for all of the right reasons, and she loved it. Miles had placed it by the window on a small white side table and it looked like an abstract work of art.

'Your mum is desperate to come and visit as soon as you've settled in,' he told her.

Demi's heart melted a little at his thoughtfulness. It did make the huge white space feel more like home, or her new home-from-home. Her office was light and airy, the complete opposite to the masculine space he'd created for himself. After years of a tiny dark room, the space felt like a revelation to her.

'Wow! Thank you, Miles,' she said, trying to sniff back a few tears that were threatening to escape. She turned to look out of the window for a moment and compose herself. It wouldn't do to be bawling her eyes out on her first day. 'The

place looks so big and clean,' she laughed suddenly, and he smiled too.

'This is the heart of the business. We run all the technology from here.'

Miles went over to her desk and moved the computer mouse. Demi could see that one of the screens on her desk was flashing with figures, and the other with design specs.

'Gerry has just been in here setting up the screens for you with one of our tech guys,' said Miles. 'You pretty much have the whole site at your fingertips from here.'

Demi grinned and looked at the screens with wide eyes, like a child in a sweet shop. The computers at her dad's garage had been antiquated. These ones looked shiny and new.

'The only parts that are off limits are the supercars,' added Miles, 'although you could probably advise on those too if you choose to get involved. Their systems are housed in a secure room at the back of my office.'

'Exciting,' grinned Demi. 'I wondered what that door was for. I thought it might be your personal kinky sex room,' she joked, and he spluttered a laugh. 'Have you ever got locked in?' she asked, batting her eyelashes at him theatrically.

'Not yet,' he laughed, waggling his eyebrows at her. 'Now you've said it, it would be a great place to hide from prying eyes as no one gets access without my say-so.'

'If you have dates in there, give me notice to vacate the room,' she giggled and he rolled his eyes with good humour.

'If I want to show a woman I'm interested, I'm not sure a snog in a fancy computer cupboard would hit the mark,' he laughed.

'Oh I don't know,' grinned Demi. 'That depends on the woman. If it's hot, sexy and sweaty in there, it would probably work.'

'It's got black walls, but it's also air conditioned and has a huge couch in it for when I'm tired and want some peace and quiet,' said Miles. 'I guess I'd have to make my own steam.'

And there are no sex toys in there, unless you get turned on by a whirring computer screen.'

Demi burst into giggles and the final few nerves slid away. It was fun teasing Miles. She wasn't sure she wanted to think about him having steamy sex in the dark room behind his office, though, which was weird.

There hadn't been much laughter at her old job, or at home lately. Allan still lived with his parents, but more often than not, he slept at her flat. Now that she was about to start her dream job in Cherry Blossom Lane, she'd been considering the commute. It could take well over an hour each way at peak times.

Could she move away from Allan? They'd been together since they were teenagers and, ten years on, she still relied on him. She scrunched up her eyes for a moment. Perhaps it was him who relied on her? She was realising that she could cope without him and still have adventures. Obviously she didn't want to, because she loved him... But in their latest row, he'd said he'd be fine without her nearby. She wondered what would happen when he and her dad finally worked out how much she had held the garage together, sometimes just by what felt like sheer willpower.

Miles offered to go to his office to make them both a coffee while she settled in. She swung her backside into her surprisingly comfortable designer chair. It was padded in all the right places and she wriggled her bottom in joy. No broken springs to prod her legs. Her old chair had a broken arm as well, and she'd stuck it back together with industrial tape.

Back at the garage, she'd done the accounts, spoken to customers, dealt with the marketing on a very limited budget and sorted out any problems, as well as ordering all the supplies and fixing a few cars if she had time. She could have serviced any of the cars on a daily basis, but the fun had gone out of that, years ago. She simply didn't have time to get dirty under a bonnet very often. She did miss it, but was fed up with having to prove she knew what she was doing, often better than her dad did.

She didn't want them to fail without her, so she'd set up automated systems so she could still help with the accounts, but weirdly, she felt free here. She wanted to spin around with her arms flung wide and shout in glee, but Miles was probably already regretting his decision to make her a partner after her ridiculous nervous chatter about bondage rooms!

She would be doing many of the same jobs here that she did at her dad's place, but she already felt much more appreciated. She'd spent days and evenings planning this move with Miles and each email, or phone call, had gotten an enthusiastic response. It was a new world to her. She'd had more thanks from Miles in a few days than she had in years from Allan or her dad. She was beginning to understand who appreciated her efforts and found her an asset, not a drain.

'You daydreaming again?' asked Miles, as he perched his backside on her desk and placed a coffee in front of her. 'There is hot chocolate if you want it, but I thought you might need the energy for today,' he nodded his head at the fragrant frothy coffee and she dipped her head over it and inhaled the rich aroma, smiling that he'd added loads of cream and sugar.

Demi warmed her hands around the insulated glass mug and sipped the drink with a sigh. 'I do like coffee sometimes and I'm definitely going to need all my energy, by the sound of what you need me for,' she smiled. Miles eyes darkened for a second, but then he laughed and stood up.

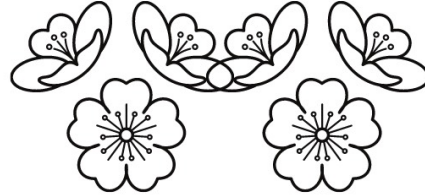
'I intend to utilise *all* of your skills until you're replete,' he said, making her blush for some reason. 'I expect you to work hard. You'll find lots of bonuses to being here. Plus, my office is just next door if you need me for anything...'

Demi drew in a deep breath and stood up. 'I think it's about time I started putting our plans into action. You can go and sit behind your huge desk and make important calls and I'm going to crawl under cars, measure every inch of my barn and forecourt and start booking in supplier deliveries to fit the garage out.'

'That's my girl,' said Miles, kissing her on the nose and leaving her to stand in the middle of the room, pulse jumping

with excitement about what the day might bring. What it wouldn't bring, were arguments, self-deprecation and doubts. Today was the beginning of her new life and she intended to grab the opportunity with both hands and enjoy the ride.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Allan sat amidst the cardboard boxes and watched silently as Demi carefully packed up her home. It was a bit gut-wrenching to be moving to a different town, further away from Allan, but she'd asked him to move with her and he'd refused. He'd said she was selfish, and should be the one to commute if she had to work somewhere else.

'How can you abandon the garage?' he asked scathingly. 'And me?'

'I'm not abandoning either of you,' Demi said, trying not to raise her voice. 'I offered my dad a solution and no one would listen. It's better for all of us if I give this opportunity a try. It could set us up for life.'

'Set *you* up for life, you mean. Where was my job offer?'

Demi sat back in shock and stopped folding her towels to keep her heart from beating out of her body. She didn't want to fight with Allan. She was bone tired from organising the garage, so that she could leave in good conscience.

'You'd want to work for Miles?'

Allan scoffed and took a gulp of the beer he'd helped himself to when he'd arrived. He hadn't picked up one box to help her.

'Of course not! I'd consider being his partner, though.'

Demi shook her head in incredulity. 'You can't stand Miles! You've never even liked us being friends.'

‘That’s only because the world and his wife can see you spend too much time together for people who are “just friends”’. He emphasised the last words with his fingers and a sneer, and she wondered when her boyfriend had changed so much. It had been hard going for her at her dad’s garage, but he’d never once stepped up to help – other than the late-night networking that hadn’t seemed to produce many ideas. ‘I’d certainly like some of his wealth, but it seems he only offers that to his female friends.’

‘Allan!’ Demi stood up in disgust and brushed her hands down her jeans for want of anything else to do. It was either that or throw the last dregs of the wine she’d been sipping earlier into his silly face. ‘Miles sees the value in my ideas. You and dad both had that opportunity well before Miles did, but you turned me down.’

‘Miles just sees a way to get you away from me, and it’s worked,’ he hissed angrily.

‘Why the hell would he want to do that?’ she asked, throwing up her hands and going into her small kitchen to make herself a cup of hot chocolate. She needed the sugar boost right now, and she had some rum in the back of the cupboard that she fully intended adding to the mix. This was exhausting and it wasn’t the packing that was the problem. She made the steaming drink and went to sit opposite him on one of her little velvet sofas.

‘He’s been trying to separate us since we were teenagers and he messed up by getting with that other girl at the party. You left with me, and he’s never forgiven me for it.’

‘Don’t be so ridiculous! You know Miles and I went to the party together and kissed, but it was nothing! We all know that. I left with you and you’ve been the only man in my life since. You’re being unfair.’

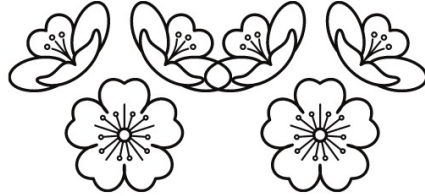
Allan shook his head at her stupidity, but she wasn’t going to let him make Miles the scapegoat.

‘Let’s forget Miles and talk about why you won’t step up to help my dad, and why you’ve been out so much lately?’

Allan shifted in his seat, but she saw the flash of guilt. You didn't spend over ten years with someone and not know guilt when you saw it, plain as day, on your partner's face.

'Who is she?' Demi said slowly, her heart in her mouth, not really knowing if she was ready to hear the answer.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Demi brushed a speck of dust off her new jeans and stood looking out of her office window at the fields of wildflowers that surrounded both sides of Cherry Blossom Lane. Her work attire had smartened up a bit now that she had posh premises, but she still had a capsule wardrobe including jeans or dungarees and fitted T-shirts, although these were new and a better quality of cotton. She ran a garage, so anything else would be destroyed in days. She tried her best not to bring oil or grease into her gorgeous calm domain, but she was sure it would happen at some point.

She had a brand-new flat to move into soon, but she was staying with Sasha for a couple of nights as she'd finally confronted Allan. He'd tried to lie, but in the end he'd broken down and told her that he'd been meeting up with a local woman, Cindy. He'd pleaded with her to understand that it was because of the pressure from her and her family about stepping up into management at her dad's garage. He had finally moved into the role after she'd left and now blamed her for that too, the selfish git.

Len, Demi's dad, was also unhappy, as now that Demi wasn't there to cover for him, her dad could see that Allan wasn't up to the job. He'd finally admitted how much she contributed to the business, but it was too late for her to do anything about it. She'd committed to helping Miles launch the new garage and café and the build was almost complete. She didn't think she could ever go back, now that she'd seen how fulfilling a job could be. Miles appreciated her, he commended her for her hard work and he utilised her ideas to

their full potential. She fell into bed physically and mentally exhausted each night, leaving little room or energy for the fountain of tears that she shed every evening. She pushed herself to her limits and then found new ones to reach. The job was all she'd ever dreamed of and more. She hated seeing her family fail, but wouldn't take responsibility for their actions any more. A wall of ice had formed around her heart where Allan was concerned, and she'd calmly asked him to leave before falling apart as soon as the door had closed behind him.

Now, just a few weeks later, she'd heard through the town grapevine that he was still spending a lot of time with Cindy. So much for pleading with her for a second chance and asking her not to dump his sorry arse! He'd been phoning her and texting endlessly to take him back, but in between those times he was otherwise engaged, it seemed. She'd spent so many nights sobbing into her pillow that she thought her heart had actually broken in two. She'd even wavered about taking him back – until she'd found out he was still seeing *that* woman.

The build was nearing completion and the projections of growth based on their market research were looking positive. It was incredible to see her vision for the café come to life at last. They had called it the Pit Stop Café and it was fresh and streamlined, but also warm and welcoming. Demi and Miles had enjoyed sourcing modern driving memorabilia for the décor and the whole place felt interesting from the moment you walked through the door. They had a long serving counter which had cold cupboards fitted into it at one end, so that customers could grab drinks. The coffee machines were efficient and silent and the staff had been fully trained by their new team manager, Kitty, who was a whirlwind!

Demi had found time for tastings with suppliers with Kitty, while Chris and Poppy's mum, June, had advised them on the core necessities for the café. Demi had sat on Miles's desk and fed him morsels of cake until he'd protested and held out his hands to ward her off, laughter in his eyes. He worked such long hours that she was keen to keep up with him, which meant there was no room for wallowing. She hadn't confided in him about Allan yet, because she didn't want to see the sympathy in his eyes. That would be her undoing. She knew

he'd take her out to dinner or to the cinema to try and cheer her up, but she wasn't ready to reveal that she'd been cheated on. She felt like such a moron for not seeing it sooner and chastised herself daily, feeding her insecurities.

Chris had years of experience running his own coffee shop in her hometown, so it would have been madness not to get him and June involved. It also gave Demi a chance to hear local gossip. It had been June who had quietly led her into a back room a few weeks before and told her about Allan. Demi could still picture Chris' pinched face and June's worried glances, but they had bitten the bullet and told her, which was more than her own mother had. Tianna had hidden her head in the sand and refused to believe it was true, but now she knew it was, she was furious and out to cause Allan all kinds of pain for the distress he'd caused Demi. She'd screamed down the phone and wanted to sack him on the spot, out of loyalty to her daughter, but Demi had persuaded her to wait. If her dad found out, he'd kick Allan out. The business did still need him and for now it was crucial that there weren't any further changes. In the end her mum had complied, but she'd refused to speak to Allan again, which would cause issues if she ever went to the garage. Luckily she only popped in infrequently.

Demi sighed and went to sit at her desk. She couldn't wait to go and try one of the little tables dotted about in the coffee shop. This wasn't somewhere people would come with groups of friends, so the round tables were small and intimate, big enough for four at most. She had taken enquires asking if people could bring their children to wait with them while their cars were serviced, and this had made her think about a small play area and children's computer tables for homework or games, but for now they were just concentrating on keeping adult customers onsite while they waited for their cars to be fixed, got their tyres changed or did their MOTs.

The hot desk area was a brilliant addition. There were twenty desks available, which boggled her mind. She'd been thinking maybe one or two, but Miles was always looking to the future and he was expecting this area to be popular. With some of their services taking a few hours, workstations would be premium space. They wanted to make the cafe the heart of

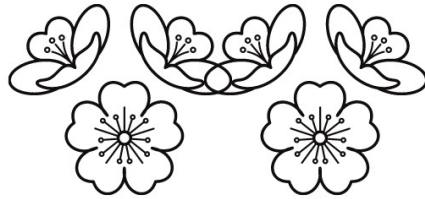
the motoring community and they'd even discussed having car events in the showrooms or forecourts. The possibilities for the space were endless. She didn't want customers to wander away after they had dropped off their cars. She would now encourage them to stay onsite and become part of their community. They could collect advantage points for free drinks and the cakes were named after famous cars like the Mini (indulgent chocolate mini rolls), the Rolls-Royce (a perfect lemon sponge) and the Aston Martin (a red velvet dream of a cake).

The garage build and setup for the café were all coming together quickly, as Miles had the money to make things happen and their combined expertise was extensive.

Hearing on the old town grapevine that Allan was spending even more time with Cindy, after vowing he'd never see again, she felt she wouldn't be sorry if she never saw Allan again. She'd lost weight and knew she looked withdrawn and miserable. She tried to hide it at work, but Miles clearly knew something was wrong. He'd asked her round to dinner the following evening and she had decided that she actually needed a night away from staring at four white walls, because she still hadn't really personalised her office yet and she was staying at work later and later. She was meeting Poppy, Sasha and Billy that evening for a drink, which made her cringe. Would they be able to tell that she'd been cheated on just by looking at her, she wondered? Would everyone else?

She'd had so many good times with Allan, and was saddened that the past year had all but obliterated those memories and turned them into more ways for her to doubt his truth. Had he always been a cheat, and was that why he hadn't committed to her? She often found herself wondering these days.

CHAPTER NINE



Demi was glad to see Billy sitting with Poppy and Sasha when she finally arrived at the pub in Cherry Blossom Lane. It was springtime, so the cherry trees were in bloom, lining the walkway to the pub's front door. Hanging baskets full of scented flowers flanked either side of the entrance and window boxes of forget-me-nots and bluebells made Demi smile. She'd had a long day and a crisp glass of white wine was all that she'd been thinking of for the past four hours.

The commute to work was wearing her down and she now understood how Sasha had felt when she'd lived at home and worked here. Before Demi had hit gold and finally found a suitable flat to live in, she had seriously been considering sleeping on the very comfortable couch in her office. To be honest, that would have been nicer than the pokey basement rooms she'd been looking at, before she found the one she was now moving into. It was small but comfortable. She was constantly tripping over packing boxes at home.

The new flat was a clean blank canvas and the packing boxes reminded her not to give in and let Allan come back into her life. Their relationship was boxed and taped up as far as she was concerned. She didn't intend to ever open it again to look inside – she might find that all the memories she held of their time together were actually just a figment of her imagination, while he was happily shagging the woman from up the road. She did kick a couple of the boxes occasionally when she thought of him, but they just crumpled a bit and hit

the wall, like she had when she'd found out that the love of her life was a lying scumbag.

Her bank balance would be much healthier soon, but she'd insisted that she wanted to invest the tiny amount of money she'd saved from her dad's business in her new venture and now she was slightly regretting that decision. It had literally bought one single machine in the new garage set-up, but it was an important piece of equipment and she felt proud every time she saw it.

Billy saw her and waved. He was always smiling these days, which warmed her heart. At least her friends were happy. He worked for Poppy and since he'd begun dating social media influencer, Devon, neither of them had looked back. She did ache with the loss of her own happiness, as although her relationship with Allan had been far from perfect, they had loved one another. She dredged up a smile and headed their way, glad to see a full bottle of wine and four sparkling glasses on the table.

Franco, the bar manager, wandered over to say hello and to ogle Billy. He clearly still hadn't gotten over his crush on her friend. Billy was looking dapper with a new haircut, short at the sides and longer on top, with a gelled tousled look from the front. He looked as if he'd tumbled straight out of bed, but Demi knew he would have taken ages perfecting that look. Franco was clearly salivating and Demi felt sorry for him. Unrequited love was hard. Billy was obsessed with Devon and the feeling seemed to be mutual. After Billy's break-up with his long-term boyfriend Ed the previous year, she enjoyed seeing him so happy.

Devon had been an interesting addition to their tight-knit group and he fitted in perfectly. He was famous, but then so were most of the group now, so people tended to stare at them wherever they went. She was the only oddity, she guessed, but she was happy in the wings of the drama. She had never craved notoriety or fame and didn't know how her friends were as unaffected by it all as they were. She knew Poppy had found eyes prying into her private life very difficult at first, but Sasha had helped her to embrace her success and enjoy it.

Demi wished she could reach that level of accomplishment, but in her own quiet way. She had no need to be on the front pages of newspapers or magazines. The odd mention of her dad's garage in the local paper had been good enough for her. She'd displayed the pages proudly on the walls and they had been a good talking point for customers. Miles had baulked at her suggestion of framing some of the articles about his business in his client areas – but she'd already ordered the frames whether he liked it or not, she sniggered to herself.

His face was made for social media and although he had an amazing client base, he was always discovering new areas for growth. Taking a few notes from Sasha and shouting out about his success would be a good idea. If supercar clients saw him being interviewed in high-end magazines, it could only help cement his brand. Maybe she'd go in early one day and just hang the articles up and be done with it, she grinned suddenly. She kissed Franco's cheek as she approached him, but as soon as he left, her shoulders slumped and her smile drooped.

'You ok?' asked Sasha, handing her an almost overflowing glass of wine, which she took gratefully and sipped quickly to stop it spilling onto her jeans. She hoisted her bottom onto one of the high bar stools and wondered why they always chose a tall table here. There were plenty of regular tables, but she suspected that Billy liked to peruse the room from a high vantage point. He was always on the lookout for customers and opportunities for Poppy and her interior design business, but as they already had loads of those, she guessed he was probably just being nosey. They were all a bit taller than her, so she always felt like she had to climb up onto the seat.

'It's been a hell of a week,' Demi admitted, kicking off her shoes and letting them fall to the floor. She wriggled her toes and admired Sasha's deep red towering heels. Demi didn't know how she survived those shoes. She worked in a garage, and not in front of the camera like Sasha, but Demi still wore her Converse trainers even with a dress on a night out!

She tried to sit still for a moment to compose herself. She knew that her friends were aware of how badly things were

going at present with Allan, but she wasn't fully ready to let them in about how much it had escalated yet. She was mortified they might have heard the rumours about her boyfriend and Cindy. Although every single pore of her body wanted to believe that he was somehow innocent, her insides felt as though a tangle of barbed wire was scratching around. She spent most evenings sobbing herself to sleep in her bed, and her days slapping on layers and layers of extra foundation to cover the bags under her eyes. She'd ended up buying those eye drops that were supposed to make your eyes sparkle, but they'd made them even redder and she'd cried harder.

'Starting up this new business with Miles is a lot of pressure,' she hedged, drinking a big gulp of wine and enjoying the soothing effects on her parched throat. 'You'd all know about this, of course,' she sighed, rubbing her eyes, and then wishing she hadn't as they hurt.

Poppy was looking at her with concern and Sasha and Billy were waiting patiently for her to spill the tea and divulge what was really going on. They certainly weren't stupid and knew her too well for her to get comfortable right now.

She wrung her hands in her lap and then slugged another mouthful of wine for courage, but it stung her empty stomach. She hadn't had much of an appetite recently. 'Things aren't great at home and Allan's basically said that I'm abandoning my parents in their time of need and causing them to fail.'

Poppy gasped and Sasha scoffed and laughed. 'What an idiot!' she said, while shaking her head and rolling her eyes heavenward. 'He wouldn't listen when you did try to intervene. He flat-out refused to implement any of your ideas.' Sasha sipped her wine and eyed Demi over the rim of her glass for a moment before placing it on the table and turning to Poppy for her view.

'That's emotional blackmail and disgusting behaviour. I expected more of him,' said Poppy primly with a shake of her head.

'I didn't,' said Sasha, undiplomatically.

'Sasha!' scolded Poppy.

‘Well,’ said Sasha, refusing to back down, ‘I’ve said this to his face. It’s not something he doesn’t know. I don’t think he appreciates you enough, Dems, I’m sorry.’

‘Are things ok with you and Allan? Things that don’t relate to work?’ asked Billy in a gentle tone.

Demi knew her face was flushed. She hated being the centre of attention. She tried to fight a strong urge to run and hide. She knew she put off her problems and buried them in the sand to uncover later, otherwise she might have tackled Allan on some of his behaviours years ago. She understood that Sasha was speaking the truth, but Demi realised that she wasn’t perfect either. Allan had told her of her flaws often enough.

‘Things aren’t great,’ Demi finally admitted, deciding that she needed to be more open with her friends. Poppy had confided in them all when things were bad between her and Dylan and Sasha and Ollie certainly hadn’t had an easy ride either. ‘We’ve been arguing a lot and... I think he might be seeing someone else,’ she said as her voice broke into a sob and her friends crowded round her.

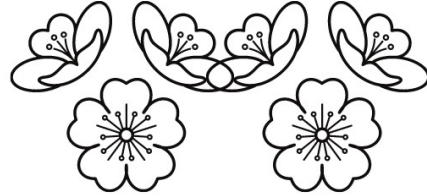
‘Surely not?’ gasped Poppy in outrage. ‘I’ll kill him!’

‘What a jerk!’ said Sasha, her eyes flashing fire.

Demi sniffed and took the pack of tissues that Franco hurried over with, lines of worry on his forehead. He placed a fresh bottle of wine on the table and whispered something to Billy about it being on the house. She gave him a watery smile of thanks and he blew her a kiss and left them alone again in the middle of the crowded bar. Demi looked around and it felt like they were in their own bubble. Everyone else was milling about, seemingly happy with the world, but who knew how many hearts were breaking at that moment, or worlds being destroyed with a few simple words?

‘Tell us everything,’ said Billy, topping up all their glasses.

CHAPTER TEN



Miles smiled at Demi as he opened the door to the house he now lived in with his older brother. He was spending less and less time in their old town, so it had seemed the right moment to move nearer to Cherry Blossom Lane.

Demi smiled back, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. He'd noticed how withdrawn she was lately, and he worried that she'd taken on too much. It was a huge step up and change for her. The new garage was twice the size of her dad's and they had employed a plethora of new staff, including an assistant for her, plus Kitty, the café manager. They'd achieved amazing things over the past few months, but perhaps he'd pushed her too far?

Miles was enjoying living in the house Dylan had bought when he was trying to persuade Poppy to marry him, and then moved out of about a minute later. Ollie had jumped at the chance to rent the space from his brother and Miles could see why. There was a huge workshop underneath the building and a luxury apartment above it. The pretty garden, lined with tall trees, backed onto Poppy's designer house. They were close, but lived in separate developments. Dylan still used the workshop to experiment with his timber designs and Ollie owned a gym in Cherry Blossom Lane. All three brothers had busy lives, but still tried to make time for each other. Living nearby helped, although when Miles wanted to bring a date home, he hadn't thought about what to do. Luckily Ollie was staying at a hotel with Sasha that evening after a work event, so Miles had the place to himself – not that this was a date.

He led Demi into the lounge and offered her a fragrant glass of white wine, which she accepted gratefully. She slumped down onto the couch and sniffed the air. ‘Whatever you’re cooking smells nice,’ she commented.

Miles smiled and went to stir the sauce. ‘I can’t really take credit. I heard about this amazing place in town that offers freshly cooked meals you literally just heat up. I popped in on my way home.’

‘You mean like a takeaway,’ joked Demi, shaking her head and laughing.

‘No,’ he grinned. ‘Well, kind of. More like a home-cooked meal – but cooked by someone else. This is a chicken casserole. Are you hungry?’

Demi paused to think about it then obviously decided that she was and nodded her head, which made his gut sigh with relief. He was sure she wasn’t eating properly. He knew she’d been flat hunting, but she’d told him she’d found a place in the high street. He could easily have found her a stunning flat, but he knew she’d never have accepted that. Now he dished up two plates of the steaming food and took them to the snug dining room set-up. The table was in a corner of the room, instead of being positioned centrally, and it felt intimate and warm. The blue and grey colours of the room were deeper and more muted here which instantly made you feel relaxed and comfortable. Demi went to get cutlery as Miles had forgotten it, and grabbed the bottle of wine, too.

‘You’re welcome to stay the night if you want to leave your car here,’ said Miles, noting the bottle. ‘I can sleep in Ollie’s room.’

Demi was already topping up their glasses and then tentatively pushing her food around her plate, so he waited until she finally tasted it and then smiled at him that it was good.

‘Do you want to tell me what’s been going on?’ Miles asked gently, blowing on his food to cool it down. ‘I’ve been worrying that I’ve piled too much pressure on you.’

Demi paused mid-bite in shock, and then placed her knife and fork back down. ‘I’ve been putting off telling you about Allan,’ she said morosely, picking up her wine and sipping it, watching his reaction over the rim of her glass. He carefully kept his face neutral.

‘What about him?’ he asked, wondering if her next words would change things for both of them, as he had a feeling she finally knew what Allan had been up to.

‘We’ve separated,’ she sniffed, taking another gulp of wine and wincing. It was good wine and chugging it back wasn’t ideal as it had a high alcohol percentage, but Miles didn’t think now was the time to offer her a glass of water. She might throw it at him.

‘Separated... or have you split up?’ he clarified, his heart racing as he took a hefty gulp of his own wine and then coughed slightly. He got up to clear away their almost-untouched plates for something to do, so as not to betray how much her answer meant to him.

‘Is there a difference?’ she slurred slightly, sloshing more wine from the bottle into her glass and then topping his nearly full glass up so that it almost overflowed. He dumped the plates into the sink and swiftly took the bottle from her and placed it back on the table. Her eyes were scrunched up, as if she’d not really thought about this before and that stung.

‘There is,’ he said, taking her hand across the table and giving it a squeeze to show he supported her decision, whichever way the hammer fell, even if he didn’t quite believe that. ‘One is time apart and you might get back together, the other is no going back.’

Tears leaked out of Demi’s eyes and he went round to her side of the table and then pulled her into a hug. She started to sob and he led her to the couch and pulled her onto his lap, his arms wrapped around her as she cried. He gently stroked her back with one hand as she gradually quietened. Then he picked up the remote control with his free hand and pressed a button to soften the lighting and start some relaxing music. He silently thanked Poppy for her design genius and kissed

Demi's forehead while she snuggled deeper into his chest as her sobs quietened. He wished they were together for other reasons, but she hadn't answered his question and he wasn't sure what the status quo was on her relationship with Allan.

'I think you need to get a proper night's sleep,' he murmured into her hair and she sniffed and didn't say anything. He swung her up into his arms and took her into his bedroom. Not his finest moment, and not how he'd ideally like to be carrying Demi to bed, but she was his best friend over everything. How she felt in his arms, when she wasn't teasing him or talking about another man, was something new. She had just been crying over said man, though, so maybe he'd have to accept they would never get their timings right. For now, she needed her friend. He tightened his arms around her as he bent and placed her gently on his bed. He then pulled her back to standing and wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumb.

'You will get over this, Demi,' he said softly. 'It might feel like your heart is breaking right now, but you'll be stronger without him.'

Her dark eyes looked sadly into his and she hiccupped softly and leaned her face on his chest.

'We need to get you undressed. Do you need help?'

She stared up at him sadly and nodded. He reached out to pull her T-shirt over her head and she held her arms up without saying anything. He helped her step out of her jeans and tried not to sigh at the sight of her. He let go of her to pull the duvet back and was thankful that he'd changed the sheets that evening. He might well not be so lucky himself with Ollie's bed, as his brother had been out all day and Miles was not about to do his laundry.

As he turned round, Demi had thrown off her underwear and was standing in front of him stark naked! He nearly had a heart attack. He knew she'd had a lot to drink, but Demi was usually quite shy. He tried not to take in her beautiful curves and stare, but before he could work out a coherent thought, she had pulled him to her by the collar of his shirt and her lips

plundered his own. He tried to stop and think about what she was doing, but this was his dream woman, and she was naked and kissing him.

For a moment his body went into automatic response, where all his dreams were being met and Demi was willingly kissing him with abandon. His hands slid around to cup her backside and pull her closer and he met her passion for passion, but then his conscious mind kicked in and he pulled back in horror at his own actions. Demi was drunk, and he could have been anyone at that exact time. His ego wasn't so huge that he thought this had anything to do with him.

He reluctantly put his hands on her shoulders and eased her away. 'Demi, no,' he ground out.

Demi's hand flew to her mouth and then to cover her body as he stepped away. 'Oh my God, I'm so sorry Miles! I don't know what I was thinking.'

He'd already turned away so as not to embarrass her further and grabbed the throw from the edge of his bed. He scooped her up into it and then off her feet and into bed, where he covered her with the duvet.

'Demi,' he tried to reassure her, his breath coming fast. 'It was the wine. I forgot to mention it's pretty strong. I should have told you, but you were upset about Allan.'

She flinched at the mention of his name and Miles quickly bent down to kiss her cheek and turned to leave the room. When he took a quick glance back before he closed the door, Demi had pulled the duvet up to cover her face and all he could see was a burst of her curls peeping out of the top. He sighed heavily and closed the door behind him, walking further up the corridor and then going to pour himself a brandy.

He sat looking out at the stars twinkling in the inky night sky and then put his head in his hands and groaned. This was not how he'd thought the night would go. Now Demi would be too mortified ever to look at him again. He swore under his breath and then grabbed the remote to put a film on Ollie's huge flat screen TV. There was no way he could sleep after

holding Demi in his arms and kissing her like that, and he feared that their friendship would never be the same.

Miles was in the modern kitchen making coffee when Demi walked in to join him the next morning. He was already showered and changed into a suit for the day's meetings. She'd taken one of his T-shirts out of his wardrobe and was wearing that with her jeans. His mouth went dry suddenly and when their eyes met, she blushed and hung her head. As she approached, he lifted her face with his fingers.

'You ok?' he asked as he handed her a milky coffee.

She took it gratefully and sipped it gingerly. 'I feel like I've got a thousand little drummer boys waltzing around my head,' she said slowly.

Miles tried not to laugh at how she was looking so sorry for herself, but she was too darn cute. He pulled her in for a hug to show her that there were no hard feelings, but he had to force himself to let her go after a quick squeeze of support. 'Coffee is a good hangover cure,' he said.

'I'm so sorry about last night, Miles,' she said, biting her lip and fidgeting from foot to foot.

'You have nothing to apologise for,' he said honestly.

She looked into his eyes and then at her feet again. 'To answer your question before I jumped on you, it's totally over with Allan. It has been for a while now, but I'm trying to come to terms with being on my own. I'm sorry I cried all over you.'

Miles smiled. 'You aren't on your own. You have me,' he said simply.

'I tried to throw myself at you and I'm so embarrassed. Why I thought it was a good idea, I'll never know.' Her face flushed darker and she sipped her coffee, but wouldn't meet his eye again. 'Especially when your life is full of supermodels and practically every woman you meet falls in love with you.'

Miles threw back his head and laughed at this, some of his good humour returning.

‘The only reason I didn’t sweep you into my bed, Demi,’ he said seriously but firmly, so she would understand his truth, ‘Is because you’ve just come out of a serious relationship and I didn’t know whether it was officially over, or on a break. When I kiss you, I want you to be fully aware that it’s me you’re kissing, and not someone who just happens to be there.’

Demi’s mouth fell open and she looked up with wide eyes. ‘Um... I... I’m glad we didn’t do anything that could ruin our friendship,’ she mumbled, quickly rinsing her cup in the sink and placing it on the draining board. Miles stepped behind her and placed his arms either side of her, so that she had to turn around. She was biting her lip again and fire lit in his veins. He’d tried to resist her, but here she was in his domain, and it seemed she wasn’t clear about how he felt about her.

‘I think we stepped over that boundary last night, Demi,’ he said, kissing her on the side of her face so that she looked up. ‘There’s no going back.’

She gasped as he swooped in and captured her lips. Heat ignited throughout his body, and she groaned and leaned into him, matching his passion with her own. His hand slid down to cup her backside and to pull her closer so that she could feel what she did to him. He deepened the kiss, until he almost lost the last vestige of self-control. He could have picked her up and carried her to his bed or made love to her right there on the kitchen counter, but Ollie could walk in any moment – and he had a meeting scheduled that he couldn’t miss. He reluctantly pulled away.

They were both panting hard and her eyes were glazed with passion. He held her face in his hand and kissed her briefly again, but she suddenly realised where she was and what she was doing and mumbled something about having to change her clothes and get to work. In a flurry of activity she gave him a quick hug and then left him standing by the kitchen counter, staring at their two empty coffee mugs on either side of the draining board.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Demi had moved into a flat in the little village at the end of Cherry Blossom Lane. It was above the coffee shop with the gorgeous barista, and it seemed half of the local female population now frequented the place.

It was good to be somewhere bustling, so that she didn't feel as alone as she had for the past few months. Her phone calls and texts with Allan weren't getting them anywhere and she was walking around in a half daze most of the time. She was aware that she needed to snap out of it and she even wished the anger she'd felt at his betrayal would come back, so that she could actually feel something. Now she was numb.

She knew she had to take drastic action, but was a shell of her former self. She said she was busy when her friends asked her out and was mortified about her behaviour with Miles. She'd practically thrown herself at him when she was naked and he'd probably kissed her the next morning out of sympathy. Her own passion had shocked her, but because she hadn't kissed anyone other than Allan for years, she guessed that she'd react the same way with anyone. Yes, that kiss had floored her and she'd wanted more, but it was just her own desperation for human contact rearing its ugly head. She'd wanted to make love to Miles on Ollie's kitchen floor!

She cringed and packed those disturbing thoughts away in a box that she mentally padlocked shut. If her relationship with Miles was now over, she felt like she'd never recover. Parting from Allan had split her in half, but being close to Miles and working on this huge project together had just about held her

together. Supposing he couldn't stand to be around her now? It was so embarrassing. She'd had a few glasses of wine on an empty stomach and been emotionally wrecked. But she couldn't blame drink or her hormones – she'd basically jumped her best friend.

She didn't know what was happening to her lately. Maybe she needed validation from another man to feel attractive? Because when she was around Miles now, she blushed and fluffed her words and her pulse raced. She'd start tripping over her own feet next. It was as if she was on heat, after years of her libido slumbering. It was as confusing as hell. She'd had an okay sex life with Allan, so why was she suddenly salivating after Miles? She hadn't looked at him that way since they were young adults. She shook her head at her own appalling behaviour and grabbed her bag from the little side table by the front door.

The new flat was neat as a pin. In the end she'd been glad to leave her old home behind. She still hadn't unpacked any of her personal items. Most of them reminded her of Allan, and she couldn't look at them. Luckily the flat had come fully furnished, with a snugly little couch that she could sit and cry on with a view out of two double windows across the village and up towards the fields behind Cherry Blossom Lane. She could imagine Poppy, Billy and Sasha at work, and even pop by and see them. She just didn't want to right now. They had been hinting for years that Allan didn't treat her so well, but she'd been blind to his faults. Now her eyes were wide open and she cringed inside.

She needed coffee and sustenance before she passed out. She didn't have the energy for food shopping and knew she should wash her hair and slap on some makeup, but she couldn't be bothered. Maybe the fit barista would make her feel better by sharing some of his gorgeous energy. Miles had woken up her libido, but it seemed it was now in hiding for being so embarrassing. She'd forgotten how mentally exhausting dating could be.

Perhaps she should forget men and just spend some time building her self-esteem, but that had taken a battering for

years. She stopped and took in a deep breath of courage at being seen out in public, in case she scared anyone with her wild hair and eyes. Then she gritted her teeth and decided that something was going to change – right now. Doormat Demi was in the past. She squared her shoulders and smiled to a woman who held the coffee shop door open for her.

‘Hi,’ said the barista as she approached. ‘What can I get for you today?’

‘A hot chocolate, please,’ she said, mustering up a bright smile as he was just so good to look at.

‘Anything else?’ he asked with a cheeky wink. Demi grinned and couldn’t help but feel a bit flattered at his obvious flirting.

‘It depends what’s on offer,’ she parried, beyond caring what an idiot she sounded like, and he grinned back.

‘My name’s Sid,’ he said. ‘I heard that you’ve just moved in upstairs?’

‘I’m Demi,’ she replied, checking that no one else was waiting in line at that moment. ‘That’s right. It’s a beautiful little flat. I need a sugar lift to help me with the unpacking.’ He handed her the drink that his colleague had made and added a slice of cake to her tray.

‘That’s on me. Do you want to meet up for a drink tonight?’ he grinned. ‘I wanted to ask you before anyone else did. There’s a great wine bar in this parade,’ he continued, nodding to a customer who walked past and gave him a cheery wave. ‘Have you been there before?’ asked Sid. ‘It opened last week.’

Demi looked around in shock to see if he was asking someone else, but he was still smiling at her. Now she wished she’d washed her hair after all. ‘I haven’t, but that sounds great!’ she replied, adrenaline flowing that she’d bagged a date that evening. ‘I’d love to.’

‘Well, seeing as I know where you live, I could meet you outside the shop at eight?’

‘Ah... ok. That sounds perfect.’

Now the butterflies that had lived in her stomach when she'd started work with Miles were back in full force. She took her tray and smiled shyly over her shoulder at him as she found a table by the window. She shakily put the tray down and looked at the simple slice of cake. No one had done anything like that for her for ages, but she was determined not to cry. She had an actual date with the town 'hottie', and she would eat the cake before she fell apart with nerves.

She grinned suddenly at how her life had turned round. She'd gone from a miserable job and a relationship where she wasn't appreciated, to her own business and dates with sexy barista guys. She wondered if Sid was talented with his hands and sniggered to herself childishly – God, she was tired. Sid seemed genuinely interested in her, so maybe she should start this new life and not be such a loser, after all? She could date sexy and interesting people, like Miles did.

Trying not to scoff down her food and drink too quickly, she sent an urgent text to Sasha and Poppy, asking them if she should go. She got immediate replies and a resounding YES! There was also a barrage of questions, but she ignored those for now. As soon as was decently possible, she smiled at Sid and headed out of the café to catch her breath.

Could she do this? She hadn't dated anyone other than Allan for over ten years. She felt rusty and out of touch. What did you talk to your date about and what did you wear? She was about to head back up to the flat, but instead turned in the direction of Verity's boutique. She'd know exactly the right thing to wear and now that Demi was finally earning a fair wage, she could treat herself to an item or two from Verity's everyday ranges. It was about time that this old hag became the racehorse she'd always dreamt of becoming – or something like that. She was sure there must be a better analogy, but that was all she could think of for now. It was either that or comparing herself to a zombie.

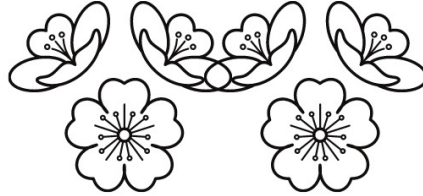
She knew she'd been sleepwalking through her life for the past few years, but now she was ready to wake up and live a little. Maybe she could even become the Demi who threw off her clothes and stood naked confidently in front of a delicious

man without messing it all up. Baby steps at first, with a date with a handsome stranger, but after that she was going to move mountains to be kinder to herself and to nurture her inner goddess.

She almost walked headfirst into a huge man who was innocently walking his dog along the high street, and she apologised profusely while she tried to untangle her legs from the dog lead. The dog chose that moment to jump up and lick her and she ended up a tangled mess on the floor. The man smiled kindly down at her and gave her an appreciative look, as he lent a hand to pull her back onto her feet. Rather than mumble an apology she looked him straight in the eye and gave him a dazzling smile. He grinned back and told her to have a great day, which she was sure now that she would. She glanced back over her shoulder and he'd paused to watch her walk away.

She tried to stop herself from sashaying like Sasha would have done, but her backside and legs had a mind of their own and just like that, her libido was stepping back up to the starting block and was raring to go.

CHAPTER TWELVE



As soon as she arrived back at her flat, with a surprising number of shopping bags, she flopped down on the couch with a huge sigh. Verity had helped her decide on four new outfits and she'd even walked further along the parade and splashed out on some new lacy underwear. Not that Sid was seeing that anytime soon – but you never knew! It made her feel sexy and was more for her own confidence than anything else. She adored the feeling of the silk and lace next to her skin.

She'd even bought a few new fitted T-shirts with little lacy collars and some smart trousers for work. She'd been wearing the same dungarees and white T-shirts for ages, because there was no point buying new when the place was a building site, but suddenly she wanted to be seen as the boss and stand out. She was proud of all they had achieved with the build and plans and, although vintage jeans and dungarees were practical, she could dress them up with a pattered short-sleeved top or blouse or an eye-catching T-shirt. She didn't want to blend into the background anymore. She jumped when her phone rang in her pocket.

'Hello?'

'It's Poppy,' said Poppy. 'Sasha's here with me. You're on speakerphone. Tell us more!' she demanded.

Demi smiled and got up to start unpacking her bags and finally put something in her new wardrobes.

‘Sid the barista asked me out!’ she said excitedly. ‘I was so nervous that I went to see Verity and let her persuade me to get a whole new wardrobe full of clothes and then I bought some bras!’

‘Halleluiah!’ laughed Sasha. ‘I didn’t know his name was Sid, but you’ll certainly have a great time on your date because he’s always laughing and making jokes with customers. Plus he’s fit!’ Sasha barely stopped for a breath before continuing. ‘Those piercing blue eyes and his sexy mussed-up hair always make him look like he’s stepped out of a shampoo commercial.’

‘Why did he ask me out, then?’ asked Demi, pausing while taking a swishy short dress out of tissue paper. She didn’t often wear dresses, so this was a big step for her.

‘What a stupid question!’ said Sasha and Demi heard Poppy laugh at Sasha’s blunt ways.

‘What Sasha means is that he’s been eyeing you up for months – you just didn’t notice. He mentioned to us that he hadn’t seen our gorgeous friend for a while. So Sasha told him you’d just split up from your long-term boyfriend and would probably be at home and fending off phone calls from delicious men, asking you out,’ laughed Poppy.

‘Sasha!’ yelled Demi. ‘Please tell me you didn’t?’

‘I did not...’ said Sasha. ‘Well... I did, but I didn’t use those exact words. I just hinted that you’d be in demand, so he’d better get in there quick.’

Demi flinched at Sasha’s high-pitched laugh and rolled her eyes.

‘Sasha! I’m so embarrassed,’ said Demi in exasperation.

‘Look,’ said Sasha in a gentler tone. ‘Guys have always wanted to date you, but you weren’t single or interested. Perhaps a fun-filled date with a lovely guy is just what you need?’ she asked. ‘We all know him, so we know he’s not an axe murderer, plus I know his ex-girlfriend and I asked her about him.’

Both Poppy and Demi gasped this time.

‘Sasha!’ laughed Poppy. ‘You didn’t?’

‘I was subtle,’ grumbled Sasha. Demi raised an eyebrow at this, but it was wasted, as she was alone. ‘They are still great friends and it just fizzled out. Plus she told me he’s definitely single.’

Demi flopped back on the bed and groaned.

‘What are you going to wear?’ asked Poppy.

Demi put the phone on the bed and held up the dress. ‘Verity persuaded me it was warm enough to get my legs out and wear a dress. It’s kind of a soft green colour and has tiny straps. She said I should wear it with my wedges, so I won’t feel like I’m wearing heels and about to fall over.’

Demi could just imagine Sasha rolling her eyes. She was always trying to persuade her to try on skyscraper heels.

‘Sounds perfect,’ said Poppy. ‘Take a photo when you’re dressed and send it to us. Verity has the best taste, so you know it will be stunning. Have a few cocktails and enjoy yourself.’

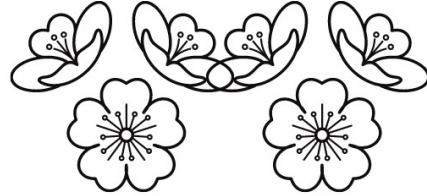
‘It’s only a date, and not a lifetime commitment,’ reminded Sasha, knowing how easily Demi fell in love. ‘Don’t rush into anything you’re not comfortable with,’ she added, blowing kisses down the phone. ‘But have hot sex if you want to – and use a condom.’

Demi burst out laughing. She quite liked the sound of some hot sex.

‘I won’t... I will... I don’t understand the question,’ joked Demi, saying goodbye and ending the call. She looked at herself in the mirror one last time and then carefully laid the dress on the bed while she went to shower and get ready for her date.

She’d already put out a new set of underwear and she caught sight of it as she walked into the bathroom and smiled to herself. She could do this. It was about time that shy, quiet Demi had a rest, and she discovered what being a temptress was all about.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Demi glanced at the boxes she'd finally unpacked the day before and at the little ceramic vase she'd just placed on the table by the front door. She'd bought it that day during her shopping spree, after all that coffee and cake. The vase was vibrant and reminded her of the kind of things her mum had at home. It made her feel less homesick, and it would be nice to look at it every time she left the flat or came through the door.

It was the kind of trinket that Allan hated, as he loved clean lines and muted icy tones, but it was perfect for her. She was a jumble of emotions most of the time and her ideal home would be warm and welcoming, not sterile and cold. She was just finding out that she had very different taste to Allan and it now annoyed her that she'd always deferred to his choices, when it had been her flat they'd lived in. She certainly wouldn't stand for that any more and was a bit confused as to why she'd accepted it before. Perhaps the rose-tinted glasses of love had meant that she hadn't cared about furnishings as long as her partner was happy. Now she wanted to make sure she was happy too. She certainly wasn't looking for another Allan. She was going to stay single but flirt up a storm and enjoy not having anyone to tell her that her choices were wrong, or that she wasn't good enough. She was woman enough for any man and a cheating ex didn't define her, she chanted to herself over and over as she got ready to leave the flat.

She'd not been out with anyone for years and she felt out of her depth, but she was determined not to give into the urge

to stay indoors and hide. The temptress she wanted to be wasn't fully formed yet, but she was going out and that was a start. She hadn't taken Sid's number, so she wasn't able to cancel anyway, and she was too polite to leave anyone hanging without an explanation.

She was excited to try the new wine bar, as it looked beautiful when she'd walked by earlier that day. The elegant sign outside showed that they sold cocktails and speciality beers, as well as the usual fare. They also had bar snacks and live music on a Friday and Saturday night. As she was literally a stone's throw away, she might even become a regular.

She pulled at the hem of her dress and tried to tame her wild curls, but there was a slight breeze and she gave up. As she stepped out of her door, Sid was standing just under one of the café's outdoor lights and his face glowed when he saw her. He looked gorgeous in jeans and a smart collared short-sleeved, dark blue top with a discreet logo on the chest. His blond hair was brushed back and his blue eyes were taking in every inch of her attire. She could see that he had a couple of tattoos on the top of one arm and she wondered if they had significant meaning to him. It could be a good chat topic later if their conversation ran dry.

'Wow! You look stunning!' he said appreciatively.

'Don't sound so shocked,' she laughed, taking his outstretched hand and flushing at the contact. She hadn't held hands with anyone other than Allan or the Taylor brothers for a while, so it felt strange... but good.

Sid laughed good-naturedly. 'You're usually wearing jeans or dungarees when you come in.'

'So you've noticed,' she parried, almost fainting that she was attempting to flirt, but it seemed to be working as he pulled her along with him and they strolled towards the bar. She got a waft of his aftershave and smelt patchouli and sandalwood. Allan had been very particular about his fragrances, so she'd learned about them years ago. She shook her head to clear images of them shopping together.

‘Of course! I always notice a beautiful woman,’ said Sid, breaking into her thoughts.

‘Even if she’s just come from the garage?’ she asked, as she had often arrived at the café straight from work.

‘I heard about your venture on the town grapevine,’ said Sid, glancing at her as they walked amiably, side-by-side, hands linked between them. The bloody town grapevine! Was there no escaping it? But she supposed in this instance she did want locals to know about her new venture, so this was good. ‘How’s business?’

‘Well, it’s not officially up and running yet, but the café is organised.’ She jumped and held her hand over her mouth. ‘I’m sorry! I didn’t think how you might feel about another café in town.’

Sid laughed kindly and she relaxed again. ‘Firstly, I don’t own the shop, but there has been discussion about it.’

She tensed again and they stopped outside the wine bar. People were going in and there was a burly bouncer on the door who nodded to Sid as if they were mates and smiled at Demi. She smiled back shyly, but was nervous about this coffee shop chat.

‘The bosses don’t think it’s a problem at all,’ Sid continued as they stood just inside the bar.

‘So you’ve not invited me out to get all the gossip?’ she asked, as that awful thought came to mind.

Sid looked into her eyes and grinned. ‘I’ve been wanting to ask you out for ages, but I thought you were in a relationship?’

She sighed. She definitely didn’t want to talk about Allan right now. ‘I was, for a long time, but that’s in the past.’

Sid took her hand again as they had moved apart. ‘My bosses think your café is far enough away. We tend to get footfall from people in town, while you’ll be serving customers onsite who are there for their cars. It’s just that tiny bit too far to walk here from there, unless you enjoy a jog,’ he teased. ‘Hopefully you’ll be successful. We’ve been around long enough not to be threatened by someone new.’

‘Phew,’ said Demi, theatrically mopping her brow and making him laugh again. ‘Shall we sit down?’ she asked.

‘After you,’ he said with a smile.

As they wound their way through the tables, she took in the way the place had been designed. There was a sleek bar running along the back wall that had a polished concrete countertop, backlit with sultry low lighting. The whole end wall was filled with an arrangement of bottles and glasses, with clever lighting to make them all stand out too. There were tall tables dotted around with bar stools, and booths for groups to snuggle into. The whole feel was industrial, but it had a sexy edge and sultry music was playing in the background, encouraging people to enjoy a drink and get closer. *Sasha and Poppy would love this!* Demi thought.

Sid led her to a tall table in the middle of the bar and snaffled two stools, offering her one. She smiled her thanks, but as she swung herself up onto it, she noticed Miles sitting in a booth to her right. He was with a group of men and women in suits and he was glaring at the way Sid had his hand on her waist. She flushed and her smile faltered. Sid leaned in to ask her what she’d like to drink and Miles abruptly turned back to his colleagues. She recognised one of the women from their technology department, and a man from accounts. She clearly wasn’t needed for that meeting and she sniffed and tried to reach for some of the equilibrium she’d felt earlier, but failed.

When Sid returned with their drinks, she laughed in all the right places and offered to get another round in, but when she reached the bar, Miles followed. He leant his arm on the bar next to her so that their conversation was private.

‘You’re dating now?’ he ground out.

‘You’re having a business meeting without me?’ she parried, thanking the barman for her drinks when they arrived. Miles placed his order and asked for them to be brought to his table, as the bar offered table service.

‘The meeting was in the office earlier. You’ve been avoiding me, so I couldn’t ask you.’

Demi flushed, as this was true.

‘I’ve been trying to give you some space, but it seems I’ve given you too much,’ he quipped, staring over his shoulder at Sid, who was chatting to one of his coffee customers.

‘What does that mean?’ she asked, her head spinning suddenly – and not from the alcohol.

‘It means that we kissed and then you’ve backed off from me,’ he said slowly, as if he was trying to control his emotions. ‘Was it that awful?’ he asked candidly.

Demi’s face flushed and she gulped in some air. ‘No! Of course not. I was just embarrassed. You’re one of my best friends and I knew you felt sorry for me. I pounced on you when I’d been drinking on an empty stomach and you literally had nowhere to run.’

She hung her head and he gently lifted her chin. She darted a glance at Sid, but he was still happily chatting. Being such a popular barista, she guessed he must know practically everyone locally.

‘I wouldn’t have run anyway, Demi,’ Miles said seriously.

She gasped, her eyes wide, her heartbeat racing. He put his fingers around her wrist and felt her pulse, which jumped at his touch. This was a different Miles to her best friend. He was dark and mysterious and confusing. Her breathing began to get shallower.

‘I was being respectful to your heartbreak. I didn’t want to you regret anything if I rushed you by showing you how I felt,’ Miles continued.

‘H-how do you feel?’ she almost dragged out, not sure she could cope with knowing, but not wanting to leave until she found out.

‘Like I’ve been sleepwalking for years, and you just woke me up,’ he said, and her mouth hung open at the mirror of her own thoughts. She quickly snapped her mouth shut and picked up her drink.

‘You can’t be serious?’ she asked.

Miles gazed over again at Sid, who was now looking at them with interest. Demi decided she needed to get out of there. Miles let go of her wrist but she immediately missed the contact.

‘I don’t want you to be with anyone else,’ he said seriously. ‘I hate it.’

She licked her lips and felt like she wanted to cry suddenly. Miles pulled her into a hug and she didn’t resist.

‘I’ve missed you,’ he whispered into her ear, before getting up and handing her drink to her.

Well, that was her hot date well and truly ruined. She had no idea of what to think. Miles liked her. Really liked her! Bloody hell. What would that mean for their working relationship and their friendship? So many thoughts were whizzing through her brain that she couldn’t clarify any of them.

She weaved her way back to her table and apologised to Sid for taking so long. She took a hefty sip of the rich red wine in her glass and sat back on her chair.

‘Who is that?’ Sid asked.

‘That’s Miles. He’s my best friend,’ she said simply and she could see Sid visibly relax.

‘Ah, ok. I guess he likes to check out your dates and make sure you’re ok? That’s fair enough.’

Demi flushed at what Miles had actually said, but she just nodded and hid her face behind her glass as she gazed around the now packed wine bar. Luckily people were currently obscuring her view of Miles, but she could feel his presence. She tried to enjoy the remainder of the evening, but she was just coasting. Sid was a lovely guy, but she couldn’t recapture that initial excitement.

Her phone buzzed with a text as Sid popped to the bathroom. It was Miles, offering to walk her home. She did laugh at that and tapped in a quick reply that she was on a date and lived in the same road as the bar! It did finally make her smile though. Miles was always looking out for her, but now

there was an edge to his meaning. Her cute, kind friend, had metamorphosised into a dangerously sexy bachelor who was looking for someone to play with.

After another glass of wine, Demi was feeling a bit tipsy. She held onto Sid's arm as he finally walked her home and she decided that she'd had a thoroughly good evening. Sid was charming and great company, but the number of women stopping to chat and trying to snare his attention, when he was clearly on a date, was a bit much for Demi. She was definitely a monogamous woman, and she didn't get the impression that Sid was looking for anything serious. Not that she was either, right now, but she didn't fancy sharing her date with half the population and Sid hadn't dissuaded anyone from joining them. In the end there had been a big group of men and women. She'd had a brilliant night and made new friends, but she'd always been able to feel that Miles was there, watching. For now, though, a date with Sid was a lot of fun and that was exactly what she needed.

When they arrived at her flat she blushed and turned to face him, not quite sure what to do. 'Did you have a good time?' Sid asked.

'I did,' she said truthfully and he pulled her into his arms for a kiss before she had time to think about turning away. His mouth was warm and welcoming and she sank into the kiss and enjoyed it, but there was no passion burning in her belly to make her grab his hand and pull him into her flat.

Sid smiled down at her. 'Do you fancy going out again some time?' he asked smoothing a stray hair out of her eyes.

She smiled up at him. 'I think I'd like that,' she said truthfully. She didn't know how she felt about Miles and now was not the time to jump full pelt into another relationship.

Sid pulled her in for one quick kiss on the lips and then told her that he'd call her, or see her in the coffee shop. She wondered fleetingly if they decided not to date what would happen, but she got the feeling that would be ok too. Sid was an easy-going kind of guy and she guessed that he would just chat up another girl and get another date with ease. She kind of

liked that about him after the intensity of a long relationship with Allan.

She tried to quell the nerves at having kissed another man, but as she climbed the stairs to her flat, she realised that her feelings were more about Miles than Allan, which shocked her and made her stand still and catch her breath for a moment. Was it the drink and the jealousy talking, or had Miles been serious? Her mind was quite fuzzy with all the wine, and she wondered if she'd got her facts muddled up or imagined Miles's interest?

She kept thinking of that kiss with Miles and for some reason her thoughts of him weren't quite so friendly anymore. It was as if he'd woken something in her and now every touch made her skin feel hot and her pulse race. She was mortified and still didn't quite believe what he'd said in the bar. Surely he couldn't really like her that way?

She didn't know what game he was playing and intended to put a stop to it by dating as many people as she could. She'd show Allan what he was missing. She found she wasn't as heartbroken as she thought she'd be. In fact, she felt free for the first time in years. Free from the pressures of her dad's garage and free of trying to be the perfect girlfriend for someone who didn't appreciate her.

It was as if the scales had fallen from her eyes. She was slowly beginning to see the Allan that everyone else saw. How they had all been so kind to him for ages she couldn't fathom, but perhaps it was the same ties that had held her by his side for so long. They were one big dysfunctional family and they hated letting each other down. Allan had never quite fitted in, because of his self-centred ways, but they'd all accepted him for Demi's sake. She understood that now and was ashamed of the way she'd adored him. She fleetingly wondered what her life would have been like if Miles hadn't left that fateful party with someone else, but in all honesty, they'd been so young. It probably wouldn't have worked out for them anyway. They were better off as friends, weren't they?

She had just kicked off her shoes and settled herself on the couch with a welcome cup of hot chocolate after saying

goodnight to Sid, when the doorbell pealed. She paused mid sip and her heart started racing. Had Sid come back, or could Miles have just left the bar and wandered down? She smiled suddenly and hoped it was the latter. She was still tipsy enough to have lost a few inhibitions. Perhaps tonight was the night for kissing hot men! She giggled at her own bravado, as she was usually the little shy mouse who let others step into the limelight while she held their bags. Maybe now was her time to have some fun?

She flung open the door with a huge grin, which slid from her face when she faced her ex, Allan. He was standing there with a sombre expression. She stuttered and didn't know what to say. He eyed her pretty green dress and raised an eyebrow, his face flushed in annoyance.

She stepped back and wordlessly let him in, hating that she was worried what he'd think of the little flat after the bigger one she had owned in Essex. He'd always wanted her place to reflect his personality, even though he didn't officially live there, but her new home was bright, vibrant and now full of welcoming scatter cushions and photos of family and friends. He looked around and took it all in, before turning to her with anger in his tone. 'You seemed to be expecting someone that clearly isn't me. You didn't take long to move on.'

Demi gulped in some air. But where she'd usually cower or scuttle away, she straightened her back and faced him – the man she had loved with all of her heart for so long. He'd betrayed her. She knew that now, however much he denied it. The love she'd felt for him was still there, deeply rooted in her teenage years – but she was a grown-ass woman now and fed up with people-pleasing to keep the peace. Who had she been looking out for anyway? Certainly not herself. The man in front of her didn't think of her either, and if he thought it was ok to come into her home and chastise her, he could bugger off.

'If you mean, was I hoping a friend was popping round, then yes,' she said calmly.

His eyes narrowed and he glanced around as if searching out signs of male occupancy. 'Miles?'

‘No, not Miles. I went on a date with the guy who runs the coffee shop downstairs,’ she said bravely, fed up with half-truths. ‘You started dating someone else while we were together, so I don’t see the issue with me dating when we are not.’ Her voice was icy clear and Allan floundered a little before regrouping

‘I told you that wasn’t true,’ he almost shouted and started pacing, which made her back up against the couch. It was a deep green and squidgy, unlike the one Allan had chosen, which was rigid and uncomfortable, but stylish and grey. This one almost begged you to sit on it and relax. Her legs touched the fabric and she braced them so as not to fall back on it.

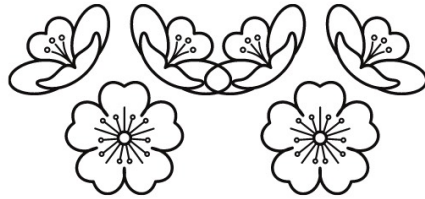
‘It *was* true, though,’ she said with a steely calm that she certainly didn’t feel. ‘I visited her and asked. I wanted to see if she would lie to my face – like you’re doing now.’

Allan’s smile slid and his bravado dropped. He reached out for her, but her demeanour told him to stay away and he dropped his hands and hung his head.

‘I think you should leave,’ she said firmly, pointing unnecessarily to the door and then walking into her bedroom and shutting it behind her. She heard the front door slam and let out the breath she’d been holding.

It had shaken her to see Allan. He’d looked a bit pallid and had big bags under his eyes, but that wasn’t her problem any more. She went back into her living room, turned her favourite music on – and decided she quite liked being in demand.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Demi felt like her heart would burst with pride when her dad finally came and gave her a hug. She'd invited her parents for a tour of the new premises and had given them the full experience, which involved tea and cake. Her dad had looked around with a practiced eye and remarked on how proud he was of her.

She'd felt sick with worry for days before they had arrived, but Miles had persuaded her to arrange it. They hadn't had a moment to talk after that, so she'd had one more date with Sid and then they'd both decided to stay as friends. She'd been asked out by one of the suppliers, but had gently let him down. She'd seen Miles standing at the main reception window watching her, and she could have sworn he knew what was happening by the irritated look on his face.

'I should have understood your ideas ages ago,' said her dad gruffly, pulling her in for a hug. 'I can't visualise things like you can and the plans you had drawn up, although incredible, didn't make it easy for me to see what you meant.'

Demi felt tears spring to her eyes and she sniffed and quickly rubbed them away. Her dad wasn't usually gushy or open about his feelings in public, so this was a huge step for him.

They walked around the newly fitted garage and he poked his head into every area and checked she'd set it up correctly, which of course she had. She fleetingly wondered if he'd be annoyed at the huge investment opportunity she'd had, but she just saw pride in his eyes. Her mum had already wandered off

and was chatting animatedly to Demi's new café manager, Kitty. She'd been a godsend and, as she'd been the manager of a café before, she brought lots of knowledge that Demi didn't have herself to the role. Demi watched her mum smile as Kitty reached for some cake samples and Demi rolled her eyes. They'd be chatting about recipes and having a tasting session in a minute if her mum had her way.

Demi's heart filled with love for her parents, these two people who would walk over fire to protect her and support her. She understood now that her dad didn't want to expand at his age, and just wanted to keep a tight ship from being smashed on the rocks. The problem was people like Allan, and other friends of his that her dad had employed. They saw the job as a way to chill with their friends and relax all day. Some were hard workers, but others should have been let go along the way. Her dad wouldn't hear of it, though, and it was draining the business financially.

'So, Allan is finally running the garage?' she asked carefully.

Her dad sat on one of the desks that were ready for their new garage reception staff who were starting the next day and glanced around.

'He said that we needed him and he wouldn't abandon us, whatever that meant,' said her dad, tongue in cheek. 'I guess that's why you two don't seem to be together anymore? Did he use that line on you?'

Demi refused to answer, but her dad regarded her with knowing eyes. 'I'm your dad. You two have been together for years. Do you think I wouldn't notice that there's a problem. Want to tell me about it?'

Demi's face flamed. If Allan left, then her dad's business might finally crash and burn. Allan might be a useless partner, but he could manage to keep customers happy for now.

'I don't really want to talk about it, Dad,' she said honestly.

Her had nodded. ‘Ok. Is it salvageable?’ he asked candidly. ‘Did he hurt you in any way?’ He stood up, checked his wife was still busy sampling cakes and took Demi’s hand.

She smiled at their interlinked hands and then leaned in and hugged him. ‘I don’t think it’s salvageable. He’s not happy that I’ve left the garage and thinks I’m selfish.’

‘It’s me who was selfish,’ said her dad sadly, rubbing his tired eyes. She could see how drained of energy he was even though he was trying to hide it. ‘I should have listened to you ages ago and not tried to keep everything the same. We have to move with the times. I’m going to have a word with any staff who aren’t pulling their weight. That includes Allan,’ he added, much to her surprise.

‘Well done, Dad!’ Demi smiled suddenly.

Just then, her mum joined them.

‘Dad was just telling me that he’s streamlining the business,’ said Demi and her mum seemed to be trying to hide her own surprise by offering them a taste of the gooey chocolate cake samples she’d brought with her from the counter. Demi took a piece and her mouth immediately salivated for more of the decadent concoction. Kitty had found an incredible baker locally and they ordered their cakes from her. Demi had tried to source as much as she could from the surrounding areas, including their advertising and promo, most of which would be coming from Sasha and her company. Printing would be done by a guy who ran his operation from his garden shed two roads up. His shop was tiny, but his end product was very professional and he could actually produce large volumes from the space, which was a win for them all.

‘Does that mean getting rid of Allan?’ her mum asked suddenly, putting the plate of cake down and giving her husband a steely stare.

‘I can’t sack him just because they’ve split up,’ said Len. ‘But he will have to start putting in extra hours and earn his new title, like Demi did.’

‘I never had a title,’ said Demi, shaking her head and tutting with good humour.

Her dad ignored this at first. ‘Everyone knew you pretty much ran the place, and I wasn’t daft enough not to know that our customers came in to see you. I was just too pig-headed to admit it until you were gone. Your mum pointed it out often enough,’ he added and her mum nodded her head with just a hint too much vigour. ‘I was determined to prove we could survive without you once you’d decided to leave, but now I’m not so sure.’

‘Dad?’ Demi wanted to know. ‘Has it gotten worse? Is Allan stepping up to help at all?’ When her dad seemed unsure she continued. ‘Allan refused to work harder when I was there and it annoyed the hell out of me that he’s only done it since I left. It didn’t cause the break-up, though.’ Her dad eyed her sceptically. ‘We just need time apart,’ she quickly added.

‘Your dad should’ve let you run the business ages ago,’ said Tianna. ‘He knows that now. I’ve started to do the accounts and they are shocking, Demi.’

Demi hung her head, but her mum cupped her face in her hand. ‘It’s not your responsibility. We should have both stepped in sooner, but you were so good at plastering over any problems. When you left, we could see them clearly, which may have been what we needed. Your dad wants to look for a buyer.’ Demi gasped, but she also felt relieved.

‘Are you sure? I can’t believe it.’

‘It’s the right choice,’ said her dad. ‘We need to do it while the garage still has some value. Your mum and I would love to have time to travel and visit family abroad at last.’

Her dad had been putting off visiting Demi’s grandma in Jamaica for years because she always got him to do some kind of building work, or check over the whole family’s cars even if they didn’t need it, so Demi was floored. Her grandma was fierce and loud and she gave Len a headache even though he loved her. She often came to England and stayed with them, so they saw her regularly, but Tianna spoke of visiting her mum’s

home more often. Now it seemed that her dad had decided he'd like that too!

Miles walked into the garage and her heart suddenly started beating at what felt like a hundred miles an hour. He shook her dad's hand and kissed her mum's cheek, who giggled like a schoolgirl and then kept darting her eyes between him and Demi after he'd turned his back. What the hell!

Miles and Len wandered into the new garage area and her mum rushed to her side. 'He's so handsome!' she hissed, making Demi blush. 'Young Miles would make the perfect partner for you,' she laughed, making Demi shake her head at her mum's antics. 'He can't be a bachelor forever.'

'Stop it!' Demi scolded. 'You know Miles and I are just friends,' she added, although she wondered if that were true as she'd barely seen him recently. They'd both been busy, but was he avoiding her? That ugly thought decided to pop its head up again.

'I think we should tell your dad about what really happened with Allan,' said Tianna under her breath. 'If that boy comes near me I'll take a swing for him for all of the heartbreak he's caused you.' She was practically baring her teeth.

Demi smiled at last but said quickly, 'We definitely can't tell Dad! He needs Allan, if he wants a quick sale. Allan's one of the most experienced mechanics. Dad will chuck him out if he finds out about Cindy.'

Her mum tutted loudly and shook her head in disgust.

'That boy is lucky I haven't seen him in the street or I'd have dragged him to his mother's house and told him to explain to her how he's treated my daughter.'

Allan's mum was scary and opinionated, and she told everyone who would listen how perfect her son was, so Demi couldn't imagine that conversation ending well.

'Maybe don't do that, Mum,' she pleaded. 'She's probably heard about it on the town grapevine by now. She's tried to

phone me a few times but I've ignored her calls. Unless Allan's been telling her I've left him, which wouldn't surprise me, she probably already knows.' Demi frowned at the thought.

'I never liked that woman,' said her mum and Demi almost choked on the piece of cake she had filched from the plate. Her mum patted her back and grinned wickedly.

'You never told me that.'

'She never treated you with enough respect, and her son is following her example. Good luck to the next woman, because she's done you a favour taking him off your hands.'

'Mum!' said Demi in exasperation. 'I thought you liked Allan?'

Her mum shrugged her shoulders and stared at the plate until Demi handed her the final morsel of cake. That reminded her that Miles had joined her for a cake tasting evening with Kitty recently. Although everyone had remained professional, Demi felt that her new manager might also have a little crush on Miles. Demi had finally admitted to herself that she might kind of enjoy Miles's company – and not just as friends – but the idea had shocked her and she was actively avoiding overthinking it.

Her mum's next words broke into her train of thought. 'Allan was ok. I didn't mind him, but most of his conversations were about how impressed he was with himself.'

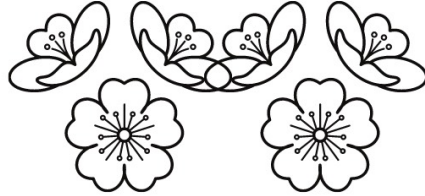
Demi burst out laughing and felt some of the tension of the day ease. She watched Miles and her dad chat amiably to her new garage manager and wondered if she should have offered that job to her dad, then immediately dismissed that idea. It was doing them good to have their own space. She didn't know why she hadn't thought of leaving years ago. Her dad patted Miles on the shoulder and grinned at something he said, which made Demi smile too. They had always gotten on so well, as they had cars in common.

‘I know that Len wants to find a buyer now, but it may take a while and we need to ensure that he tightens the place up in the meantime,’ said her mum, suddenly serious now. ‘I’ll be making sure he follows through with our plans and that the dead weight is put out to sea at last. They’ve taken a ride on our backs for too long. It might be a shock when they realise they now actually have to do some work to get paid,’ she said with finality.

‘Are you telling Allan about the potential sale?’ asked Demi, tension filling her body once more. She noticed that her dad and Miles were heading back their way and she stood up and brushed down her smart new trousers.

‘Nope!’ said her mum with glee. ‘He can find out the same way you did about his infidelity. Through the town grapevine, and after the deal is done.’

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Demi admired her reflection as she turned from side to side in the tall mirror in her hallway. Her new wrap dress was silky and clung to her curves in all the right places. It dipped low and gave a tantalising glimpse of cleavage and had little crystals sewn into the belt that cinched in at her waist. She was meeting Sasha and Poppy and all the Taylor brothers to celebrate the imminent launch of her new business, and for once she wanted to stand out.

They were meeting in Franco's pub in Cherry Blossom Lane. Demi's stomach was full of butterflies. Miles had been so cute with her dad, and her mum hadn't stopped winking at her until she'd had to nudge her to stop. They'd left with hugs and promises to visit soon and Miles had turned to her with pride in his eyes as he'd told her how much her dad loved the garage. He'd given them full access to the site and they'd ended up staying for hours, which had worried her as Miles was super busy, but he'd seemed to be enjoying himself. They'd had a photo shoot in the afternoon and he'd slipped his hand around her waist and smiled for the camera, but the closeness had made her fumble and blush and he'd been concerned if she was ok.

They hadn't spoken again about their conversation in the pub, so now she wondered if she'd imagined his interest in her. Maybe it was just wishful thinking? Miles had recently been 'papped' by a journalist when out with a stunning redhead, which had resulted in a mention in a national newspaper, so she'd decided that she was being stupid anyway. He was so far out of her league that they didn't even orbit in the same

atmosphere. He'd tried to get her on her own since then, but she'd scurried away, mumbling about her long 'to do' list, and kept her head down. He was younger than her, even though he often acted as though he was the most mature of their friendship group. Perhaps he had just been messing around that time at the bar.

She knew there would be questions about Allan tonight as she hadn't confirmed his betrayal, but she hoped her friends were smart enough to read between the lines and wait until she was ready to tell them further details. She pulled on a brand-new pair of wedge-heeled sandals and enjoyed how they matched her flirty summer dress. The weather had finally decided to brighten up, so she grabbed a lightweight jacket and her bag and headed for the door. She almost jumped out of her skin when she came face to face with Miles when she opened it, and he held onto her arm to stop her face planting as she tripped over her own feet.

He laughed and pulled her into a hug. 'I'm happy for you to fall into my arms, Demi, but I didn't expect it to be the moment you opened the door,' he joked and she smiled finally. Those stubborn butterflies wouldn't budge, though.

'Sorry about that. I'm so clumsy. What are you doing here, Miles?' She looked at him expectantly.

Miles grinned and she blushed. What was it with this man and her hormones? 'I thought I'd walk you to the pub. I've just finished work.' She noted his smart short-sleeved blue shirt, the colour of cornflowers, and his suit trousers. His jacket was slung over his arm.

'You're working late,' she said casually, closing the door behind her and following him down the stairs, which afforded her a view of his wide shoulders. 'I thought you were too busy dating in the evenings to do anything else,' she said waspishly, unable to help herself.

'Another reason why I'm here.' He turned suddenly and the small corridor space seemed to shrink, which made her breathing come faster. 'I wondered if you'd seen that. Bronté is a customer. I've been servicing her car for years.'

Demi raised an eyebrow and he rolled his eyes but moved in even closer so they were chest to chest.

‘Her husband was there too. Funnily enough they didn’t include him in the shot,’ he sighed.

‘Oh...’ said Demi, gulping. She licked her lips, and his eyes followed the movement.

‘You went out with the coffee guy again?’ he asked, clearly knowing the answer and not liking it by the way he was frowning.

‘I... uh... I did, but we’re just friends.’ She didn’t know where to put her hands, so she leant one on the wall, but this just moved her closer into his side. His eyes went dark and predatory.

‘And are we just friends?’ he demanded to know. ‘I haven’t been able to get you on your own for ages. It seems that meeting in a tiny corridor is the only way to stop you from running away.’

‘I don’t know if we’re friends,’ she said, looking at his mouth, transfixed on his lips. ‘I thought you were dating the redhead.’

Miles took her hand and placed it on his heart. His pulse was racing. He took her other hand and brought it to his lips and she sighed in pleasure. She couldn’t help herself, she melted when he was near.

‘I thought I made it pretty clear at the bar where my interest is,’ he said, looking deep into her eyes.

At that moment she was glad that there were no other flats that led from this corridor, as she would gladly stay there all night – or have mad passionate sex with him on the stairs, as that was all she’d been thinking about since their first kiss... then her phone rang and startled them both. They jumped apart, but before she could answer it, he swooped down and captured her lips with his. Fireworks exploded in her brain and she lost any other coherent thought other than his mouth on hers. His hands slid round her waist to pull her closer and make her aware of how much he wanted her. Her phone

started to ring again. They broke apart, both breathing rapidly and rested their foreheads together, his hands still linked around her waist. She glanced at her phone screen and recognised Allan's number, so she slid the ringer to off and put the phone back into her silky handbag.

'What is this?' she asked finally, when she'd managed to form a simple sentence. He kissed her again briefly and then took her hand and led her outside. The warm evening air filtered around them but she felt cold without his arms holding her. She was numb with shock that a man could make her feel this way with a simple kiss. She let herself be led along the road and up towards Cherry Blossom Lane in a daze.

Miles tucked her under his arm as they walked, but then stopped and turned to her, lifting her chin so that she had to look at him. Her skin was flushed and she felt like she'd had a few glasses of wine – giddy and a bit silly. She knew she was grinning like an idiot but she couldn't help it.

'I don't know what this is,' he said honestly, bursting some of her equilibrium, 'but I know that it feels right. We work well together and when you aren't around, I'm thinking about you, or about kissing you.'

Demi blinked in surprise. She didn't know how to respond to that. Did he want a business partner... with benefits? Her scrambled mind couldn't work it all out, but Miles seemed to think that cleared everything up, and they once again started walking towards the pub.

'Have you been avoiding me?' he asked as they reached the pub.

'Yes,' she said honestly. 'I'm not sure what to feel about the sudden shift in our relationship. I didn't like the redhead,' she grumbled, 'Kitty's obsessed with you too,' she added petulantly and he gave her a wicked smile that reminded her of how much he'd liked to tease her when they were just best friends.

'I can't help it if my magnetism and charm wins people over,' he joked, pulling her in closer. 'I love it that you were

jealous. You've never minded me dating before.' There was an undertone to his words that she didn't understand.

'You've never kissed me like that before...' she said. When he gave her a reproving stare she flushed again. What was it with this man and her bodily temperature?

'Let's not talk about that school party,' she said firmly, taking his hand and leading him inside. She and Miles often walked holding hands or hugging, so no one would bat an eyelid at them messing about and joking, or touching.

Sasha was sitting with the others, at a table near the big back windows that opened up to fields of vibrant flowers beyond. She saw them and waved and Dylan jumped up, blew Demi a kiss and went to get them all a round of drinks. Miles joined him and Ollie kissed Demi in welcome and then went to lend a hand. They'd pretty much always ordered the same round of drinks since they were young adults, so their choices were a given. The girls mostly shared a bottle of red wine while the boys preferred tall cool glasses of beer.

'You looked very cosy with Miles,' said Sasha. 'What are you two plotting now? World domination?' she joked. 'We need to meet up to go over your new social media schedule.'

'No work chat tonight,' scolded Poppy, who looked gorgeous with her blonde hair piled high into a topknot, her dangly earrings sparkling in the late evening sunshine. She was wearing a fitted white lace blouse with dainty little cap sleeves and dark blue skinny jeans.

Sasha had on a gorgeous deep red summer dress that skimmed her curves and drew glances from the men at a nearby table. Both of her best friends were stunning, so Demi was used to basking in their glory. This time she felt a bit weird, though. Usually, having a boyfriend was a kind of shield, to scare away single men, but now she was the only lone female of the group. She felt a bit exposed, especially in her pretty new dress, which was attracting interested stares from a couple of guys nearby. Demi pulled the neckline up and the belt a bit tighter. Was she leaning towards Miles because she was afraid of being on her own? She didn't like the way

that brought a sour taste to her mouth, and she quickly took the huge glass of wine Miles handed her on his return and took a big gulp, which made her eyes water.

‘Steady!’ laughed Miles as he sat down next to her, their knees touching under the table, which made her skin flame. She couldn’t meet his eyes for a minute.

‘So are things with Allan officially over?’ asked Sasha, when the boys were all comfortably seated.

Everyone turned to look at Demi. She hated being the centre of attention, so she looked round for somewhere to escape to, but Miles put a reassuring hand on her knee fleetingly and she tried to calm her breathing down.

Would they think she was rebounding, if she admitted to her growing feelings for Miles, she wondered. She’d never mentioned the stupid crush that she’d always had on him. He was the youngest of their group, but he’d always been so serious and studious, and her shy nature had leaned towards him, even years ago. He was like a teeny tiny thorn in her side that she didn’t really want to remove. She’d thought that nothing would ever happen with them, so she’d been happy with Allan and loved Miles anyway as a friend. As long as Miles was in her life in some capacity, she was content... she’d thought. Seeing him out on dates with women hadn’t bothered her too much, because she’d known he was never serious about them. She hadn’t stopped to wonder why she felt that way. She realised everyone was waiting for an answer and she took in a deep breath of courage.

‘Yes. He’s been seeing that girl Cindy from the chip shop on the parade just outside of town.’ She was happy to hear their collective gasps of horror and anger, but she felt Miles tense by her side and knew what she said next could change her life. ‘It’s taken me a while to come to terms with it and I’m still angry, but when he turns up at my flat like he did the other night and tries to emotionally blackmail me to get back with him, I can see what he’s doing now.’ She looked around the table and could still see a bit of scepticism. ‘I’m going to start dating a bit more and maybe enjoy kissing a handsome man or two,’ she laughed suddenly and enjoyed the low growl from

Miles about the kissing more than one man. His knee touched hers again, but she just moved closer this time and he grinned and sipped his beer.

‘You’ve been with Allan since that fateful party when we were teenagers,’ said Poppy. ‘I’m so sorry he’s treated you that way, Demi,’ she said, taking her hand across the table and squeezing it in solidarity. ‘We all trusted him.’

‘Didn’t you go to that party with Miles?’ asked Sasha, giggling as Ollie poked her gently in the ribs for teasing her friend.

‘She did,’ clarified Miles, his eyes boring into hers. Demi flushed and rolled her eyes. This was old news.

‘Yeah, but Miles got off with someone else at the party, after he snogged Demi!’ said Sasha who was a bit tipsy after her huge glass of wine. Ollie slapped his hand over his mouth to muffle his laughing and Miles looked shocked.

‘Sasha!’ scolded Poppy.

‘Sorry.’ Sasha hung her head, but was still giggling.

‘No I didn’t,’ said Miles indignantly. ‘I went there with Demi and she left with Allan.’ He looked at Demi and shrugged apologetically.

‘Um... that’s not right,’ said Demi. ‘Allan told me that you were in the bedroom with that girl from the local car wash that all the boys fancied. He said you’d arranged to meet her there. I only went home with him because I was crying!’

She went bright red and everyone was speechless for a moment, before they all started speaking over one another. ‘It worked out for the best in the end, because we’re best friends now,’ she looked at Miles for assurance, but his face was a picture of shock. ‘Didn’t it?’ she asked in confusion.

‘No,’ said Miles, his eyes darting fire and his cheeks flushed, which made her heart sink. She was trying to understand what he was telling her, but Miles definitely hooked up with Arabella... didn’t he? ‘That didn’t happen. I was helping Ollie in the bathroom, because he was so drunk he

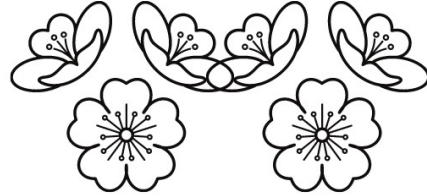
broke a glass and cut his hand. When I came out and looked for you, I was told you'd left with Allan. The rest is history.'

Ollie held up his hands in surrender. 'So this is my fault? You'd have probably just dated and hated each other anyway,' he said. Then he yelped as Sasha kicked him underneath the table. 'Ow! Ok, I don't really believe that either,' he apologised. 'I was roaring drunk and cut my hand up pretty badly. Miles was the only one with boy scout training. He patched me up with the contents of the medicine cabinet. It hurt like hell for days!'

Demi's mouth hung open before she snapped it back shut. 'But... but...'

'Bloody Allan,' was all Sasha said, and then she got up and strutted to the bar to get another round of drinks while everyone else just sat there and watched her go.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



The launch of the site had been a whirlwind and Demi wasn't quite sure if she'd recovered yet. There had been bunting and cake and speeches. The front car lot had been lined with cordoned-off supercars that people could admire and drool over, and the garage was now open for business. Drovees of people had stopped by after an extensive social media push by Sasha and her company. Ollie had put up posters for them in his gyms and Poppy had helped make sure that the design of the build used the space to its maximum potential. They already had bookings galore from local residents for their cars and the café was a smash hit.

Instead of customers dropping their cars off and going somewhere else, they could now stay onsite. They could get food or a drink and enjoy the view of the supercars in their lot or the fields of flowers beyond. Sasha's ideas about home working and workstations at Ollie's latest gym were incredibly popular, so Miles and Demi had added desks to a separate quiet area beside the café. People could now work while they were waiting for their cars, and see the café through glass doors so they would be tempted to get a snack while they were working.

Demi and Miles had enjoyed quiet dinners a few times but they hadn't discussed the kiss or the school party. It seemed like they both didn't want to open the floodgates of regret about that misunderstanding. Perhaps it had made Miles decide she was just too mixed up for him. After all, she'd gone to a party with him and gone home with another boy, without checking on him first. To be fair, she'd thought he was with

someone else, but she should have trusted him. Her own insecurities about not being good enough were always ruining things for her. She was tired of jumping at shadows at work, in case it was him, while her eyes followed him across every room.

Demi thanked a couple of her new staff for their hard work and stretched out her tired shoulders. She saw Miles head for his office and, without second-guessing herself, started walking quickly in the same direction. She glanced down at her jeans and pretty fitted blouse and decided it was now or never.

Miles looked up from his desk when she came in and smiled, but she could see how tired the past few months had made him. He was usually full of energy, but the build had taken longer than expected, even though she'd tried to shoulder the majority of the workload.

'Are you ok?' he asked, standing up and propping his backside on the corner of his desk.

'I... Um... I need you to show me something in your computer server room,' she said, keeping her features neutral and trying not to play with her hair as her heart raced. Miles frowned and looked at the secure door at the back of his office.

'What do you need in there?' he asked in confusion. 'I'm sorry we haven't had much time to talk about anything other than work recently,' he added. 'I could literally fall asleep on my feet.'

She went round and took his hand, which made him raise his eyebrows. Most of the staff had left for the day, but anyone could walk in. 'One of the new clients asked me about our operating systems today and I was stumped to answer. I thought if I looked around in there a bit, I might not look so stupid next time. Would that be ok?'

'Um... Sure. I'm not sure what that will tell you, but I can show you around if it helps.' He walked to the panel on the wall and tapped in a code and then pressed his hand so the panel could digitally recognise it was him. The door slid silently open and they walked into the heart of the business.

Demi had been in there a few times and seen the walls of humming computers and screens. To one side was a couch and a water cooler. As the door slid shut, she turned to him and took both of his hands in hers. She didn't give herself time to think but pressed her body into his so that he was against the wall and his lips were already seeking hers. His hands left hers and slipped into the back of her hair to mould her closer and they both groaned. His hands moved to her backside and he picked her up. Her legs wound around his waist while he turned them around so her back was against the wall this time. Her soul ignited and her body burst into flames in his arms. The kiss seemed to go on forever, but then he slowly pulled away and set her down. His eyes were dark with lust and his lips glistened in the muted light. His breathing was as laboured as hers and he rested his forehead on hers for a second.

'I've been wanting to do that since you kissed me in the corridor,' she said in a husky voice. 'What is with us and small dark spaces?' she laughed, breaking the sexual tension that made the atmosphere heavy.

He laughed and dipped his head to kiss her neck and a shiver ran down her spine. 'You can corner me in a cupboard any time if you're going to do that to me,' he said, kissing her deeply again and then groaning as they drew apart.

'Come home with me,' he said gruffly, suddenly still and watchful, waiting for her answer. She felt like her heart stopped, as she hadn't been with anyone but Allan, and doubts filled her mind. Allan had all but destroyed her confidence and she bit her lip and frowned.

Miles smoothed the lines away with his fingers and lifted her chin so that their eyes met. She could openly see the longing in his. 'I'm happy to wait if you're not ready, but every fibre of my being wants to be inside you right now and it's almost killing me,' he admitted, brazenly taking her hand and leading it to show her just how much his body craved hers. She gasped and he kissed her again, pushing doubt from her mind. This gorgeous man really wanted her and although he was showing her how much, she knew this would go at her

own pace. She pushed gently on his chest to give herself space to breathe.

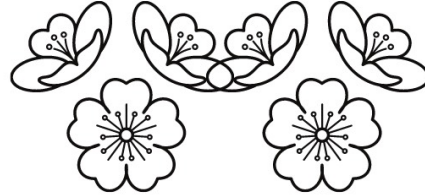
‘You really want this?’ she asked in a breathless voice. ‘What if it changes everything?’

Miles nuzzled her neck and took her hands in his. ‘It already has,’ he ground out, clearly showing constraint. ‘I’ve wanted this to happen for years, Demi,’ he said honestly, and she leaned back on the wall in shock. ‘You’re my first thought every morning and my last thought at night,’ he said between kisses on her lips that were driving her wild. ‘I’ve always dreamed of us being more than just friends, but you were in a relationship.’

Before she could begin to think about Allan, he kissed her again and she groaned his name when he pulled away. ‘Now you’re mine,’ he said, ‘and I’m yours. Is that what you want too?’ He didn’t move while he waited for her answer, and she kissed him greedily on the lips and took his hand to lead him to the door. Her heart was racing and her head felt as though it was full of candyfloss, on a high of sexual energy and excitement. If this was what being with Miles felt like, then she didn’t ever want it to stop.

‘Let’s go home to bed,’ she said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Demi was walking round with a permanent grin on her face. The night she'd spent with Miles had been a revelation, and now she felt insatiable! She was trying so hard to be professional at work, but he kept touching her hand when no one was looking or brushing a stray curl out of her eyes and stealing quick kisses. Then the night times were all adult. They barely made it through a meal most evenings, and always ended up slick with sweat and exhausted after getting naked and exploring every inch of each other's bodies.

Miles was always smiling now too. He still slung his arm around her for a cuddle all the time and didn't seem to mind who saw them, as they'd done this before anyway. They hadn't spoken about the status of their relationship, but neither of them seemed to want to date anyone else. They worked hard during the day and played hard together at night, mostly at Demi's new flat as Miles lived part-time with his older brother Ollie and half the week in their old town, although he was going there less and less, as he wound up his old offices.

Demi was under a car, checking her staff were working diligently, and was pleased to see everything was in order. She'd built a great team and was proud of their growing client list. The café was a huge hit and she grinned as she saw Miles wander over. Then he stopped outside the café to chat to Kitty.

Thanks to Kitty, there was suddenly softness to their forecourt, with flowers, pretty café signs and the scent of spices and sugar filling the air. It enticed people to go in and find out what the cake of the day was. Kitty was always telling

everyone who would listen how handsome Miles was. She was a ball of energy. She had long red hair swept up into a topknot and wrapped in a bandana for work. She wore her uniform of branded T-shirt and black trousers well.

Demi didn't like the way her insides squirmed when she saw them together. Demi could hear Miles joking that he would put on weight if Kitty kept tempting him with cake samples, and Kitty giggled coquettishly and fluttered her eyelashes at him. Demi took a deep breath and tried to calm herself down.

Miles had given her no reason to be jealous, but no one knew that they had been hooking up and it was starting to worry her. Kitty openly drooling over Miles made Demi remember that Miles was very eligible and women often made passes at him. Kitty was sunny, bright and cheerful, so why wouldn't Miles want to encourage her? She was very attractive, while Demi was currently covered in grease and probably smelly from being on a dusty trolley on the floor. The lines of their relationship had always been very clear before, but now she was worried. She'd begun to have much deeper feelings for one of the Taylor 'heartbreak brothers.' She cursed and swung herself out from under the car.

Miles saw the movement and then grinned and headed her way. As she got up and brushed herself down, he stopped right in front of her and before she could speak, he fed her a morsel of cake. She groaned in pleasure – she couldn't help herself, the flavour of salted caramel and cream was too much and she'd forgotten to eat breakfast. His eyes dilated immediately, and he brushed a stray crumb from the side of her mouth with the pad of his thumb. She had to stop herself from pressing her cheek into his hand, as she was still angry at him for being so gorgeous! He was blocking everyone else's view of her, and she licked her lips.

'Stop doing that or I'll have to drag you back to my office for a "meeting,"' he said huskily, emphasising the last word.

'We had one of those this morning,' she giggled suddenly.

‘I need another one,’ he laughed. ‘You’re distracting me from my work. I can’t seem to go for even a few hours without coming and finding you. I thought you’d be in the café, as you weren’t in your office.’

‘I was under a car,’ she smiled.

‘I’d rather you were under me,’ he said cheekily and she gasped.

‘Miles!’ she laughed, but her skin was already warming up and she wished she didn’t have such a busy morning ahead. ‘Maybe it’s not great that we have so many customers already. We could have found another use for my trolley,’ she grinned. He pretended to look shocked, but she could see his brain already thinking of how that could work.

‘I need to get back to my office, but you’ve given me food for thought. Can I take you out to dinner tonight?’ he asked suddenly.

She paused in her teasing and her mind went blank for a second. They had been out to eat together thousands of times before they became intimate, but this seemed like an actual date.

‘We need to celebrate all we’ve achieved here and I want to show off my partner,’ he said.

Demi gulped down the lump in her throat. Did he mean *partner* partner, or just business partner? She was confused. ‘Ok,’ she said shakily. ‘Where are we going?’

‘Somewhere fancy,’ he said and grinned, which almost made her heart stop. He was so handsome, and all his attention was focussed on her. Kitty called out to him that she’d made him a coffee and he looked over his shoulder and waved to show her he had heard.

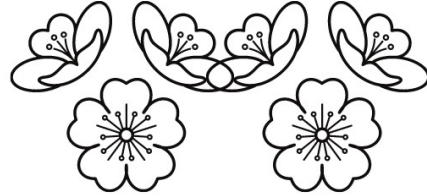
‘It’s a date,’ she said bravely, looking at Kitty and smiling as Kitty held up a coffee for her as well.

Miles’s face lit up with pleasure and he nodded to her before grabbing his coffee and heading back to his office. Demi followed and accepted her coffee from Kitty, who nudged her and winked.

‘That man is just too handsome for his own good,’ she said, fanning her face theatrically. ‘The woman who lands him is in for a real treat, I bet,’ she giggled and looked straight at Demi, who suddenly remembered how busy she was and that she didn’t have time to stand around and chat.

She thanked Kitty for the coffee and hurried back to her other desk in the garage, to google the nearest shops to buy a slinky dress and some sexy new underwear.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Miles curled his arm around Demi protectively as they stepped out of the restaurant. Light bulbs flashed in their faces. There were photographers milling around outside who had leapt into action as soon as they'd seen Miles. He was regularly in magazines now, so he was becoming used to it, but Demi froze for a moment and then hurried to their car. She looked stunning in a sexy deep red silk dress that swept over her bust and clung to her curves. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen her wear before, and he had been salivating all night – and not for the incredible food from the award-winning restaurant they had just had dinner in. He'd tried to enjoy the delicious food and wine, and they had chatted about how well the business was going and come up with a plethora of inventive ideas to keep them up to date, but all he could think of was holding her arms above her head and lifting the wisp of silk away from her skin and throwing it onto the floor, so that he could feast on her. They spent so much time together naked, but he couldn't get enough of her and he feared he was becoming obsessed.

He'd managed to compartmentalise their relationship before, but his feelings were growing every day, so much so that he felt he was falling hopelessly in love with his best friend. He was trying to keep things light and uncomplicated, as he knew she'd been in a long and serious relationship with Allan. He didn't want to scare her away with the depth of his feelings or pressure her into anything she wasn't ready for. He knew she enjoyed his lovemaking, but he wanted all of her in his life, forever. This wasn't a fling for him, but he was at a

loss about how to make her stay. He worried that she'd get bored and find another guy to spend time with, once she got her first fling after Allan out of the way. The thought kept him up at night. He hated feeling insecure and vulnerable. He'd managed to protect his heart so far, but now he feared that Demi held it in her hands.

He opened the door of his sleek sports car for her and she slid inside, looking like a deer who'd been caught in headlights. He put his hand on her leg in reassurance, but she didn't seem to notice.

'Are you ok?' he asked, as he started the engine, moved out of the car park and headed home. He enjoyed the purr of the car's engine and tried to concentrate on that, and not the knot of fear that had just formed in his stomach. He knew what was coming next.

'Will the photos be in the papers?' she asked shakily.

'They might be,' he said honestly. 'I didn't know photographers would be there, but word often gets out. I'm sure the restaurants tip them off for free publicity. It doesn't usually bother me. I'm sorry if it's upset you.'

'I just wasn't expecting it.' She looked at his hand on her leg and then out of the window. He put both hands on the steering wheel and gritted his teeth. 'Supposing Allan sees it?' she asked, and his worst fears were realised.

'Would that be a problem?' he asked as casually as he could, his hands gripping the wheel tightly.

Demi brushed her curls out of her eyes and looked over at him. 'He's been calling and texting, trying to apologise. He came to the flat and he's said that it's over with Cindy.'

Miles felt bile rise up in his stomach and he wished he'd not drunk that rich black coffee after their meal.

'Do you want him back?' he asked simply. He understood that she'd been in a relationship since she was young and she didn't really know anything else, which was why he'd been trying not to pressure her. Now he wished he'd made his intentions clearer.

‘No... of course not,’ she looked satisfyingly horrified at that idea. ‘But I’m not sure how to feel about anything at the moment. I never expected us to happen and I didn’t exactly smash the dating world in between.’

‘Perhaps that’s because he made sure that you were never confident enough to leave him, or look at anyone else, Demi,’ he said harshly. He winced, as he could have softened his words – but he was so mad right now and felt the intimacy they had built up recently slipping through his fingers.

Demi drew in a sharp breath. ‘What do you mean?’

Miles pulled the car into the parking space behind her flat and turned off the ignition so that the only light was the one beside the entrance. It gently illuminated both their faces. Miles wasn’t sure he wanted Demi to see how much she had hurt him by still caring about what Allan thought, especially after the way the guy had treated her recently. Miles wasn’t a man who put off tough talks, though, and he turned to face her.

‘Demi, you’re gorgeous, caring, brilliant and one of the kindest people I know.’ She flushed and bit her lip, but didn’t interrupt him, so he continued. ‘You won’t want to hear this, but Allan made sure you didn’t know how amazing you are so that you’d stay with him. He belittled you to ensure that you’d never look at another man and feel worthy,’ he ground out.

‘So I wouldn’t go to someone like you?’ she asked angrily. ‘To someone who just wants a fling? I want marriage and children, as well as a business.’

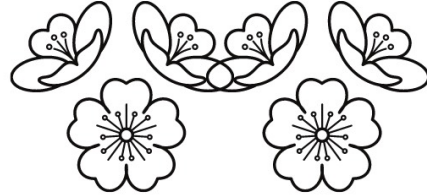
She turned away to stare out of the window and he was ready to beg her to stay if she leapt out of the car.

‘I want that too,’ said Miles. ‘This isn’t just a fling to me, Demi. Surely you can see that?’ he pleaded. She snapped her head round to see if he was lying, but he guessed she didn’t trust her ability to work that out, after Allan. Tears sprang to her eyes and she got out of the car.

‘I wish that were true, but I’m fed up with being played,’ she said as she slammed the door, and he watched helplessly

as she entered the building and closed the door firmly behind her.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Demi flicked through the paperwork on her neat wooden desk for the thousandth time and still didn't take in any of the information. She'd gone over and over her conversation with Miles and tried to figure out if what he'd said was true.

She had built a wall around her heart after Allan and, although it was crumbling after spending time with Miles, there was still a barrier. She didn't know if she'd be able to fully trust a man again and she knew Miles was bearing the brunt of that. She also knew he wouldn't intentionally hurt her, and she hoped he was serious about wanting to settle down – but why would that be with her? She wasn't glamorous or special in any way, so surely his head would turn the minute a hot new model strolled in with a supercar for him to service.

She didn't think her heart could cope with the devastation of seeing Miles with another woman now. She'd have to move to a different part of the world and start a bookshop or something. Then she could read decadent romances about swoonworthy men all day and avoid the ones in real life. They were too dangerous to mere mortals like her. Falling in love with a Taylor brother was never going to be a good idea. She shook when she thought about the fact that she was in love with Miles. She knew Sasha and Poppy were ecstatic with Ollie and Dylan, but both had had long and rocky roads to happiness. Demi wanted to avoid that at all costs. Allan had knocked the stuffing out of her and although she was slowly rebuilding her confidence and Miles made her feel oh, so sexy and constantly on heat, she knew those feelings couldn't last.

She'd never glowed after a mere touch from Allan. She had to assume that passion like this would wear out pretty quickly and he would want to move on.

She got up, wandered to her bookcase and flicked through a few pages of an engine manual. Even that couldn't hold her attention. She sighed and went to look out over the forecourt. She froze in shock when she saw Allan pacing across the paved area and looking around for something. He peered up and saw her in the window and his mouth set with determination. Demi winced as this could only mean more arguments, but a teeny tiny part of her was glad to see him. They had shared so much conversation over the course of their relationship, which was something her evenings of passion with Miles hadn't resulted in. She and Miles were sexually compatible for sure, but they seemed to have lost some of their usual friendly communication. She missed their casual chats in his office or phone calls about their day. She enjoyed every second of his hot slick body next to hers, but worried that that was all she was to him. Was he using her, now that he had her business ideas and a willing body in bed?

She walked out of her office with determination and decided not to let Allan wrongfoot her anymore. She was fed up with having her emotions dictated to her by men. She would not be intimidated by him any longer. As the lift doors silently slid open, Allan looked around in awe at the high level of design and professionalism. Then he noticed her standing silently and watching him, so his mouth set into a grim line and he walked her way.

Demi's office manager, George, stepped out from behind his desk and enquired how he could help, but Allan moved round him. Demi signalled that it was ok to let him proceed, although what George could have done about it she wasn't sure. Allan was stocky and spent hours in the gym, and George was a quiet, diligent man who never raised his voice. Demi loved that about him and it was one of the reasons he'd got the job ahead of the long list of other applicants. She had warmed to his gentle soul and she felt relaxed and calm beside him, which she desperately needed now. She had so much new

responsibility, plus she felt a weight of responsibility not to drag Miles's rising star of popularity down with her.

Demi worked really well with George and he ran the office like a dream, though he was very different to Billy and his bursts of song over at Poppy's place. Billy was super dramatic in everything he did, whilst George and Demi enjoyed quiet times and sitting and discussing customers and new ideas for the office over a hot chocolate and marshmallow tower. She loved the fact that George looked ready to step in anyway on her behalf. He was glancing from her to Allan with lines of worry on his brow. She gave him a bright smile and watched his features relax as she led Allan towards her inner sanctum. He stopped as he passed the door to Miles's office and looked straight in. When he saw Miles's sumptuous quarters and huge oak desk, Allan growled aloud. She noticed Miles look up in surprise. He gave her an enquiring glance and tilt of the head, but she shook her own and gave him a weak smile.

She felt like she'd done an assault course by the time she sat down, realising she'd left the office door ajar. She turned to offer Allan a seat opposite her desk, too tired to get up again.

'I can see why you left now,' said Allan with a sneer, then his cheeks flushed and he hung his head when she gave him a steely stare and said nothing. 'Sorry. That was uncalled for.'

Demi let out the breath she'd been holding and tried to clear her mind. 'What are you doing here, Allan?' she asked.

'I miss you,' he said forlornly, his gaze running over her as if to check that she was real. 'I know I messed up, but I've never done anything like that before, Dems, I promise you.' He held out a hand to her, but she just stared at it and he dropped it to his side. 'Your dad needs you at the garage. It's falling apart without you there. I admit, I might not have realised how much you held us all together, but I do now,' he pleaded.

'You realise how much work it takes to manage everyone, you mean,' she answered sarcastically, 'now that I'm not there to carry both of our jobs.' Allan baulked and sat back in his chair, seeming lost for words that Demi had answered back.

‘I work hard,’ he muttered, not meeting her eye.

It put her nerves on edge to see him, now she’d been dating Miles, and confusion filled her mind – which in turn made her even angrier. She didn’t want to still have feelings for her ex, but they’d had many good years together and she cared about him, however badly he’d treated her in the end.

‘You do – when it pleases you,’ she said shortly, her hands wringing in her lap.

‘Can we talk?’ he asked. ‘Somewhere more private.’ He glanced towards the door and she guessed he meant far away from Miles.

She could feel the anger reverberating off him, but for once, it didn’t worry her. She wondered if he was comparing her light and airy plush new office to the box he now worked in, with a tiny window and a cluttered desk – the room she’d had to work out of for years. When she’d mentioned decluttering, they’d all moaned that there was nowhere else to store anything.

Now she could see Allan taking note of the huge windows, lighting panels that Poppy had installed and the bookcase full of exciting books.

‘I didn’t realise that you and Miles worked so *closely* together,’ Allan ground out, his face pinched and angry, his cheeks flushed.

Demi sighed. ‘We’re partners, Allan, what do you expect?’

‘Nothing. I expect nothing from you,’ he said angrily. ‘I just thought that you might want to help me out. The garage isn’t doing well. I saw a photo of you and Miles at a restaurant in the papers, looking swanky and a bit too close and cosy for my liking. I guess you have extra influence on him now?’

Allan didn’t try to hide the inference that she’d slept her way to the top, which made her almost double over as if he’d punched her in the stomach. He was the only man she’d had a serious relationship with in her life, and he knew this full well. It was a low blow and her eyes blazed. She tried to shove down her own fears that others would regard her that way too,

when they found out she'd slept with the boss, but as she was also the boss, she was trying not to care. She wasn't quite succeeding and her old insecurities, about why a man like Miles would want a mess of a woman like her, flooded back. Her own cheeks flushed and she gripped her hands until her nails dug into her palms.

'Allan,' said Miles, who'd knocked swiftly and suddenly come into Demi's office, his stern gaze pinning Allan to the chair. He'd clearly heard Allan's derogatory comment as he joined them. 'What Demi has built here is from her own hard work and dedication. You might not have seen the potential of her ideas, but that doesn't mean that others don't. I've been running my usual business here. The rest of the site has been set up, staffed and run by Demi. I would have assumed you'd know what she's capable of, from the years that you both worked together, but perhaps you forgot to take notice?' he asked.

Allan's cheeks flamed and he gripped the arms of the chair he was sitting on. Miles wasn't standing over him, but his presence filled the room anyway. Allan looked at Demi and ground his teeth, but then she could see the devil ignite in his eyes. She knew that look. It meant he was about to cause trouble.

'I do know how amazing she is. We were everything to each other for a long time and you don't forget that in a hurry,' said Allan, calm suddenly. 'I came here to speak to Demi and I'd rather do it in private.' He smiled sweetly at Miles who smiled cordially back, but didn't move an inch.

'Look, I'm sorry to interrupt this *meeting*,' said Miles, coolly. 'Demi, there's a call for you in the computer room. It will only take a minute.'

Demi frowned. The phone on her desk was in perfect working order. But to be honest, she needed room to breathe and get away from her ex for a moment. She was confused about his sudden charm offensive.

'Um... Sure. Sorry, Allan. I won't be a moment.' She got out of her seat and followed Miles into the dark computer

room. As soon as the door was closed, he pulled her into his arms, tangled his fingers into her hair and ravaged her mouth with kisses until she was breathing hard and clinging to him. When they finally broke apart, both were panting and they rested their foreheads together. He pulled her into a hug and laid his head on top of her curls.

‘I’m sorry. I was jealous,’ he said, not sounding too sorry. His hand was slipping to cup her backside, so she couldn’t help but press her core to his and he groaned and kissed her deeply again.

‘Miles!’ She tried not to laugh when she came up for air, but he was too damn sexy and her pulse was racing. ‘I need to get back,’ she said, biting her lip and quickly brushing her curls with her fingers. She didn’t want to look dishevelled in front of Allan and give him more ammo to try and manipulate her with. ‘You’re incorrigible,’ she laughed, slapping his hands away when he reached for her again. ‘Haven’t you got a client meeting in ten minutes?’ she grimaced, remembering seeing it in their shared work calendar. He winced and slapped his palm against his head.

‘I forgot! I saw Allan go into your office and spent the next ten minutes scheming about how to get you into our secret place,’ he laughed, kissing her briefly on the lips and then pressing the code to open the sliding door to his office.

‘This is certainly a passion palace with a difference,’ she rolled her eyes, giggled and squeaked as he had a quick cheeky feel of her backside. Some of her equilibrium had returned and although she knew she had to go back and face Allan, she suddenly didn’t feel so worried about it.

Allan was fidgeting impatiently when she returned. She winced, as she kind of felt like she’d just been unfaithful, when he was the one who’d cheated. She wondered if he could see from her eyes what had just happened, but to be honest he’d never paid much attention to her wants and desires, so she shrugged and sat down opposite him again, her hands primly clasped in her lap. The same hands that had just been pulling her lover closer while she panted his name.

‘That was a long call,’ said Allan, bracing his impressive forearms on the chair. She started a little. She had loved his strong arms and often stared longingly at him when they were together as he wasn’t a cuddly kind of guy. This time she felt nothing more than a longing for him to leave the room. It shocked her after all they’d been through together, but her feelings for him had been neutralised, it seemed.

‘It was important,’ was all that she said, trying and failing to block out the flashbacks of hot man and ‘almost sex’.

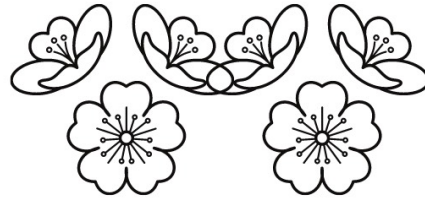
‘Demi. I want you back,’ said Allan, coming round and taking her hand to make her stand up and face him, but she led him to the door and opened it. Demi’s heart raced. She knew that Miles was about to be in a meeting next door. She’d never seen the jealous side to Miles in all the years she’d known him and a frisson of excitement filled her veins.

‘Demi,’ repeated Allan, trying to pull her towards him and dipping his head to kiss her. Demi jumped back in shock.

‘Allan, no!’ she said as she moved to the other side of the door. Did he think that his sorry puppy dog eyes and very short speech would win her over? Where were the hearts and flowers and poems about how awful his life was without her, she scoffed, silently fuming. ‘I’ve moved on,’ she said clearly and his head whipped round as if he’d been shot.

‘Who with?’ he asked immediately, his face flaming as he darted a glance towards Miles’s office.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Tianna handed Demi a plate of handmade biscuits iced with brightly coloured decorations. Demi took one gratefully, biting into it and enjoying the crumbly outer shell and soft gooey centre. Her mum loved cooking and often baked delicious cakes with cream oozing out of the sides and biscuits drizzled with icing sugar or chocolate. The flavours of ginger and orange burst into her mouth, and as the sweetness of the sugar hit her senses she groaned out loud, making her mum smile.

Demi had been too tired lately to cook or bother with more than a microwave meal, which her mum would scold her about. Miles had seemed distant since Allan had been in and she wondered which part had upset him. Maybe he'd seen Allan try to kiss her and thought she'd encouraged him? That didn't sit well with her and she hoped Miles knew her enough to realise she was trustworthy. There were lots of new feelings floating around them both that she didn't fully understand yet and it put her on edge a lot of the time. Half was sexual tension, because he was so damn sexy she literally wanted to throw him on his desk and climb on board, but the other half was the fear of losing her heart and herself to a man again.

'How's the garage doing?' Demi asked her mum, trying not to think of the way Miles lazily trailed his hand along her leg when he was watching television.

'Not so good,' said her mum, snapping her attention back to the present. Demi tried not to wince and looked enquiringly at Tianna. The fear that they would need her back working at

their garage gnawed at her daily. She loved her new life, but family came first. Her dad was looking for a buyer, but he still hadn't implemented too much change. He had let a few very slack staff go and had streamlined his operations at last, after finally taking on board one or two of her points, but they did need to take more drastic action soon.

‘Allan came to my place,’ she said casually.

‘What!’ said her mum. ‘Why? The workshop or the flat?’

‘The workshop,’ said Demi. ‘He once again accused me of abandoning you both and said that you were failing without me.’

‘Damn that boy,’ said her mum and she slammed her hand on the coffee table by the couch, making Demi jump. ‘I’ve always said that he was an emotional manipulator, but that takes the biscuit.’

With that she slapped her plate on the table and the biscuit broke in half, a bit like Demi and Allan right now. Her mum had also mirrored what Miles had said, which unsettled her. Were they both right? Had Allan been knocking her confidence all along? Her mum got up and went to the sideboard, which was next to a big picture window that looked out onto the vibrant garden that Demi had loved playing in as a child. Her mum took a selection of papers out of the drawer and then placed them on the table in front of Demi.

‘What is this?’ asked Demi, looking at the photos of men and women and the pages of writing.

‘CVs,’ said her mum. ‘We need a new manager. Allan is useless, and I’ve just told your dad what he’s done to you.’ She sat back and stared straight at her daughter, refusing to be sorry.

‘Mum!’ gasped Demi.

Her mum held up a hand to halt her tirade. ‘It was time. Your dad marched to his car and told me he’s going to fire him.’

‘He can’t!’ said Demi, jumping up and beginning to pace the room.

‘He can,’ said her mum steadily, not giving an inch. ‘He certainly can. Allan has had plenty of warnings and your dad now sees that you did the job for both of you. Your dad misses you at work, but he’s also ready to move on. You leaving has made him realise that there is more to life than spending every waking hour with his head stuck under a bonnet or in the accounts programme. We need a good manager – like you were, but one with the ability to make small and significant changes before we sell. We held you back and we understand that now. Your ideas were genius, but we are too tired to have a big upheaval now. A new owner will be offered your plans as part of the sale, if that’s ok with you?’

Her mum flushed a little but Demi went and held her hand and squeezed it in hope for the future.

‘Of course! The plans were drawn up for you both,’ she said graciously, even though they had cost her more than a month’s wages and some of her savings.

‘We might have a buyer,’ said her mum, as she got up and brushed biscuit crumbs off her deep red flowered dress.

Demi sat back in shock. ‘Who?’

‘I’ll tell you more when we know more, but it looks hopeful – and your dad is already looking at flights to Jamaica,’ her mum clapped her hands in glee and Demi smiled finally and felt some of the earlier tension leave her tummy. She pictured Allan’s angry face and took a deep breath.

‘Maybe it’s time for us all to put the past where it belongs and move on,’ she said thoughtfully.

They heard the scrunch of car tyres on gravel and turned to look expectantly as Demi’s dad came in. He sat down heavily on the couch and she could see that he was under a lot of emotional strain.

‘I’m sorry, Demi,’ said her dad. ‘I didn’t know what Allan had done or I’d have spoken to him long ago. He certainly got a piece of my mind today. I sent him away with his tail between his legs.’ Demi got up and gave her dad a big hug, snuggling into his side.

‘You really didn’t have to do that for me. I’ve moved on.’

‘I did,’ he said gravely. ‘I know I have apologised before, but the garage has lost its heart without you. I’ve had the place valued. It’s still worth a pretty penny because of the site and equipment. We do have a lot of goodwill and our customers are loyal. We just needed to listen to your ideas and sharpen up. I’ve tightened the team and we are much more efficient now... or we will be, now that useless ex-boyfriend of yours is gone.’

Demi flinched and then decided to let it go. ‘No more hangers on?’ she teased, picturing her dad’s mates, sitting around and gossiping all day like a load of fishwives.

Her dad shook his head and laughed. ‘They actually took it well when they found out the real state of the business. It’s time for most of us to retire and if we sell up, your mum and I can do the travelling she’s always dreamed of.’

Tianna came in with a plate piled high with gooey cream buns, icing dripping down the sides.

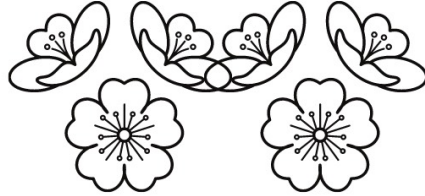
‘Have you been stress-cooking again, Mum?’ asked Demi with a laugh, taking one and biting into it. She tried to catch the cream that slid onto her plate with her tongue and enjoyed the soft sweetness of the sugary confection. After a few more bites she put her plate down and nodded at the pile of papers on the little coffee table. There were also trinkets and magazines and pens everywhere. Her parent’s house was clean and welcoming, but it would never be clutter-free. Her mum’s magpie tendencies for anything bright, handmade or colourful would always fill an empty space. Demi reached over a small vase of tulips and was careful not to displace the little dish full of brass buttons. She took the top sheet of the paperwork and began to read, while her parents scooped up beside her on the squidgy couch.

Some of the CVs were from experienced people who could easily run the garage. Two of them already worked for her dad, and Demi read their applications with interest. Allan had always been the option her dad wanted, but they already had staff who could now step in, even in the short term.

‘I think selling up is a good option now. Then you can finally relax and spend the money on holidays or in the garden,’ Demi said.

Len and Tianna were in agreement and after an hour more of choosing who to interview for the managerial post in the interim, they had a shortlist. Finally, Demi felt that there was light at the end of the tunnel and she could begin to really enjoy something... or someone... exciting and new.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Demi drove her car into the parking space behind her flat and slumped back into her seat in exhaustion. She was glad, but a bit uneasy about her dad finding out about Allan's deception. Her dad seemed pretty happy that Allan was finally out of their lives, but refused to go into the finer details about what had actually been said. Demi didn't like to think about Allan and her dad arguing. They'd always rubbed along pretty well and she hated to think they couldn't stand each other now, especially as Allan was probably back living with his mum – just down the road from her parents' house.

She tried to remember that this was all Allan's fault, but the guilt crept in anyway. She'd spent hours looking through career histories of potential managers with her parents and booking interviews. She wiped her brow with the back of her hand. It felt weird to think that Allan's connection to her parents' business was over.

Demi had promised to come back and help her parents with the interviews. After that, her dad had cooked them a sumptuous dinner of fiery smoked jerk chicken and fragrant rice, not that she'd been really hungry after all of the cakes and biscuits she'd consumed.

The drive had felt long but she was finally home now. It had been an emotional day. It seemed that the ties that had held her and Allan together were gradually snapping and drifting away.

As she closed her car door wearily and approached her flat, a figure moved out of the shadows and she jumped in fright

before seeing who it was.

‘Bloody hell, Allan, you nearly scared me half to death,’ she said, shaking her head and sighing heavily. Her bones felt like lead and all she wanted was a hot bath, to wash the dust out of her hair and get into the spring-fresh sheets she’d put on her bed that morning. She noticed that Allan looked haggard and as exhausted as she was. She cringed as she knew he’d just been fired. He must have driven straight to hers and been waiting for hours, but it wasn’t her place to offer him comfort anymore.

‘What do you want, Allan?’ she asked.

‘Can we go inside?’ he asked, sounding like a desperate man. She had little choice but to comply. She’d been dreaming of a mug of hot chocolate and her cool bed for the whole journey home. It had been a tiring day and the last thing she needed was another argument.

As they stepped inside she went into her compact kitchen and switched on the kettle. While she got mugs out of the cupboard, Allan came up behind her and put his arms around her, dipping his head to kiss her neck. She turned in shock and stepped away. ‘What the hell are you doing? I told you that wasn’t going to happen when you came to my office.’

‘I miss you, Dems,’ he said, dropping his arms and turning to lean on the countertop. ‘I’m sorry about what I did with Cindy. It just happened. It didn’t mean anything.’

Demi stood there aghast. ‘Not to you maybe, but for me it meant the end of a decade of loving the same man,’ she yelled, her fists bunching and her cheeks flaming.

How dare he trivialise what he’d done, and the months and months of heartbreak he’d caused? She’d barely eaten for weeks, and her friends had been worried sick when she’d stopped contacting them, or going out. She hadn’t been able to face anyone and felt burning shame about her man seeking another woman, even though she now understood it was his failing and his alone. Miles had made her understand that. Allan hung his head and she stormed into the living room. For someone who was fairly timid by nature, she felt like a

volcano was about to erupt in her chest. Lava would spill out of her mouth and she would spew fire at anyone daft enough not to get out of the vicinity.

‘You threw away my love as if it meant nothing, and now you expect me to take you back?’ she turned as he followed her into the lounge and he flinched and ducked as she picked up a book and threw it at him. He moved slightly and it hit the wall with a satisfying thwack.

‘Let me make it up to you?’ he pleaded.

‘Is this about your job?’ she asked scathingly.

‘Your dad sacked me,’ he whined.

‘I know,’ she said triumphantly, and his cheeks flamed.

‘The business will fail without me, you know that,’ he said, bravado coming back into his voice.

She scoffed and looked at him, wondering how she’d been in love with him for so long. She couldn’t see anything particularly appealing or loveable about him now.

‘It won’t,’ she said with absolute certainty.

‘I needed help with your dad’s garage. The stress of me taking over was too much,’ Allan pleaded for understanding, which he didn’t get. ‘You’ve deserted your family and left it to rot!’ he added, anger rising in his voice.

Demi’s hackles rose and she really wanted to throw her drink in his stupid face, but then remembered that she hadn’t actually poured the kettle yet and that annoyed her even further. She was fed up with wasting precious time on this man.

‘I don’t have to explain myself to you, but my dad has been to my new office and seen what I’ve achieved and how it could have worked at his site. He speaks to me most nights and I know exactly how his business is doing – from years of scraping round to keep you all employed, while you sat on your arse and chatted to your mates. Or shagged a girl from the chip shop down the road,’ she added for good measure.

Allan reeled back, finally dealing with a Demi who didn't give in to his will. 'But...'

'You needed to up your game to keep the cosy job you've had for years while you were bleeding my parents dry. They see you at last, and so do I.'

Allan reached out to her, but she stepped back and he had to drop his hand.

'Are you and Miles sleeping together?' he asked, fire in his voice.

'How's Cindy?' she parried.

Allan hung his head and let out a huge theatrical sigh, before throwing his hands up in exasperation and muttering that she should move on and let it go.

'I have moved on,' she said quietly. 'Without you.'

Allan winced and sparks of anger filled his eyes. 'Did you sleep with your best mate to get your new cushy job?' he asked scathingly, and she flinched as if he'd punched her. The doorbell pealed and she grabbed the opportunity to try and calm her breathing and speed past Allan. His question didn't warrant an answer. He didn't try and stop her. His cheeks were still a dull red.

She only knew one person who would turn up on her doorstep unannounced at this time of night and his timing couldn't have been worse.

She opened the door and then stepped back to let Miles in. The smile slid from his face when he saw her expression. 'What's wrong?' he asked immediately, pulling her in to his side. Every fibre of her being wanted to sink into his embrace, but the words Allan had spoken had stung. She felt wooden in his arms, and he quickly released her.

'Allan's here.'

Miles raked his fingers through his hair, making it all mussed up and sexy and she gulped, feeling her body begin to thaw. 'Again?' he asked. 'What does he want?'

‘He wants a reconciliation,’ she said quietly, grabbing his arm to stop him going into the lounge where Allan was currently pacing the room, his heavy footsteps resonating. The footsteps approached and Allan came to see who was at the door.

‘Demi and I were having a private conversation,’ he said angrily to Miles, looking him up and down with disgust. Miles glanced at Demi to see how she wanted him to react, but she could see his muscles bunching under his shirt and his eyes narrowing on his prey.

She put a hand on his arm to placate him. ‘Go and make us some coffee Miles,’ she said. ‘I think it’s high time that we all sat down together for a chat.’

Allan’s cheeks flamed even more when he saw her hand on Miles. ‘So this is the real reason why we broke up? I knew it!’ he raged. ‘Why do you think our relationship didn’t survive? He’s always been after my girl. There were three of us in it the whole time!’

Demi refused to step back when he started to get closer to Miles, who didn’t budge. She could feel the anger emanating from him and she put a hand on Allan’s heart to step between them. ‘That’s certainly true in your case for the past however many months,’ she said, her tone telling him to back off. He stood back suddenly and his eyes pleaded with her, but it was too late for that to work. He dipped his head for a moment before throwing Miles a dirty look and storming off, slamming the front door behind him.

Miles and Demi stood in the silence, then he opened his arms and she moved into them. They went into the lounge and Miles led her to the couch, where she sat down gratefully, one of his arms still around her shoulders. She sunk down against the back of the couch and sat with her head in her hands while she cried for the loss of the last threads that held her and Allan together as friends.

‘Did you tell him about us?’ he asked gently, taking her hands in his own and kissing them gently. She nodded.

‘I didn’t exactly tell him, but he worked it out. I said I’ve moved on. Maybe I should have kept that to myself. He’ll probably tell everyone now.’ Miles lifted her face up with his finger and looked into her teary eyes.

‘Is that a problem?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said honestly. ‘I’m worried about what people will say. You’re technically my boss.’ Miles grinned at this and kissed her on the mouth, which she couldn’t help but respond to, her arms winding around his neck to bring him closer. When they surfaced, he pulled her onto his lap and she snuggled into his neck before sliding off, getting up and offering him a drink. ‘I think we both need one,’ she said, smiling now some of the earlier tension had dissipated.

It was hard to think of much else when Miles touched her. She found she actually didn’t care too much if Allan knew she’d moved on with Miles, but she didn’t want to throw her happiness in his face. She still kind of wanted him to be happy too.

‘You don’t need to worry about anything Allan says,’ said Miles, coming up behind her in the kitchen and slipping his arms around her waist to pull her into him. ‘For a start, we’re partners. I’m not your boss. You don’t own shares in my company and we both own the garage you run. In fact, you have a slightly higher share capital than me because it was your genius idea, so technically you’re my boss,’ he winked and she grinned. ‘I put in the investment, but you are the one who has set it up and staffed it. We are both single and Allan hasn’t treated you well. You deserve better.’

Demi tensed. She hadn’t thought about the fact that they weren’t a couple, or that either of them could date other people, and it scared the hell out of her. Seeing Miles with someone else would literally make her heart, that was finally healing, shatter into a thousand pieces. She wasn’t sure she’d recover.

‘That’s not for you to decide,’ she said testily, making him back off and frown.

‘I care about you.’

‘I know.’ She hung her head. ‘I care about you too.’

‘You do?’ he was smiling slightly again now, and the frown had disappeared. He took her hand and started running his fingers up and down her arm, making her shiver with anticipation.

‘Yes,’ she said, blushing.

‘Do you want him back?’ he asked as his fingers stopped and he just held her hand. He was looking at their interlinked hands and she felt her heart melt a little. Maybe he did care for her a bit more than just for casual hook-ups?

‘He’s all I have ever known,’ she said honestly. ‘Until now.’ Miles looked into her eyes, and she could see the passion and anger mixed there.

‘You need someone who will be there for you and treat you like a princess,’ he ground out, looking directly into her eyes so that she couldn’t look away. Her heartbeat started racing and confusion filled her brain.

‘I’m not a princess I’m just me. I’m not confident or special or...’

‘You are special,’ Miles cut in. ‘Allan has taken all your confidence. Hopefully time away from him will show you how special you are.’

‘Allan said that my dad still needs me,’ she said, trying to stay focussed and not swoon into Miles’s arms.

‘You know he doesn’t,’ soothed Miles, cupping her face in his hand and kissing her gently. ‘Help him to find a manager or a buyer.’

‘It’s not that easy,’ she protested, leaning in for more kisses and pouting when he stopped.

‘It is. You have the skills to help them from here. You have your own business now, which has to be your priority. Your dad is a grown man and he’ll be fine.’

‘They said they might have a buyer,’ she sighed, leaning into him. He wrapped his arms around her and led her back to the couch. ‘And Jared says he’s added our business details to

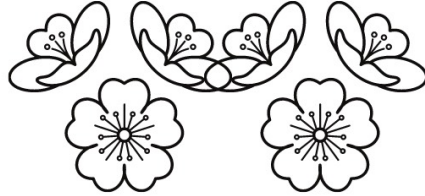
his latest glossy home brochures because it will help him sell more houses in the area.' She laughed suddenly. 'Apparently, we are high end and offer glamour... well, you do,' she teased.

'Bloody Jared!' Miles laughed, pulling her back onto his lap and snuggling her into his arms. 'At least he's doing something to try and help us all this time instead of trying to split us up.'

Demi giggled and started kissing his neck, which made him growl and pull her closer, so that she could feel how excited he was to have her in his arms. 'I don't care about Jared,' said Demi as her breath caught in her throat. 'Take me to bed.'

Miles didn't need asking twice and he braced his legs and stood up, swinging her into his arms while she giggled and hid her face in his neck. He strode into the bedroom and as he placed her onto the bed, he whispered into her ear how he was going to make her forget about any other man and have her screaming his name, while he showed her exactly how beautiful she was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



*F*ranco welcomed them to the Cherry Tree pub with hugs and kisses and led them to a table in the back garden. The sun was blazing that day and the flowers were in full bloom and filling the air with the scent of lilacs and roses. The pub garden was dotted with cherry trees and had stunning views across the same fields as Poppy's studio. You could also see the fields from Demi's garage. She was gradually beginning to feel more at home in the area.

Dylan, Ollie and Miles headed straight to the bar with Billy, who said that he was craving salt and vinegar crisps. Billy was like a magpie, filching snacks off other people's desks at work. He'd adored the Pit Stop café when he'd visited, and he'd walked around with a frosted lemon cupcake in each hand while he'd checked out that they were using Poppy's technology and designs correctly. He'd finally given in and reluctantly put the cakes down, but had managed to stuff half a cupcake into his mouth first! He'd confirmed that the hot desks were perfectly placed and installed correctly, and the daylight and sound panels above them were giving optimal performance. If a customer wanted to listen to music, then they could bring ear pods or earphones and plug directly into the fancy computer desks, which were already in high demand. Billy was like a walking and talking fact sheet on all of Poppy's designs these days.

Demi still felt a tinge of sadness that her dad hadn't understood her vision at the start, but in a way it had helped them all because she'd been forced to make changes, and so had he. She had a new career and he was finally excited about

his retirement and travelling to visit their extended family in Jamaica. The excuse that the garage couldn't be left for long was now defunct and although they hadn't said much more about the new buyer, they were very excited about the offer and it was progressing at speed, it seemed. For once they didn't want her input and as Miles had offered them a free meet-up with his legal team, they were all set to sign on the dotted line.

The pub was bustling, with everyone trying to make the most of a few sunny days. Demi grinned at Sasha, who was watching her carefully.

'How's it working with Miles?' asked Poppy, who looked fresh and pretty in three-quarter length fitted jeans and a summery blouse with tiny flowers dotted all over it. Demi felt her cheeks grow warm and she smiled at Franco as he passed by with a group of mums and toddlers, who ran ahead or fell over their own feet in equal parts.

'Demi!' demanded Sasha, pushing her sunglasses on top of her long dark hair, which was swept up in a high ponytail that day and swung jauntily around her shoulders, making her look fun and flirty, which she was. 'What's happened?' Tell me everything,' she demanded.

'Nothing,' responded Demi, not quite meeting her eye at first, but Sasha just raised one eyebrow and waited. Poppy was already jiggling around in her seat with impatience. 'Well... he kissed me,' Demi acquiesced, not quite ready to share the full details of her new obsession with one of the Taylor heartbreakers. The girls grinned excitedly, but at that moment the boys returned with their drinks and snacks and sat down amongst them. Miles slid his hand briefly onto Demi's leg and she nearly jumped sky high.

'I'm ravenous,' said Billy, happily opening the bags of crisps.

'Didn't you just have lunch at the office?' asked Poppy, with a laugh.

Billy pouted and put his designer sunglasses on the table. 'Yes, but it was just a salad sandwich, so it doesn't count,' he

added, making Demi grin. She jumped again as her phone rang in her bag and she excused herself to take a work call from a quieter corner of the garden.

Ollie slapped Miles on the back, and laughed when Miles told him about the advert Jared was putting in his brochure. 'Jared is your problem now that Demi's single,' he joked, watching Miles roll his eyes. Dylan grinned too and he looked across at Poppy, who seemed to find whatever the boys said quite funny. Demi was watching the interaction while she sorted out a small problem with one of their café suppliers. She wondered what they were all laughing about.

'I think she's still hooked on Allan,' said Miles sadly. 'She seems happy, but something is holding her back.'

'She's worried about her parents,' said Sasha, shaking her head at his stupidity. 'She feels like she's left them to rot.'

'She hasn't!' defended Miles.

'I know that,' placated Sasha with a grin, patting his hand. In a gentler tone she continued, 'But she feels guilty about her happiness...' she nudged him on the shoulder and he smiled suddenly. 'And awful that their business is failing, even though they've finally decided to sell up.'

'She's also had the same relationship since school and she's probably doubting her own instincts, after trusting Allan for so long with her heart,' said Poppy candidly. 'We can all see how much closer you've become. What if you break her heart too?' She eyed him steadily and he didn't flinch.

'I wouldn't do that,' he said fiercely, and Poppy smiled suddenly and touched his arm in solidarity. 'I know that, brother-in-law, but you need to give her space to breathe. She's scared.'

'Of me?' Miles said in incredulity.

'Of how she feels about you, you fool,' reiterated Sasha with a smile softening her words. 'The feelings that Demi has always had for you have been bubbling below the surface for years, she just didn't see them. Allan did – and that's why he wouldn't commit to marrying her. It must be hard loving

someone when you know they are the perfect fit for someone else, especially one of the Taylor heartbreak brothers,' she burst out laughing and Miles gawped at her in shock.

'Surely not?' he asked. 'I thought it was just me?'

'Nope,' said Sasha, satisfaction in her tone. 'Allan didn't let her see it. He made her self-worth orbit around him, so she felt unworthy of looking at anyone else – especially you, her best friend – aside from Poppy and me, of course.' She ignored Billy's insulted look that he wasn't included in that list. 'It's also why he never stepped up as manager. It would have given her the opportunity to leave her dad's garage sooner. The git.'

Poppy stepped in before the brothers got more riled up. 'It's great news that Jared's on board with joint promotions for the garage and any local new builds. One of his selling points for his latest project is parking for two family cars at a minimum, but to be honest most of his builds are high-end, so they have loads of parking anyway.' She looked at Dylan for confirmation and he nodded. 'I think he doesn't like to feel left out of any of our businesses,' she joked and Dylan sighed and shook his head.

'It's almost like Jared is becoming one of the family,' joked Sasha and Ollie pulled a face.

'How's things going at the gym?' asked Poppy, turning to Ollie.

'The hot desks are brilliant,' he said, puffing his chest out like a proud peacock. 'Sasha's now bringing in social media influencers, so we have a photo wall. The regulars love it, and the photos are being shared far and wide. I might need to open a third premises soon.'

'Wow! That's great news,' said Poppy, blowing them both a kiss across the table.

'The place is buzzing,' said Dylan proudly. 'I was tempted to ask Sash to promote my new furniture ranges, but she's pretty much booked out this year.'

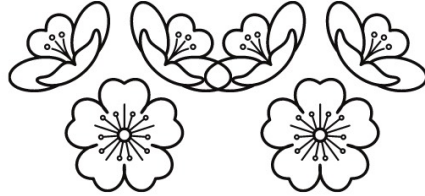
Sasha blushed. 'I'd make time for you, brother,' she laughed, then gulped as everyone went silent and stared at her as Demi re-joined them and asked what was going on. 'It was just a turn of phrase,' said Sasha, but Ollie pulled her to his side with a cuddle and her face was bright red.

'We got engaged!' said Ollie, after a quick nod from Sasha. Before she could speak, everyone was crowding round them and pulling them out of their chairs for group hugs. Sasha opened her handbag and slipped on a dazzling diamond ring and Demi and Poppy grabbed her to get a better look and kiss her in congratulation.

Demi's heart filled with joy for Ollie and Sasha, but her eyes sparkled with unshed tears. Her own dream of marriage hadn't worked out with Allan. Marriage was all she'd thought about for years, but now the tears were of relief that she'd dodged that bullet. She just wished she'd had clarity sooner and not wasted so much time on a man who clearly wasn't worth it. She watched Miles hug his brother and saw the wide grin on his face.

She couldn't imagine what it would take for a man like Miles to want to marry, but she was pretty darn sure that she wasn't it. They were in that infatuation stage, but once that was gone, would they be able to remain friends and see each other move on? She might be part of the Taylor brother inner circle for now, but she wasn't sure if she'd be able to hang around and congratulate Miles while he married someone else.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



They had partied long into the night to celebrate Sasha and Ollie's engagement. Franco had brought over a huge bottle of champagne. Demi had decided not to be maudlin and had thrown herself into the celebrations. She was the only young, free and single one left from their original school friendship group, and it was about time she had some fun. She'd shed the skin of the old Demi, who was quiet and timid, and became the life and soul of the party. Miles had watched in amusement and the others had been almost as bad as she was. She'd danced on tables and pulled other customers up to dance with her. In the end Miles had taken her hand and led her home. He'd tucked her up in bed alone while her head pounded like the gates of hell. Now she was smiling at her customers at work, but every single movement hurt and she wished she could crawl into a ball and die.

A couple of the customers had enquired if she was single recently and handed her their business cards, and she knew she was a big hit with the rest of the clients too. She probably should try dating other men to protect her heart, but when she wasn't working she was thinking about Miles – hot and naked. She couldn't help it! He was sculpted by angels.

She'd told him about the date offers in good humour and he hadn't seemed to mind, so she guessed that he still felt that this was a casual fling. If it was, then she was going to make the most out of it and enjoy every minute. She kept having secret kisses with Miles in the back room and they were half-naked in there most of the time. She couldn't seem to keep her hands off him and he was just as bad. She didn't know if it

was the confined space, the humidity, or her hormones that made the whole darn situation so sexy. She grinned suddenly as her heartbeat ramped up and she waved cheerily to a member of staff, before heading to Miles's office. He was in the middle of a business call, but when she inclined her head towards his computer room, he grinned wolfishly and ended the call as quickly as he could, opening the sliding door and following her inside.

'We are so unprofessional,' giggled Demi and he reached for her and slipped his fingers under her top and over her breasts, making her push herself into his hands with a groan of pleasure.

'I don't care,' ground out Miles as he kissed her neck and almost snapped the back of her bra in the rush to rip it from her body. She gasped as his hands found her nipples again and she groaned and leaned back to give his mouth further access to the sensitive spot on the side of her neck, while touching her lower body into his. 'I've waited for you for years,' he said as he filled his hands with her and trailed kisses down her chest.

'Why?' she asked, flushed and aroused, but pushing against his chest gently.

'Why did I wait?' he lifted his head and stilled his hands, but did slip one into the waistband of her jeans, making her sigh in pleasure.

'You weren't ready,' he said gently, kissing her lips softly at first and then pulling her body into his and deepening the kiss. After a few more kisses he pulled back again, his breathing coming hard. He leant his forehead on hers. 'If you were happy, I couldn't interfere.'

'But...'

'You'd have resented me,' he said, as she pulled his shirt out of the waistband of his suit trousers and slowly unbuttoned it.

'You might be right. Shouldn't you be in a meeting?' she smiled seductively up at him, undoing the last button so that

his muscled chest was set free for her hands to roam over. He caught her hands in his and mischief sparkled in his eyes.

‘I should be!’ he jolted suddenly, as if it had completely slipped his mind. ‘You keep distracting me. I’d happily make love to you here on the floor, but,’ he glanced at the beautifully crafted watch on his wrist and sighed. ‘I’ve got to call a client in exactly five minutes.’ She pouted and he laughed while he quickly buttoned his shirt back up and tucked it in.

She reset her own clothes, while his fingers kept following her movement and touching her skin until she had to slap his hand away. ‘Not helping,’ she joked, and it was his turn to pout. She blew her curls out of her eyes and straightened her top. ‘Come round to mine tonight,’ she said as they opened the door and went back into Miles’s office.

Luckily, the rest of the staff knew not to disturb anyone in that room as the technology in there was so important that only Miles knew how to keep it all running smoothly. He was often in there for hours, so him being in there with Demi wasn’t unusual. He grinned and nodded before she copped a quick feel of his taut backside and told him to get back to work with a laugh.

‘You were the one who pulled me in here!’ he protested, grabbing her for a swift kiss as she tried to walk past him. ‘I’ll come round tonight and bring food. You’ll need the sustenance,’ he growled cheekily. She darted past him with a grin, blowing him a kiss as she went.

‘I’ll look forward to it,’ she winked seductively, feeling like a million dollars.

She swung past her office to check her emails and then almost skipped back to the forecourt, stopping for a moment to enjoy the bustle and noise of her domain. Customers were checking in cars and heading to the coffee shop, which Kitty ran like a dream. Poppy’s mum, June, and her husband Chris popped in every so often on their way to see Poppy. Demi had teased June that she was becoming a bit of a matchmaker. She’d formally introduced Kitty to Jed, the latest addition to

their mechanical team, after dragging him into the café to taste some cake samples. Jed had been chatting to Chris and June and had mentioned he was glad that there was a café onsite. June's eyes had lit up and Demi could almost imagine the cogs inside her brain whirring. Jed and Kitty were both balls of energy and Jed was always smiling, just like Kitty was. They'd immediately hit it off and started dating.

Demi had pretended not to be relived, as Kitty always mock-swooned when Miles was near, but Kitty also had a keen eye for detail and clearly knew full well that there was something going on between Demi and Miles, even though they hadn't publicly admitted it yet. Demi didn't know if it was serious enough to tell anyone about, but Kitty teased her about her Cheshire cat grin and the way Miles's eyes followed her around the forecourt. Demi had tried to ignore the gentle teasing, but a frisson of heat always hit her spine when he was close by and she couldn't help but instinctively know where he was, too. Who knew that running a business with a sexy partner could be so much fun!

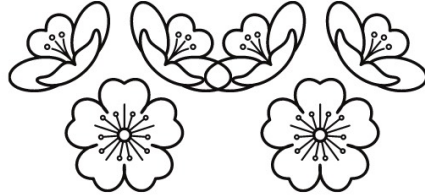
She tried not to look smug, but when Kitty caught her eye with an *'I know exactly what, or who, you've been doing'* conspiratorial smile, she tried not to blush and roll her eyes. She and Kitty had become quite close since they'd been working together. It was nice having more women around. Five of the new mechanics Demi had hired were women, and there was a mix of waiting staff in the café. Vernon was a university student who worked for them at weekends and Elsie was a pensioner who had more energy than the rest of them put together, who had wandered in one day and offered her CV to Demi with a flourish and a grin. She'd worked on cruise ships, for some minor royals and for a bloke who hosted a show on the television, so Demi had employed her on the spot. She had so many risqué stories about her work that Demi was sure she shouldn't tell anyone, but Elsie just laughed and embellished the stories even more. Demi was almost sure most of them were made up – but if Elsie did ever decide to write her memoirs, then they'd be a smash hit!

She glanced over as a car wound its way along the drive to the garage, and waved as it was one of their regulars. It made

her stomach fizz with excitement to think that they already had customers who returned to get their cars fixed. She enjoyed spending time on the forecourt with her staff and the business filled her with pride. She often climbed into the grease pit to do a vehicle inspection under a car herself, and spot-checked work to keep everyone on their toes.

The texts and calls from Allan had dwindled to nothing and she felt freer than she had in years. Sasha was busily planning her engagement party, amidst much excitement and drama, and kept popping in to remind Demi that it was real and she and her dream man were actually getting married. Poppy even took time out of her hectic schedule and came in for a coffee from time to time too. Demi found that she adored her new flat and routine. She visited her parents on weekends when she could. It looked like the sale of the garage was being finalised and they were much happier, but she realised that she'd forgotten to ask once again who the mysterious buyer was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Demi wriggled in her silky dress and pulled at the hem. ‘Stop it!’ scolded Sasha, tapping her fingers away. ‘You look divine!’ Demi grimaced and wriggled some more, glancing quickly around the fancy hotel room where they were all getting ready.

Poppy came up behind her and they looked at their reflections in the tall mirror. Poppy straightened Demi’s drooping shoulders and spine and dropped a swift kiss on her cheek. ‘Stunning!’ she agreed.

She touched the sparkling jade green necklace at Demi’s throat and made admiring noises about Demi’s fitted green evening gown and the beautiful little diamond and emerald earrings that she had given Demi for her birthday a week earlier. Demi’s hair was pinned back at the sides with glittering diamanté hair slides, so it revealed the jewellery she was wearing, and the full face of make-up! She was more used to being covered in grease from a car engine than all this primping and preening, so she fidgeted some more.

‘I’m not sure about this,’ Demi grumbled, turning from side to side and trying not to fall over in the towering heels Sasha had persuaded her to wear. Sasha had been giving her lessons in how to walk in them, but she’d already fallen on her backside twice, grazed her knee and almost fallen head-first into the wastepaper bin! If she hadn’t turned at the last minute and whacked her hip on the sideboard instead, she’d have had used coffee pods and orange peel in her hair, but at least she’d have smelt nice. Her stomach rumbled as she’d been too

nervous to eat breakfast, or lunch, that day. She was officially Miles's date for this local charity ball and as Miles was sponsoring the event, their sleek branding was everywhere. Sasha had seen to that too.

The main ballroom was lit with a modern version of crystal chandeliers, where the crystals were long oblongs with laser-cut edges that sparkled in the glow of the bulbs hidden within. They hung down from huge shiny metal lampshades that matched the brushed metal and gunmetal grey interior of the room. When Demi had gone in there to check on everything earlier, it had felt as though she'd stepped into the middle of a movie set, or the pages of an interiors magazine. It was rich, sexy and decadent.

The event organisers had hired one of the hotels that Jared had built and his trademark elegant design with high-end finishes was everywhere. It was just outside Cherry Blossom Lane and they had rooms booked for the night. Currently the girls were all getting dressed in Miles's room. He'd already gone downstairs to meet his brothers in the bar and to greet any early guests. Demi had had to hold herself back from ripping his tailored dinner suit straight off his body, when she'd first seen him stroll casually into the lounge of their suite. He'd looked breathtaking, but now, with Poppy and Sasha there, and Miles's clothes in the wardrobe and his toiletries in the bathroom next to hers, she wondered if she was truly ready for something new.

'Stop fidgeting,' commanded Sasha again, with a huge theatrical sigh. She handed Demi a deep green velvet handbag that matched her dress and had little diamantes along the trim. She clutched it a bit too hard, making her fingers sting, and then gratefully accepted a cool glass of white wine from Poppy, who had raided the mini bar. Demi took a sip and tried to quell her racing heart. 'What if he holds my hand in public?' she quivered. 'We're business partners.'

'So what?' scoffed Sasha. 'You're the boss, as much as he is! Loads of people meet their 'partners' at work, anyway,' she added as an afterthought, leaving the double entendre floating in the air, which didn't help Demi's nerves.

‘Is that what you’re worrying about?’ asked Poppy gently, straightening up her own fitted cornflower blue dress. Her long blonde hair was piled up in a beautiful topknot. Tendrils of hair had drifted loose, framing her face perfectly and highlighting her dangly diamond earrings.

Sasha’s dress was a rich ruby red. It skimmed her curves and dipped dangerously low at the back, which meant you couldn’t help but admire her tousled dark hair falling down her back with tiny diamond clips dotted all over it, like a sparkly waterfall.

‘Does it matter that much if you’re partners who sleep together?’ asked Sasha candidly. ‘You seem like the perfect fit to me.’

‘Is it that obvious?’ asked Demi. She usually told them everything, but this time she had been a bit reticent and she wasn’t sure why. She didn’t want to look like a fool again when he dropped her, she guessed.

‘You’re sharing a room,’ laughed Sasha, joshing their hips together and making Demi wince, as that was where she’d knocked herself earlier in ‘shoe gate’.

‘Oh yes!’ she smiled, hoping the butterflies in her stomach might get lost, but they were resolutely staying put. ‘It was Miles’s idea... to save money apparently.’

Poppy and Sasha rolled their eyes in jest at the sheer size of the suite, and shared a look.

‘Don’t you feel proud for the world to know that one of the delicious Taylor brothers is your partner, in every sense of the word?’ enquired Sasha with a lewd wink and a giggle.

‘Of course!’ said Demi a little bit defensively before she blushed and nodded.

‘So, let yourself enjoy it,’ said Sasha in a softer tone, her eyes misting over a bit as she pulled Demi in for a hug. ‘You two were made for each other. We’re all here to support you and your charity, so let’s all go and do what we do best!’

‘What’s that?’

‘Schmooze the customers and get them to invest in this incredible cause. Miles isn’t supporting it just because it benefits him – he wants to show you and his company off, and help other people at the same time. He’s a catch!’

Demi gulped and gave one last critical look at herself in the mirror before Poppy took her glass, put it down and opened the door to the suite, so that Demi had no choice but to follow them out of the room.

As they reached the bar, the hotel foyer was already buzzing. She recognised the faces of several of their regular customers and some she hoped would become regulars soon. It made her heart swell with pride that they had all joined them today. Poppy had enlisted quite a few of her celebrity clients to come along and Sasha had encouraged a few key influencers to turn up and have their photos taken with the three supercars that were currently parked outside the front of the hotel. Demi sighed with relief. It seemed that the night was already a success. She assumed that, with the level of famous guests they already had, the whole car park would soon be buzzing and filling up with other designer cars!

Miles turned from where he was chatting to a woman in a vibrant blue dress. He quickly whispered something into her ear and headed Demi’s way. The woman looked after him longingly and Demi’s stomach crunched up in fear. Could she let Miles in, and risk her heart being broken again? She didn’t know the answer to that right now.

She’d already said hello to Ollie and Dylan, who looked gorgeous in their sharp evening suits. As Miles reached her and slid a hand around her waist and leaned in to tell her how amazing he thought she looked, a flash went off in their faces. The photographer smiled at them both and then moved away. Miles didn’t drop his arm, kissing her briefly on the cheek and then stood back to take in her outfit fully.

‘You look sensational!’ he said with a wolfish smile. ‘Shall we ditch this gig and go to bed?’ he asked cheekily. Demi gasped and laughed and finally felt the ball of dread that was lodged in her throat shift and melt away.

‘Miles!’

‘Just kidding...’ he reassured her. ‘Kind of. If this wasn’t our event, I’d definitely sweep you up into my arms and take you back to our suite.’ He tucked her hand around his arm and pulled her in close. ‘Are you ready for this?’ he asked, tilting his head enquiringly, his eyes ever watchful. ‘I want us to be official,’ he said, as they both saw their main sponsor heading their way.

Demi’s mouth hung open and then she rapidly snapped it back shut. ‘Did you purposely ask me when there was nowhere to run?’ she asked seriously, her heart racing at double time. Miles turned so that his body was protecting her from anyone else’s view for a moment.

‘I did,’ he grinned naughtily, looking down at her. ‘I know you might not feel ready, but I’ve been racking my brain all day about how to ask you. Seeing big Nige on his way over, I just blurted it out.’ His eyes were full of mischief and she just couldn’t resist him.

Demi’s heart melted a little. ‘Do you mean it?’

‘Of course I do. You know I don’t do or say things I don’t mean.’

Demi did know this and although it terrified her, it thrilled her in equal measures. She could see how much this meant to him. Nigel, who was six foot seven and owned a race track nearby, was almost upon them, but then he was waylaid by Ollie, who had seen Miles and Demi talking intently and stepped in. Demi let out the breath she’d been holding and took Miles’s hand in her own. He looked at their entwined hands and then into her eyes.

‘Let’s do this,’ she said finally.

‘All of it?’ he clarified.

‘All of it,’ she said, tripping on her dress and falling into his arms. ‘These bloody shoes,’ she swore.

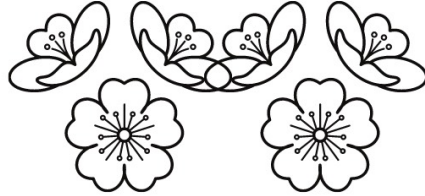
Miles threw his head back and laughed, as he straightened her up. ‘I love those shoes,’ he grinned as he admired her legs and slipped his hand around her waist again. ‘You can throw

yourself at me anytime!’ Demi rolled her eyes but laughed anyway.

‘Official?’ she asked brightly, stamping on the tiny urge to run.

Miles kissed her briefly on the lips and nodded, before turning back to the room. ‘Yes,’ he smiled happily, his eyes shining as if he’d just won the lottery, as he led her over to say hello to Ollie and big Nigel.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



The garage was full to capacity and Demi barely had a moment to think about her feelings, let alone talk to Miles about them. She dealt with customers, staff, stock levels and so much more. She'd never realised how exhausting running a successful business could be.

It was her dream, but she could see now how overwhelming her ideas might have been for her dad. It would have brought complete change and, although it made her heart soar with pride, it was definitely the right decision to try it out here first. Now they could see what had and hadn't worked and iron out any teething problems. They could easily take her ideas forward and replicate them somewhere else if they found the energy. She could envision taking on even more staff and giving herself a few extra hours of rest each week. It seemed like their growth had been phenomenal. Miles's investment would soon see huge returns and she felt much easier about him believing in her ideas. If they had fallen flat, she'd have had to run back home with her tail between her legs. Now she could hold her head up high and say she'd been right.

She still bit her lip and pulled at her hair when she saw Miles striding across the forecourt to speak to staff or meet a client. His presence was commanding. He was the shyest Taylor brother, but he never let anyone outside his close circle know that. Outwardly, he was in control of his domain. Both sides of the man were incredibly sexy. Demi feared for her heart, though, and wasn't able to fully invest in his wanting to be exclusive. She certainly wasn't about to jump into bed with anyone else, but she was holding a little part of her heart back,

so that she could recover when he wanted to move on – like Allan had.

She walked into her office and sank into her ergonomic chair with a huge sigh. She gave Miles a weak smile as he walked past to his own office with his personal assistant. He sent her a cheeky grin and her heart fluttered. She couldn't help but smile when Miles turned his attention her way. He was an incredibly busy man, but he still made her feel like nothing mattered but her. It made her blush and fumble her words. She'd never had that kind of attention from Allan. How could someone as dynamic as Miles really be interested in her? She knew she looked good, but really? Allan had never complimented her or taken the time to find out if she was okay, so she was a bit confused by Miles's sudden attention, when they'd know each other for so long.

She hadn't banked on just how successful their joint venture would be. The halcyon days of welcoming a handful of customers when they had first opened had become a distant memory. She was a powerful businesswoman now and new doors and opportunities were opening up to her every day. Magazines called for interviews and a few newspapers had included photos of them together at the charity bash.

The event had been a resounding success and the charity had been ecstatic with the donations they had received. Jared had been happy too, as his hotel had been fully booked that night. He'd turned up in person and then quietly given them a huge donation after the event. Miles had growled a little when he'd hugged Poppy, Sasha and Demi, but then he'd shaken Jared's hand and they'd spent a while chatting about how they could do some mutually beneficial deals in the future. Whatever the Taylor brothers thought of Jared, he had supported all of them along the way, and with good humour too. Demi did wonder if he was still a teeny bit in love with Poppy, but he never ever overstepped the mark out of respect for her and her husband. Demi knew that Verity was smitten with Jared, but he didn't seem to notice.

Demi could never have predicted how successful her ideas would become, but it did seem to come at a cost to her free

time with Miles. They still met up at her flat whenever they could, but it wasn't always fireworks. They were so tired that they often just snuggled up with a movie and a late meal, or fell asleep in each other's arms. Demi quietly enjoyed and cherished those moments, but she wasn't ready to admit that yet. When they did find moments for passion, he lit up her world and made it hard for her to think coherently.

Miles had confided that he hadn't expected their business to expand so rapidly, but he seemed unfazed by the level of commitment it demanded of them. She guessed he was used to it. Perhaps she should pluck up the courage to ask him if she could use his public relations team to respond to the press enquiries she had in her inbox. She was happy doing local press, but it seemed that the whole world wanted to know about the lives of the Taylor 'heartbreak' brothers.

She eyed the phone on her desk and then picked it up with a sigh. Poppy would know what to do. She waited a few moments and spoke to Poppy's receptionist, before her call was put through.

'Hi Demi,' said Poppy a minute later. She always sounded happy these days, and that in itself made Demi forget her own troubles and grin too.

'How are you?' asked Demi, idly flipping through a car magazine on her desk.

'Great!' answered Poppy. 'Billy's running the team like a dream and that gives me time to get on with designing. Sasha's decided to keep working from here, but she's got her own assistant now, who shares her office. She's very chatty and Billy says she ruins his zen,' Poppy laughed. 'But he can't talk as he's always walking around singing. I don't think he likes competition on the dramatic stakes. They're both as bad as each other and Sasha is forever rolling her eyes at them. It's quite entertaining,' she added.

'I'll have to pop by and see you all soon. It's been hectic here,' Demi apologised, picturing Billy and Sasha's new assistant having a sing-off in the office and Sasha covering her ears and glowering at them. It made her chuckle.

‘That would be great,’ said Poppy before she paused. ‘You ok?’

‘Umm. I think so. This place is more popular than I could have imagined, but as a result Miles and I don’t get time to see each other.’

‘I know that feeling well,’ said Poppy sympathetically. ‘It’s those darn boys. We want to spend every moment with them, but they push us to be our best version of ourselves without us really realising it.’ Demi jolted in surprise at her friend’s insight. ‘It can be tough, but you have to find a balance,’ continued Poppy.

‘Miles asked me to be exclusive,’ said Demi quietly.

Poppy didn’t sound surprised, for some reason. She just laughed. ‘It’s the Taylor brother magnetism. There’s nothing you can do about it, Dems. They are pretty ‘all or nothing’ guys and when they find their mate, they home in and make you theirs,’ she joked. ‘It’s bliss!’

‘But it’ll ruin our friendship, I know it will!’ protested Demi, trying not to remember how wonderful it felt to be enfolded in Miles’s arms.

‘Do you think he’s worth it?’ asked Poppy. Demi flushed and hid her face in her hair, even though Poppy couldn’t see her flaming cheeks.

‘He’s my best friend.’

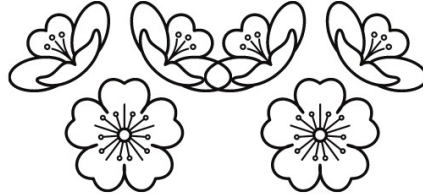
‘I’m your best friend,’ said Poppy firmly. ‘Miles has been in love with you for years,’ she finished carefully.

‘What?’ scoffed Demi. ‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ she added heatedly. ‘He’s never tried anything like this with me before. Our relationship was purely platonic.’

‘That’s because you were with Allan and professing your love in front of Miles every five seconds, you dummy,’ chided Poppy. ‘Allan made sure to be all over you whenever Miles was near. I’m not the only one who noticed. Miles was being a good friend and not interfering, but when he found out about Allan cheating, he couldn’t let it go.’

‘He knew about Allan and didn’t tell me?’ All of the air whooshed out of Demi’s body. ‘I’ll kill him!’ she cried.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Demi quickly said goodbye to a protesting Poppy and slammed the phone onto her desk. She pushed herself out of her chair and stormed into Miles's office. He was just finishing a call and looked up to greet her, but the smile slid from his face when he saw her expression. She left his office door open, not caring who heard her and went to stand in front of him. He stood up, but didn't touch her. 'Are you ok? What's wrong?'

'Did you, or did you not, know that Allan was cheating on me and not tell me?' she seethed, her fists bunching at her sides. It felt like a thousand angry ants were marching up her spine and stinging her with every step. Her whole body felt like it was on fire.

Miles's face flushed and she immediately had her answer. 'I only knew towards the end – and I tried to tell you.'

Demi rounded on him, but he didn't step back. He took her hands in his, but she shook him off and started pacing around his office. He looked worriedly at the open door and the staff working diligently outside Demi's office, and slid the door closed to give them some privacy.

'You clearly didn't try that hard,' she ground out, her eyes spitting fire at him and he winced.

'I felt that you should hear it from Allan,' said Miles. 'I spoke to him, but he tried to blackmail me. He knew I'd always cared about you and he threatened to tell you how I felt.'

Demi felt like a bucket of ice water had just been thrown in her face and she gasped, but the hurt was running too deep to consider what he'd just said.

'Did you offer me this job to get me away from Allan?' she demanded to know. Miles paused for a nanosecond too long and she cried out in anger. Then tears filled her eyes. 'He was right all along,' she sobbed.

'No!' said Miles, desperately, taking her hand and leading her to the couch at the side of his office. She really wanted to punch someone – preferably both Allan and Miles, for thinking they knew what was best for her.

'I wanted to give you the space to see what kind of a man Allan really is,' Miles pleaded for understanding.

'And you wanted me to turn to you?' she asked, brushing tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

'I didn't plan it that way. I wanted you to be free to make your own decisions. If you finally saw something other than friendship with me, then that was an added bonus.'

'You've lost my trust,' she cried, 'how could you knowingly leave me in a relationship where someone was cheating on me?'

'Would you have believed me if I'd told you Allan was a cheat?' Miles asked heatedly, jumping up and pacing the room himself now.

'I don't know,' she admitted. Her shoulders were bobbing up and down as she cried. She drew in some breaths and tried to calm herself down. She didn't want the staff to see her upset when she went back to her own office, but she was only human and she'd been pushed to breaking point by these men. 'Probably not straight away, but in time I'd have been grateful to you for putting me first,' she sniffled.

'You'd have associated me with the news and hated me too. I couldn't risk it,' said Miles solemnly. 'I'm sorry, Demi. I confronted Allan and told him to tell you himself, or I would. But you found out yourself before that could happen.' Miles ran his hands through his hair and sighed heavily. 'I'm sorry,

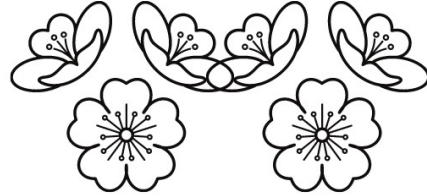
Dems,' he said again, sitting back down next to her and wiping away her tears with the pad of his thumb.

'It's ok,' she hiccupped. 'I have terrible taste in men,' she added, looking down in her lap.

Miles lifted up her chin and gave her a weak, but hopeful smile. 'Not all men,' he said, pulling her onto his lap and kissing her closed eyes, his protective arms wrapping around her.

Demi was too exhausted to protest. Her emotions were all over the place. She cried over the ending of any connection with Allan, who had been a huge part of her life for over a decade, and for the change that had just happened in her relationship with Miles. The final vestiges of him as her friend flew away, and now she'd have to make some very grown-up decisions about their future, if she felt she could trust him with every part of her heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Demi still felt a bit battered and bruised by her confrontation with Miles, but they had called a truce and were trying to rebuild the trust in their relationship. He'd taken her out to dinner, brought her thoughtful little gifts and trinkets, including a signed book from her favourite author whom he'd met at a function, and had sent a huge bouquet of flowers to her at the office. It was so big that she barely had space to work, but the scent of her favourite blush pink roses filled the air. She kept sniffing them and touching the velvety petals, sharing a secret smile with herself. The ice around her heart was gradually melting, but she hadn't completely let down her guard with him yet. He kept giving her puppy-dog stares and trying to entice her into the computer room, but she was having none of it. She needed time to heal and to enjoy her newfound independence.

She was becoming quite wealthy. If her parents hadn't decided to sign on the dotted line, which they were still pretty cagey about, then she might have considered buying the garage in Essex too. She had implemented so many systems here that could easily work there. She loved Cherry Blossom Lane, but her ties to her home were strong. Her parents were there for a start – even if they were going to be travelling more. She supposed she could look for a second site, and grudgingly admitted that it would be an idea to see if Miles was interested too. They made a good team, however snarky she still was with him right now.

After the commute back to Essex, she pulled into her parents' driveway and enjoyed the feeling of being home. Her

flat was great, but a little piece of her would always be here. She had decided to put some space between her and Miles, and was home for a bank holiday weekend. She was going to Ollie's gym, then she'd catch up with friends and stuff her face with cake at Chris's café. She felt the day's tension melt away and took a moment to note the new flowers her mum had planted in the garden and enjoy the way the sun made everything seem brighter and friendlier. She knew that both Poppy and Sasha were also back here for the weekend, so she hoped that the Taylor brothers didn't all descend too. She hadn't mentioned to Miles what she was doing, so he might find the radio silence from her phone concerning. She had forgiven him for not telling her about Allan, but it still stung! She'd thanked him for the gifts and told him that she needed a bit of space.

Her stomach turned over at the thought of him dating anyone else, as they hadn't spoken about their exclusivity since the night they'd decided on it. Miles had seemed more relaxed, until the Allan revelation, but now he had thrown himself into work. He always seemed to have client or supplier meetings, or days out to find out about the latest tech for the automotive industry. She missed snuggling up next to him at night and was still kissing and hugging him briefly, but he could tell she was holding back and didn't push it. She fleetingly wondered if he was frightened of losing her, but there was probably a queue of replacements waiting in the wings.

Her mum stuck her head around the front door and sent her an enquiring glance. She glanced at her phone and saw she'd been sitting on the drive for twenty minutes. Her mum was wearing a beautiful orange and pink dress that had flowers all around the hem. The sight of her made Demi smile and she got out of the car to be pulled into a warm hug. 'We've missed you!' said Tianna, kissing the top of her daughter's head. Demi snuggled into her mum's arms until she held her away from her and frowned. 'Are you ok?'

Demi shrugged, then nodded, trying to summon a smile and not worry her mum. 'I think I'm just tired. I'm looking

forward to sleeping for most of the weekend,' she joked lamely.

'Is Miles joining us?' asked her mum, which in turn made Demi frown. She hadn't told her parents how much her relationship with Miles had changed, but they often spent time with each other anyway. Her mum wouldn't expect him to join her for a weekend stay, though, so that was weird. His own parents lived just down the road! Demi still hadn't responded to the press enquiries, so there hadn't been much of a mention of her relationship with Miles in local papers around Cherry Blossom Lane. It was a long drive from here, so her mum was unlikely to have seen anything even if it had been covered.

'Um... no. Why would he? I think he's visiting a manufacturer in France this weekend.'

'No reason!' said her mum, sweeping her indoors and calling her dad in from where he was rearranging the tools in the garden shed. Things were lying all over the grass and Demi grinned suddenly. She didn't think that shed had been emptied in decades. The shed had been freshly painted and the garden was bursting at the seams with new flowers. Demi frowned and then shrugged, assuming that her parents had more time on their hands now they were about to retire.

'Although now you mention it, we did see a photo of you both in a fancy magazine and you looked so good together. I thought you might have some news?' her mum asked after she had quickly made them all a cup of strong tea and her dad had wandered back out to garden Armageddon.

Demi ignored the question, as she didn't really know what to say. She confided in her mum about most things, but jumping from best friends to lovers with Miles might be confusing for everyone. She wasn't sure how to tackle it, or even how she felt being in close proximity to Allan again. She dreaded bumping into him, but it was inevitable at some point. As long as she didn't bump into his mother first, she supposed. She'd probably have a thing or two to say about their break-up, and Demi bet she would be the one to blame.

Demi sat down in the lounge and watched her dad put tools into different piles and then swap them back again. He couldn't throw anything out. He was the same at the garage. That was why it was full to the brim with parts that they would never use, that 'might be useful one day'. She sipped her tea and realised she was famished. Her mum had made biscuits and they were as vibrant as ever. Tianna hadn't mastered the art of icing carefully and preferred big splotches of different coloured icing. Demi never complained, because it meant more icing for her, as it always dripped down the sides too. She bit into one and enjoyed the sugar and almond hit before grabbing another one. Her mum looked on but unusually said nothing at first.

Tianna carried on sitting primly with her hands in her lap, with one eyebrow raised, until Demi folded. 'Ok. Miles and I have been dating,' she said quickly, her heart racing.

'I know that!' said her mother, making Demi's jaw drop. 'I saw how you looked at each other in that photo, and we've spoken to Miles. I was waiting for you to tell me.' She gave her daughter a reproving stare and Demi flushed.

'You've spoken to Miles?' Demi couldn't think what the hell was going on.

'He visits his parents. Of course we've spoken to Miles. His mum and I have discussed it and we are both so happy for you. You know Fiona and I meet all the time, to discuss baking and our kids,' Tianna chided. 'Fiona has all the best secrets about how to get cakes to rise, from her cake business,' she added conspiratorially, with a wink.

'Fiona knows?' gulped Demi, her mouth going dry and butterflies taking flight. Demi loved Fiona, but wasn't sure how Miles's mum would feel about Demi jumping from Allan to Miles. 'She's ok with it? I was dating Allan fairly recently.'

'Why wouldn't she be fine?' asked her mum, tutting. 'Miles is a very lucky boy to find a gorgeous, kind and clever woman like you.'

'Mum!' Demi groaned. 'I hope you didn't say that to Fiona?'

‘Of course I did!’

Demi held her head in her hands. Her dad came in and saw their faces, then quickly mumbled about needing to find a bin bag and backed out again. He grinned at Demi as he went and tilted his head towards the door to signal that she should make a run for it. It was something they’d always joked about, when she was growing up and Tianna embarrassed her over anything, which happened often. Her mum spoke her mind and although Demi adored that about her, it wasn’t always fun when Tianna decided she knew best and took things into her own hands.

‘Miles knew about Allan and didn’t tell me,’ Demi sighed. Her mum’s lips tightened into a thin line and she drew in a sharp breath. ‘He told Allan to tell me, or he would.’

She saw her mum visibly relax, and her face softened, from someone who wanted a fight to a cute little kitten. Then she sat back with her feet tucked under and her hands in her lap.

‘That’s ok, then. He was looking out for you,’ her mum decided, and Demi realised what she said was true.

‘Tell me about the garage sale,’ said Demi, changing the subject, as she needed time to mull that thought over. But she had learned to trust her mum’s wisdom over time and decided to let go of some of the hurt.

‘It’s done!’ said her mum in excitement, and she jumped up and started dancing around the room, almost giving Demi a heart attack. She felt a twinge of loss for her family business, but she had her own business now and she could build on that.

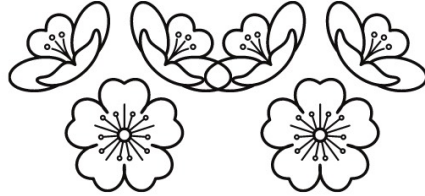
‘Who bought it?’ she asked.

‘It’s a surprise!’ said her mum, still twirling and pirouetting. ‘We’re having a barbeque tomorrow afternoon and we’ve invited a few friends and the buyer. Dad wants to announce it then. You can’t be cross,’ said her mum with a wince as she did her final twirl and bumped her backside on the sideboard.

‘What?’ asked Demi. ‘Why would I be cross?’

Her mum pretended not to hear her and bustled out of the room, proclaiming that Demi needed to go and help her dad sort out the garden while she went food shopping.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Demi's arms ached from hefting the age-old tools to the tip and mowing the grass without decapitating her mum's new flowers. This was supposed to be a holiday for her. Now she'd gotten roped in to clearing the garden and helping to make a rum punch and a cake for the barbeque! The cake was divine and she could understand now why her mum spent so much time with Miles's mum chatting about the perfect recipe. She'd been so tempted to take a tiny slice, but her mum had slapped her hands away playfully and given her another list of tasks!

She'd had to tell them she was going for a walk as an excuse to sit in the park and snooze for twenty minutes. Just as she was waking up, a shadow fell across her face and she looked up to see Allan standing in front of her. He was shielding his eyes from the sun and staring at her, as if he didn't know whether to disturb her or not. He was looking a bit dishevelled in cut-off jeans and a T-shirt that had seen better days. Allan's attire was usually immaculate and ironed by his mum, so Demi frowned.

'Allan,' she said, finding it a bit weird to say the name that she'd used a hundred times every day for years. 'How are you?' She wasn't sure they could be friends yet, but she was hoping that they would reach that point one day. Looking at his face and the way he was shifting from foot to foot, she could tell he had something to say to her.

'I'm fine,' he sighed and sat down next to her. She shuffled up to turn and face him. His body next to hers felt so familiar,

yet alien at the same time, and it threw her for a moment. ‘I wondered if you’d heard about the garage yet?’ he asked.

She gulped and bit her lip. The awful thought that perhaps Allan and his mother had bought the garage filled her suddenly and she began to feel a bit sick. They would run it into the ground.

‘So? Have they told you?’

Demi crossed her legs, as if this would protect her. From Allan’s expression, it seemed not to be good news.

‘They haven’t,’ she said honestly. ‘Is it you?’ Her eyes searched his and noted his surprise. He threw his head back and laughed, until he grew serious again.

‘I wish it was!’ he said. ‘At least then your family wouldn’t have been fleeced,’ he laughed a bit manically, and she wondered what the hell was going on.

Demi frowned and waited patiently, but Allan was still fidgety and suddenly seemed unsure about being the bearer of bad news.

‘Just tell me. Is it really that awful?’ she asked, her hands shaking in her lap.

After a drawn out, dramatic pause, Allan finally spoke. ‘Miles bought it,’ he said, and Demi gasped and covered her mouth with her hands in horror.

‘But why?’ She closed her eyes for a moment and tried to think clearly, but her brain was full of fog.

‘Why didn’t he tell you, or why did he buy it?’

She didn’t like the sudden gleam that came into Allan’s eye, or the way he took her hand and held it. She shook him off and stood up, shielding her eyes from the sun and not knowing what to think.

‘Either... both.’ She felt her cheeks burn with the humiliation of being the last to know, especially as Allan was clearly loving being the one to enlighten her.

‘He didn’t tell you because he bought it for a song,’ he said, standing up and starting to walk back through the park with her, a walk they had done a thousand times before. She found she couldn’t stand still and was itching to run home and scream questions at her parents, but forced her legs to slow down and stroll beside Allan as if the fires of hell weren’t burning in her stomach right now.

‘What were they thinking? What was Miles thinking?’ she asked out loud and then wished she hadn’t, as Allan was still next to her.

He turned and faced her, forcing her to stop walking. ‘He probably knew it would fail without you, so he drew you away with that big shiny deal he offered you, then snapped the place up when it was dirt cheap. The area surrounding the garage has been bought by a developer, so a sizeable plot like Len’s garage will be worth a fortune if they want to knock it down and turn it into housing.’

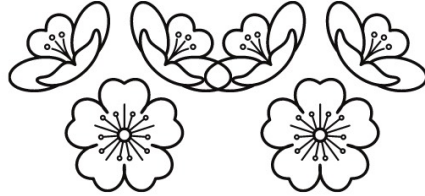
Demi put a hand out, as she felt faint, and he took her arm. She walked home on shaky legs.

Her dad was in the front garden, throwing some hedge cuttings into the green bin, when he looked up. He frowned when he saw Allan holding Demi’s arm.

She nodded her thanks to Allan and kissed him on the cheek, which made him sigh in regret and give her the cheeky smile she recognised from when they’d been together. He wasn’t all bad as a person. He’d clearly understood how she would feel about the sale of the garage when no one else did. Perhaps she’d been too hard on him. Allan lowered his eyes as he said a quick hello to Len and kept walking up to his own parents’ house, a few roads further along.

‘We need to talk,’ she said gravely to her dad, and marched inside without another word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Poppy pushed open the door to Chris's café, where she was meeting Demi and Sasha. Chris looked up from where he was making a coffee and pointed to a table where her friends were sitting, heads bent together.

From Chris's face Poppy could tell that something serious was up, so she didn't rush round to give him a cuddle, or look for her mum – who was usually to be found bustling about in the kitchen. June's latest passion was for cakes and she enjoyed experimenting with the huge old recipe books that Chris used. Poppy had been stunned that her mum actually had a gift for it. Her creations were delicious, meticulous and mouth-watering to look at. The cream teas they now offered at the café on weekends were so popular that they were thinking of taking on two extra staff. Chris was a sublime baker, but June hadn't really ever baked for Poppy when she was growing up, so this took some getting used to.

Her mum was always smiling now though and barely mentioned their years of struggles, or spoke about how lonely Poppy had been without a mum around for so many years. June loved cuddling her these days and encouraged her to speak to her previously estranged dad, which had shocked Poppy to silence the first few times it had happened. She waved to her mum as she came out of the kitchen with a tray of delicately frosted cupcakes, then Poppy headed resolutely towards her friends. What the hell could have happened with them now? She hoped it was nothing to do with Sasha and Ollie's engagement, because Poppy was looking forward to having Sasha as an official sister and not just an honorary one.

Sasha and Demi looked up and made room for her when she arrived. She gave them both a quick hug before sitting down and accepting a coffee from her mum, who weirdly didn't stay to chat either.

'What's going on?' she asked them both. 'Are Ollie and Miles ok? How are the café and garage doing?' she turned to Demi, immediately thinking of a dozen more questions.

'They're both fine,' said Sasha, spooning a huge mountain of cream and marshmallows from her hot chocolate into her mouth and sitting back and chomping furiously.

'The new garage is doing brilliantly,' said Demi, truthfully. 'If I wasn't so angry and sad, I'd be basking in my own success.'

Poppy frowned and sipped her own drink, after blowing on it to cool it down. 'What are you sad about? Miles hasn't messed up, has he? What's he done?' Poppy was incredulous as she counted on Miles to be the voice of reason – but she'd kill him if he hurt Demi.

'I've got my own savings and prospects now, and even new dreams to expand the business if I want to. I do have to thank Miles for that, but apparently, he offered me the job to get me away from the site so he could persuade my dad to sell.'

'What?' scoffed Poppy. 'Don't be ridiculous,' she added, but Sasha was a bit too quiet for once.

'That's what I said at first,' agreed Sasha. 'But there's more.'

'A developer has bought the land around Dad's garage. The value of the site could skyrocket if they want to buy more land and build flats on it.'

Poppy's mouth dropped open. 'But... but... Bloody Jared! I bet he has something to do with this,' she said, an uneasy feeling settling in her stomach.

Surely Jared would have told her if he was buying such a huge expanse of land? They were business partners, after all, even though she had no control over his business, and he had a

financial interest in hers. He was usually upfront about his plans, but as this involved Demi... he'd have known that Poppy's loyalty would be with her closest friend.

Sasha's eyebrows shot into her hairline and she started muttering about 'hot shot' men, into her hot chocolate, which just gave her a cream moustache. Poppy was painfully confused and she couldn't even laugh. She felt the start of a headache brewing, little needles digging into the base of her skull.

'It makes sense,' said Demi sadly. 'The Taylor brothers seem to like working with Jared these days.'

'It's lucrative work and they all know where they stand. It's just business,' said Sasha, clearly protecting her man.

'Jared actually enjoys working with the guys because they are all astute businessmen. He likes working with us for the same reason. We're all entrepreneurs. I know he's got a lot of his own brothers, but they live on the other side of the country and I think he misses them,' said Poppy thoughtfully.

'Bloody Jared,' said Demi. 'He's really annoying, but he's a loveable rogue. I guess Miles drew his attention to the area?'

'Let me call him,' said Poppy, standing up and grabbing her phone from her handbag. She left her bag on the chair and stepped outside. When she returned, Sasha had finished her drink and Demi was still picking her cup up and putting it back down again, but not really achieving anything. Poppy pulled a face as she sat back down, and they all knew the outcome of the conversation.

'He said it's more complicated than that, but refused to go into details, which is unusual as I pretty much work on all his big projects now – and the land surrounding Len's garage is vast.'

'Miles has ruined everything,' said Demi sadly. 'I trusted him and it shows that my judgement with men is as bad as ever. What a loser! At least I got to see my ideas could work, before I have to scream at Miles and throw our partnership deal back in his face.'

‘Have you asked Miles why?’ asked Poppy, ever the voice of reason.

‘No, I can’t be in the same room as him while I’m so angry,’ seethed Demi. ‘I tried to talk to my parents about it, but they didn’t make much sense. They said that Dad approached Miles, not the other way round.’

‘There you go, then,’ Sasha threw her hands up and smiled finally. As if that settled everything. ‘Maybe he’s trying to help?’ Sasha added, signalling to Chris that they needed emergency cake – and fast. He had been watching them with a worried look on his face. Demi betted he knew exactly what they were talking about, too. Was she the only person in this town who hadn’t known that the buyer was Miles? It seemed so, she seethed quietly.

‘He simply wanted to get me out of the way, to add to his business portfolio. He’s lived here for most of his life and knows the area inside out,’ she said sadly, tears falling now. She sniffed and rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. Poppy offered her a tissue from a packet in her bag, and Chris rushed over with a plate piled high with gooey chocolate eclairs that were oozing with fresh whipped cream.

‘Miles knew about Allan’s cheating and didn’t tell me about that either,’ said Demi through rivers of tears, not caring who saw her and reported back to her mother. It was her mother’s fault that she was crying!

‘What?’ Scary fuming Sasha was back in an instant and Demi smiled through her tears. ‘Why would he do that?’ demanded Sasha.

‘He told Allan to tell me, or he would. Allan didn’t. He just told me that Miles was in love with me.’

‘He is,’ stated Sasha flatly.

Demi shook her head solemnly. ‘How can he be, when he’s done this to my family?’ she asked. ‘This sale was supposed to mean that they could travel the world and still have money saved. Miles wouldn’t buy anything unless it was going to

make him money,' she added spitefully, then her lip wobbled again.

'Miles saying he's in love with Demi doesn't excuse his behaviour, though,' said Poppy with a frown. 'There must be a reasonable explanation. Miles would never do anything to hurt you.'

'Talk to him,' urged Sasha, clearly deciding she'd waited long enough for cake, biting into an éclair and almost going cross-eyed in bliss.

Demi caught some of the cream about to drop out of the pastry with her finger, and tasted the sugary concoction. 'I can't. He's been abroad for a week with work, and I want to shout at him in person.'

She picked up a cake of her own and bit into it, but even that couldn't bring a smile to her face. After a few bites she pushed her plate away.

'You never shout,' said Poppy, sitting back in her chair and looking at her friend in surprise.

'I know,' said Demi. 'But since Allan cheated, I'm learning.'

'You don't need to change for a man,' said Poppy. 'You're perfect as you are.'

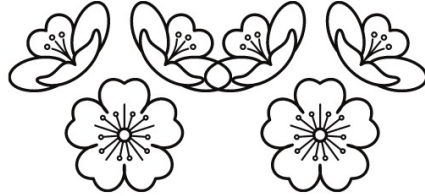
Demi frowned and sighed. 'I need to speak to my parents again. They told me some of it, but I get the feeling there's more to this story than they're letting on and I'm not sure what the hell is going on.'

As she pushed her chair back from the table and stood up to leave, Chris bustled over and wordlessly handed her a box of eclairs to take home. She looked at them for a moment and then hugged him, blowing Poppy and Sasha air kisses and giving them a tired wave, before heading for the door.

Poppy sat back with a sigh and before she could think of what to do, Chris and her mum had already pulled chairs up to their table and were asking if they could help sort out Demi's dilemma, while most of the rest of the customers seemed to be

craning their necks to listen to as well. That dratted town
grapevine!

CHAPTER THIRTY



Miles ran his hands through his hair in frustration. He'd been away meeting tech developers all week. One had invented a tiny gadget that could reduce the fuel consumption of a supercar. It would save his clients money in the long run, but pushback from the industry was high and the cost of fitting the gadget was also at a premium.

Miles loved technology and wanted to see the tech with his own eyes, but he agreed that it would be very laborious to put this particular gadget in place, with fitting expenses and a specialist team. It was something he'd keep in mind for the future, though, and would talk to his clients about. Some wanted the latest technology at all costs, so there still might be a market for those who wouldn't bat an eyelid about the price. Miles prided himself on keeping up with latest trends, but could also strip most cars and rebuild them by hand if he needed to. He did it for pleasure now and again, and had his own collection of beautiful cars stored in one of the huge hangers at the back of his plot on Cherry Blossom Lane.

Demi's parents had sworn him to secrecy about the buy-out of their garage and it was causing him a headache. What with the revelation about him knowing about Allan's affair, a secret that he had always felt pretty lousy about, it had been tough to know who to please. Clearly, he hadn't wanted to upset Demi, and he was pretty sure his news would do that. It was either that, though, or ruin her parents' surprise and big reveal party. He'd told them in the kindest way possible that it was a terrible idea, but they'd laughed and told him that they

knew Demi best and she'd love the concept and thought behind it.

Now she wasn't answering any of his texts or calls and he'd had five SOS messages from his brothers. He was pretty sure that the cat was out of the bag and his hopes of winning Demi's heart had been obliterated. He hadn't wanted to buy Len's garage, but Len was shrewd when it came to how Miles felt about his daughter. Len had seen how Miles's eyes followed Demi whenever they were together and how besotted he'd always been with her. He was a man in love and when Len had asked for help, how could he refuse?

He'd actually kind of liked the idea at first, but now his gut told him that he'd made the wrong decision – his judgement had been clouded by having Demi in his arms at last. What an idiot! His stomach felt as though it was full of lead and he knew he'd made a bad call, even with the best intentions. Demi would hate the idea. It was too soon after Allan for such a big declaration and now she'd probably dump him and run for the hills.

He cursed and tried to pull onto her parents' driveway, but it was already jammed with cars, even though everyone he knew could park nearby. Sasha and Ollie had probably walked from his parents' house and he knew Dylan and Poppy would have left their car behind Chris's café. Who else had they invited to this awful idea of a barbeque? He'd insisted they needed to keep it low key. He swore under his breath and swung his car back out, trying not to have a coronary while he parked further down the road and quickly tried to think of an escape plan – preferably with Demi.

His whole body ached from days of no sleep. He'd also had all those calls from his brothers telling him to get home quickly, with no other explanation. He hadn't even stopped for water on the long motorway journey from the airport. He slumped in his seat for a minute and rubbed his temples, then jumped half out of his skin when someone knocked on the window. Ollie's face loomed in front of him, with Sasha at his elbow. Miles took a few deep breaths to try and calm his heart rate. He could go into a meeting and negotiate multi-million-

pound deals, but facing the woman he loved and her friends, after he'd messed up, was making him want to be sick. Not that he'd eaten anything to bring up.

'You've botched this,' said Ollie helpfully as Miles got slowly out of the car and grimaced, so Ollie pulled him in for a hug, which he received gratefully.

'He knows that,' said Sasha, as she leaned in for her own hug. 'Is there a good explanation?'

'There is,' he sighed, 'but when I think about it now, it was presumptuous and a bit foolish. I thought I could sweep her off her feet.'

'By buying her dad's garage?'

He could see the moment the light bulb went on for Sasha and she understood his intention. He'd bought the garage *for* Demi. 'Oooh... I get it now. You bloody idiot!'

Sasha shook her head at his stupidity, and he hung his head. 'What about Jared?' she demanded to know. 'He's bought all the land around the garage and the value will skyrocket.'

'That was the plan,' said Miles. 'Jared loves the way Ollie's gyms bring in customers for his houses, as they are so high end now. The relaxation pods Poppy built for him in the grounds of the Cherry Blossom Lane site are a smash hit. Now Ollie has got them here in his local gym too, Jared wants to cash in on that. Those pods are a big draw for customers.'

Miles's throat was parched, and he wished Sasha would let him go inside and get a drink before she bombarded him with questions. 'I mentioned Len's idea to Jared, for me to buy him out.'

Sasha groaned and slapped her forehead with her palm.

'I know. It was stupid,' Miles admitted. 'We'd had a few beers after work, when we'd agreed on the advertising in his brochures before my charity event. I forgot that he's generally always got his ear to the ground for a new deal. He was upfront about buying the land. I thought it would bring the garage more custom for Demi, or give a great return if she

decided to sell. I paid Len a fair price and he was ecstatic. It was well over the valuation, even with the building land being optioned. I bought everything – even though most of it is junk,’ he groaned.

‘You idiot!’ reiterated Sasha, just in case he hadn’t understood her the first time, but now she was laughing at him. He poked her gently in the ribs and she yelped and then hugged him tightly, kissing his cheek, which soothed his frazzled nerves slightly.

‘Totally,’ supported Ollie, gently smacking Miles over the head with a brotherly slap, making Miles rock back on his heels, too tired even to do it back.

Ollie put his arm around Sasha’s waist, making her smile grow wider. Nothing could keep Sasha down for too long and Miles hoped she had a solution to this mess he was in. She solved her clients’ marketing problems all the time – and he desperately needed some good public relations assistance with Demi.

‘It was kind of a good idea, I suppose,’ said Sasha thoughtfully, clearly back in work mode.

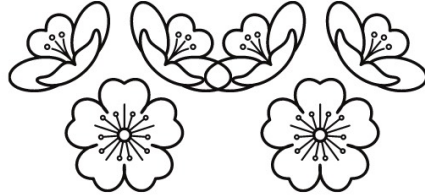
‘Sash...’ warned Ollie.

‘Sorry,’ she apologised. ‘I always jump to possibilities for growing the business and this does have prospects, if you throw in Demi’s original ideas for the place. You being away hasn’t helped,’ she sympathised. ‘You couldn’t sort out the Allan mess – and guess who saw her in the park yesterday and told her who the mystery buyer was?’

Miles groaned again, but suddenly adrenaline was back and flowing through his veins. *Of course* it had to be Allan who told Demi. Damn!

‘Come on, mate,’ said Ollie, throwing an arm around his shoulder. ‘Let’s get this over with.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Miles's eyes darted around the garden and immediately found Demi. She was in one corner on the immaculately trimmed lawn. Lush flowers bloomed in abundance in brightly coloured pots dotted around the borders, which were full of a rainbow of flowering plants and shrubs. It was a vibrant scene, but Miles didn't stop to enjoy it. A few people smiled his way and said a brief hello, but he made his way directly to Demi after only a few brief pleasantries.

Demi was wearing a pretty blue summer dress that swung around her thighs as she moved and clung to her chest. She was smiling at something Dylan said and Miles's heart almost stopped at the sight of her. He ached to hold her in his arms. He'd really missed her, more than he'd thought possible. He was sweltering in the afternoon sun. He hadn't had a chance to get changed out of his lightweight suit trousers and cotton long-sleeved shirt, which he'd rolled up to his elbows. He usually liked to dress smartly but informally, but today he felt constricted and uncomfortable. That might have had more to do with the looming confrontation than his outfit, but he shrugged that thought off.

There were parasols arranged to shade the guests, but he still felt the sun's glare as he'd left his sunglasses in the car. His head was beginning to pound. He cursed under his breath as he'd rather have had at least a small barrier to the evil looks that Demi was probably going to give him when she realised he was there. He hated the fact that he might ruin her day and be responsible for upsetting her.

At that moment, she turned and saw him. He felt like he was moving in slow motion and he paused and waited. She said something to Dylan, who looked his way and gave him a sympathetic smile. Poppy joined Dylan too, and turned to see what they were looking at. She didn't seem happy either. Miles gulped and approached them, kissing the women in greeting and hugging his brother briefly.

'You idiot!' Dylan said quietly into his ear, before grinning and slapping him playfully on the back. Miles turned to Demi and took her hands, but she didn't raise a smile for him.

He took a deep calming breath. 'Apparently, I'm an idiot. I'm sorry, Demi,' he said, holding her hands firmly so that she couldn't swing at him. 'Can we talk inside?' he added hopefully.

He let go of her hands and took a step back – she definitely didn't look pleased to see him and his ego took a hit. He noticed her parents had worried frowns on their faces and he sent them a confident smile that he definitely didn't feel.

Demi looked at Poppy, who winced and nodded. Then Demi turned and followed Miles silently into the house. She hadn't greeted him or shouted at him. Not that he'd ever really heard Demi shout. She always reasoned that shouting the loudest didn't mean you'd be victorious in an argument and that calm discussion would always win out. He had an inkling that she might forget how reasonable she'd been before, when they finally faced each other without an audience. The silence was deafening and he could almost feel his heart beating out of his chest. She led him into her old bedroom. Miles sat on the edge of her bed. Instead of sitting next to him, she pulled out the stool from under her dressing table and perched herself on that, her ankles primly crossed and her hands in her lap. He was desperate to hug her, but her icy look froze him to the spot. They'd spent many evenings in this room as teenagers, watching television or teasing each other about their respective love lives. She'd been with Allan, and Miles'd had his own share of relationships. The problem was that none of them matched up to how he felt being in the same room as Demi, even if she could only offer friendship.

The dressing table was neatly stacked with perfume bottles and photos of them all growing up. He hadn't been in this room for ages, as she'd moved into her first flat long ago, and Allan had pretty much lived there too for years. The flat had been a bit impersonal, but this room was full of Demi's unique style. It was welcoming, bright and comforting, unlike the woman who sat before him. She was waiting patiently to hear what he had to say, but also had angry red patches on her cheeks and her breath was coming hard and fast as if she was getting to the end of her tether and was about to explode if he didn't speak soon. He knew he couldn't put off the inevitable any longer.

Then Demi let out a huge theatrical sigh. 'Did you buy my dad's garage?' she asked, biting her lip and holding her breath for the answer.

'Demi, look...'

'Did you?' she demanded to know, her voice raising an octave.

'Yes. But...' he tried to go to her and pull her into his arms, but she just stood up woodenly and he backed away and hung his head.

'But what?' she suddenly exploded and began pacing the room. 'At what point did you decide you wanted a plot on prime building land, and at what point did you call me and offer me a job?'

'I didn't offer you a job, Dems. I offered you a partnership. I still am offering that – just a different one.'

'What? You're talking in riddles,' she said. He could tell how exasperated she was by the way she was throwing her hands up and still pacing the room. 'Did you know that Jared was going to buy the surrounding land?' she asked.

Miles rolled his neck in exhaustion and reached out as she passed to take one of her hands to still her. 'Demi. You know me. I'd never do anything to hurt you. I love you!'

Demi scoffed. 'I've heard that before, from Allan. Look how that worked out.'

Miles felt like she'd just punched him in the stomach and all the air whooshed out of him. His face flamed and his temper soared. 'You're comparing me to Allan?' he asked incredulously.

Demi stopped mid-rant and went quiet, hanging her head, before facing him again. 'Did you know?'

'I did,' Miles answered, hearing her sharp intake of breath. 'But unlike Allan, I never lied to you. I wanted you to become my partner because you were stifled with Len and your ideas were brilliant. Your dad approached me about the sale. He was fully aware of Jared's interest by the time contracts were being drawn up. I bought the site for you.'

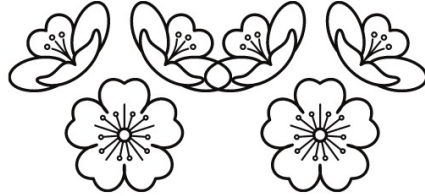
'For me?' she shook her hands free. 'Why for me? So that I didn't have to bother with it, while the value quadrupled? Or so that I wouldn't have my parents hoodwinked by someone I didn't know?'

Miles froze as if he'd been slapped, and he decided he'd had enough. He gave her one more sad look before he left both the room, and the girl of his dreams, behind. He also needed to vacate the building before he let it slip that her parents had pretty much emotionally blackmailed him into the sale.

However much he loved Demi, this hurt like hell and he'd expected more of her. She knew him better than anyone. His heart was splintering that she thought so little of him. She'd not only compared him to her cheating ex, but thought he'd hurt her parents, whom he also loved dearly and considered family.

He left by the front door, as everyone else was in the garden, and when he got back into his car, he just sat there in shock with his head in his hands.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Tianna looked in on her daughter and found Demi in a similar position in her room, with her head slumped into her hands.

‘When did you become so stubborn that you won’t listen to your heart?’ scolded her mum, coming to sit by her side and taking one of her hands. ‘Miles wasn’t trying to hurt you.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me the whole story, then?’ asked Demi suddenly, her eyes bright with tears that she brushed away with the back of her hands as her mum pulled her in for a hug.

Her mum sighed and held Demi away from her, making her look at her. ‘I overheard some of your conversation just now. Dad did approach Miles, it’s true.’

Demi’s cheeks flushed and more tears flowed. She sniffed as her mum handed her a tissue from the box on her side table.

‘We didn’t want to tell you because it was supposed to be a big surprise. None of us wanted to see you cry. This was supposed to be a celebration!’ Tianna chided and sat back, regarding her child. ‘Without Allan the business needed guidance, so your dad approached Miles. He was the obvious choice, but he needed a little persuading. Clearly you both love each other...’

‘Mum!’ cried Demi. ‘You didn’t?’

‘Miles refused at first because he said we had to talk to you about the idea. But then he agreed to inject capital, if the business was signed over to his future wife.’

‘Wife?’ asked Demi. ‘I’m so confused. Who is his future wife?’ She looked at her mum in horror.

Tianna shook her head at her daughter’s stupidity at the same time as understanding dawned for Demi. She gasped and held her hand over her mouth. Moments flashed back in her mind to where Miles had been passionate and sexy, but also other times when he told her how much he wanted children and a family. Was he trying to see how she felt about that by dropping hints about how strong his feelings were for her? She’d had so many years of a man doing anything in his power not to marry her, that she hadn’t seen the signs. She groaned and flopped down on her bed.

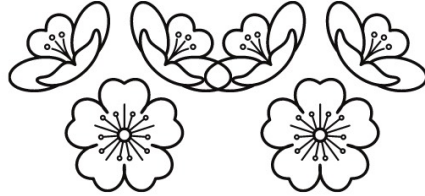
‘The business is his wedding gift to you,’ said her mother simply. ‘He asked your dad for your hand in marriage. I thought that was what you’d want.’

Her mum seemed unsure now and her own eyes were misting over. ‘I’m sorry if we misjudged this, Demi. You talked about marriage to Allan for years, so your dad and I thought you just needed to find the right man.’ She paused and took Demi’s hand again. ‘I know you haven’t been together for very long, but everyone has always seen how special your connection is. We assumed you’d discussed marriage by the way Miles wanted to offer the business as a wedding gift to his bride... you!’

Her dad walked in to see where they were, and Tianna quietly filled him in on what had just happened. He looked horrified and pulled Demi up into a hug.

‘We are so sorry, Demi,’ he said, hanging his head. ‘We were so excited that all your dreams were finally coming true that we planned a surprise party to celebrate with everyone you love. I can see now that we should have told you. But the business is already yours.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Two days had passed since the fateful barbeque at Len and Tianna's house. Miles had no choice but to go to a client meeting across town on his first day back at work. It was his biggest customer, and Miles never let a client down, however cross he was with Demi for not listening to him. Over the evening of the barbeque, his exhaustion had turned to anger when she hadn't wanted to listen or believe that there was no malicious intent behind his purchase of her parents' business. She knew him better than that, and it hurt like hell.

Perhaps it had been good to have the time apart to cool down, he thought. He'd gone to find her to hash it out when he'd got back from his meeting, but she was nowhere to be found.

Kitty had given him a reproving look for upsetting her boss, even though it was clear she didn't know why Demi was upset, as she offered him some cupcakes to take round to Demi's house to cheer her up. He guessed she'd assumed it was a lovers' tiff that was easily rectified by confectionary.

If only it was that simple, but he'd gratefully accepted the box of cupcakes anyway. They were an excuse to turn up at her flat and they might make her smile, as they were her favourite cherry and chocolate mix. The cupcakes were carefully boxed up and sitting innocently on the passenger seat of his car. Demi wasn't one for sharing her feelings. He hoped she'd let him in and give him a chance to explain this time. His own feelings were very bruised and the line of trust between them was wobbling on his front, too.

Now he was sitting outside her flat and he felt about twelve years old. Their chat at her parents' house hadn't gone well, but he wasn't a man who gave up easily when he really wanted something... or someone. Demi was worth fighting for. Allan had filled her head with half-truths and Miles shuddered to think why.

Miles would fight tooth and nail to win her back. He had bided his time and given her space while she recovered from the emotional break up of a long-term relationship, but enough was enough. They belonged together, and he would prove how different he was from Allan.

He hoped Demi could see reason. Yes, he'd been misguided, but his heart had been in the right place. He hadn't lied about anything. Demi had just assumed the buyer was her dad's biggest local competitor, and Miles hadn't corrected her because of the big reveal party.

Miles knew he should have told her, but her parents had persuaded him that the barbeque and a romantic proposal was what she'd always dreamed of. He hadn't wanted to waste time or risk losing her, which had happened anyway. He'd kind of thought that expressing his love and handing her the keys to her dad's garage in front of their friends and family was romantic. The business had been a huge part of her childhood and Miles didn't want her to lose it. He wanted to keep their heritage for their own children.

He and Demi knew what worked, now, as far as garage businesses went, and could easily implement change. All of her original ideas were sound and it would mean she'd have a business near to both her parents and his. They could commute between their garages until they found a manager to run Len's old business day to day, while they were in Cherry Blossom Lane.

Now she was mad at him, and the proposal hadn't happened. He knew it was all moving quickly, but his own parents had met and married within six months and they were still going strong. He and Demi had been best friends since they were teenagers and they already loved each other... he hoped. He was determined to apologise, appeal to her softer

nature and beg for her forgiveness. She'd blossomed from a shy woman into a feisty boss and a girlfriend who knew her own mind – but was still the kindest person he knew. He never wanted her to change. He'd already envisaged her as the mother of their children. Having lots of little ones running around could still work. They might need to adapt some office space, or he could even set up a small staff crèche for everyone. He pocketed that idea for later as he knew a few of his staff had stresses with childcare. He just wished Demi could see a future with him the same way. He could make her happy, he knew it, but he was only human and had his limits.

As he stepped out of his car, the door to Demi's flat opened and Allan strolled out, barefoot and wearing just a pair of jeans and nothing else! He put some food in the bin and then turned Miles's way. Miles froze like an animal in headlights. Allan gave him a smug grin and then walked back into the flat, closing the door firmly behind him.

Miles was rooted to the spot for a moment, but then his world came crashing down. He climbed back into his car and revved the engine, not caring who he woke up. He backed the car out at breakneck speed and sped off towards home.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Demi frowned when Allan came back into her flat without his top or shoes – what the hell?

‘Sorry,’ apologised Allan, wiping his hands on his jeans and looking pretty smug for a man who seemed to have lost half of his clothes in the past five minutes. ‘I tried to help by taking the bin bag out while you were on the phone, but it split and ended up all over my clothes and shoes. I left them in the hallway.’

Allan’s buff body used to make her drool and she’d loved seeing him naked, but now she didn’t even feel the slightest fluttering of lust. Demi frowned as she heard a loud car rev up and reverse out of a parking space beneath her flat. By the time she’d rushed around Allan, taking care not to touch him, and looked out of the window, there was nothing to see other than pitch black darkness. The car had gone. She sighed and her lip drooped.

She understood that she’d hurt Miles and she didn’t know if he’d ever be able to forgive her, but she knew he’d want to speak to her again to demand she listen to reason, even if he hated her guts now. She had a special meal planned to apologise and had even bought more sexy underwear. The kind she knew he loved, with lots of lace and satin. She’d thought he actually preferred her without any clothes at all, but she’d royally ruined all of that now. She hadn’t trusted her instincts this time and had listened to gossip.

She was the worst kind of friend. She should have had Miles’s back and not listened to a word of what Allan had said.

It had struck a chord with her, though, as she'd do anything to protect her parents and Allan knew this. But she also knew without a doubt that Miles loved her parents almost as much as she did.

When there was a knock at her door earlier, instead of Miles it had been Allan standing there. That bloody town grapevine again. Someone had probably seen Miles leave her parents' house at the weekend and knew there had been no big engagement announcement, so they probably felt upset for her. How embarrassing! She felt incredibly sorry for herself.

'I'm sorry I never proposed, Demi,' Allan said now, reaching into his back pocket and producing a beautiful diamond ring, which he held out to her as he dropped onto one knee.

Demi's vision blurred and for a moment and she wondered if she was going to fall into a dead faint and land on the carpet. Allan was half-naked in her flat, proposing, whilst Miles had just driven off in anger. She hadn't worked with cars since she was a teenager not to recognise the sound of his engine.

Her heart was in her mouth. This was something she'd dreamed of for so many years, but suddenly it was all wrong. Allan wasn't the right man.

'Did you literally just chuck half of the rubbish over yourself, to scare off Miles?' she asked incredulously, steadying herself on the sideboard. 'Did you see his car from out of the window, before you took the bins out?' she accused.

'What? No! I came here to propose,' Allan protested, showing her the sparkly ring again.

'I can see that.' She regarded the gem steadily and then opened the nearest drawer and threw an old T-shirt at Allan's head. It was one of his that she'd kept. She used to sleep in it when they were together and had kept it as a memento at first, until the sight of it had made her feel sick and she'd shoved it in a drawer. She hadn't thought to throw it away, until now.

'Put that on,' she said, when he looked at her and confusion. Then he clicked the ring box closed and tugged the

T-shirt on. 'I'm not that person anymore.' she said, doing her best to control her temper, which was firing up nicely. 'You can't manipulate me and I don't love you any more. I'm in love with Miles.'

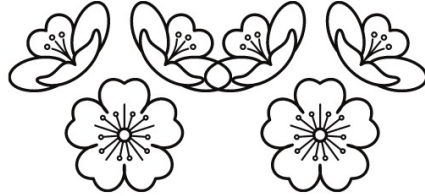
'No!' said Allan, looking appalled. 'He's not good enough for you. He'll break your heart, Demi,' he pleaded. 'He lies to you.' She could almost hear the snap of injustice when he realised what he'd just said. His face grew red as he stood and faced her.

'You lied to me, Allan!'

'Not any more, though! I want to do this for us.' He held out the ring again, then helplessly dropped his hand to his sides when she stood firm.

'There is no *us*, Allan. I think you'd better leave now. And don't forget your other shirt and your shoes,' she added as he finally stormed out. She felt euphoric, furious and powerful all at once, and she sent a rapid text to Miles to ask him to come back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Miles heard his phone ping with a notification that he had a message, but he disregarded it. He wanted to go home and get very, very, drunk. He might even dump the car at Ollie's and walk to the nearest bar. There could be someone there who would appreciate his company for the night. When he pulled into his parking space, he was relieved to see that Ollie was out.

His ego taken a huge hit and his heart was broken. How could Demi go back to her ex? Surely she had more sense than that? But perhaps she'd never stopped loving Allan, and Miles had just been a way to make him jealous? It looked like it had worked!

Bile arose in Miles's throat and his stomach plummeted – then anger took hold. He was glad Ollie was out. He couldn't be bothered explaining how he'd been played. Demi was the one who'd acted upset, and his friends had called him an idiot for trying to do something wildly romantic for once in his life – but all she'd wanted to do was to snare her ex back. It had clearly worked, judging by the fact that Allan had already been half-naked.

Len's garage had been sold for a small fortune to a very gullible man (him) – for more than it would ever be worth and now she had the guy of her dreams. And everyone thought it was Demi who had been played! He stomped up to the front door and then shoved the keys back in his pocket. The bar idea seemed more appealing than sitting morosely on his own. He turned around purposefully and headed up the road towards a

few new bars that had popped up recently. He had every intention of getting blind drunk and forgetting he'd ever met Demi. She taken up enough of his time and energy, and it was about time he lived a little.

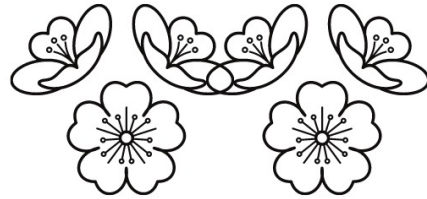


Miles groaned and rubbed his head. It felt like he had metal hammers banging inside his skull. Even opening his eyes hurt. He winced and held onto something for support, and then frowned when he saw he was in an unfamiliar bed. He looked down and realised that he was half naked, wearing just his boxer shorts. He gingerly sat up and groaned in pain. There was a glass of water on the side table, in what was a pretty grey and silver bedroom. Next to the glass was a note. He gratefully sipped the water, frantically racking his brain for snatches of memory about the night before, but there were none.

He placed the glass carefully back down on the table when he had emptied it and tried to settle the feeling of seasickness now sloshing around in his stomach. He took a few deep breaths before picking up the note. He held his head in his hands after reading it and then hobbled to the door in the hope that he could find the bathroom. Judging from how deathly quiet the place was, it seemed like no one else was home. He passed a photo in a frame on the wall. It was of Kitty, from his onsite café. She was smiling happily, with her arms around a friend.

Miles cursed and started slowly piecing together bumping into Kitty and a group of women the night before, in one of the bars. He'd forgotten she lived near Ollie's place. Now he was mostly naked, in her house, in her bed – and about to be sick in her bathroom!

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Demi frowned. Kitty was usually really friendly and chatty when she popped in for her morning coffee, but today she'd been a bit moody and sullen. Demi had enough of her own problems, as Miles was missing and his phone was turned off, which was unheard of in all the time she'd known him. She'd sent him another text, but it remained unread. Where the hell was he?

'Kitty,' asked Demi directly. 'Have you seen Miles?'

Kitty flushed and avoided Demi's eyes, busying herself making a drink and toast for one of the mechanics. 'No, not recently,' she said quickly.

Demi's hackles rose. Kitty was lying. Why? Demi sipped her own coffee but couldn't relax. Something was definitely going on. Kitty was usually sunshine and noise. She often sang at the top of her voice, even though she wasn't the best singer. Luckily she only did it when the place was empty of customers, or before the other staff came in. But today, she was totally silent and had turned away from Demi.

Why would Kitty be lying? Perhaps Miles had told her how awful Demi had been to him. She cringed and sighed. She hoped that wasn't the case, because she was going to spend the rest of her life trying to make it up to him. One person hating her was enough. She hadn't given him a chance to explain, and had believed Allan, who was a compulsive liar lately. In her defence, she'd been in a relationship where there was no real respect or trust for so long, it was ingrained for her to doubt Miles at first to protect her heart. She was really missing

Miles, though, and she hoped he was more generous than she had been at the barbeque – and that he hadn't done anything stupid.

She looked sharply Kitty who was still avoiding eye contact. Surely not? Demi knew Kitty had always had a crush on Miles, but she was dating one of the mechanics and seemed really happy – wasn't she? Plus Kitty now knew that Demi was dating Miles, or had been until a few nights ago, when she had ruined it all. Apparently the garage had been a big romantic proposal idea, but instead of falling into his arms and living happily ever after, Demi had shouted, refused to listen to reason and stomped on Miles's heart.

She had been devastated and crushed when she'd found out. It was all she'd ever dreamt of, but she just hadn't expected that of Miles. He was romantic, but not in a showy way. Other than one huge bouquet when they were first dating, and then the roses recently, his gifts were subtle and sexy, like a scent he knew drove her wild or a night in a quirky hotel where they spent all night giggling and making love. He was so driven and ambitious, and had been single so long, that she'd assumed marriage would be the furthest thing from his mind. Demi walked over to the café's "open" sign and flipped it to "closed".

Kitty stopped what she was doing and scowled. 'Um... Demi...' she looked at her watch and then the door. Kitty was a stickler for timekeeping. 'We should be open,' she said in an uncertain voice, glancing around as if planning her escape route, clearly not in the mood for a chat.

Demi smiled at one of the tech guys as he wandered over for his usual morning bacon roll, but she pointed to the sign and shook her head, which made him give her a puzzled frown and then shrug and turn around.

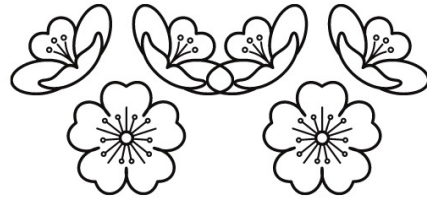
'Demi. He's a customer!' said Kitty, throwing her hands up in exasperation as she watched him walk away through the glass door. 'You can't lock him out. What's up with you today? You're acting weird,' she said defensively.

Kitty hadn't come out from behind the counter and Demi could guess why. If she hadn't finally decided to trust Miles, then she'd be climbing over it to scream at her rival. Miles seemed to bring out a feral side to her lately, but she was determined to change. She knew she'd let him down and now it was her turn to have his back and listen first, without jumping to conclusions.

'The customers can wait,' said Demi. Luckily it was still early and the morning rush hadn't started. Looking at the clock on the wall, she reckoned she had ten minutes to find out what the hell was going on and where Miles was. 'I think we need a chat,' she added firmly, looking straight at Kitty but feeling her own heartbeat ramp up.

She was praying she'd made the right decision and that Miles was worth humiliating herself with her staff for, but she demanded the truth. Kitty grimaced but gave in, and edged herself around the counter and sat at the opposite side of the table to the one Demi had just occupied. 'Tell me about last night,' Demi said firmly.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



Miles sat at his desk, staring out of the window, but not really seeing anything. Demi wasn't in her office next door and he didn't know if he was annoyed or relieved. After a quick shower and a change of clothes at home, he'd decided to walk to work to clear his head and settle his stomach. It hadn't worked. He'd walked past the café and had thought he ought to speak to Kitty, but it was closed for some reason. A few people were milling around outside and murmuring about the time.

He'd veered left and decided to avoid both Kitty and any conversation with his mechanics. Usually he enjoyed chatting to them about their latest clients or some piece of technology that needed to be ordered that day, but today he needed a clear mind.

What the hell had he been thinking? He'd been so angry at Demi for not trusting him that he'd ended up in someone else's bed. He must have been blind drunk to have stooped so low when he still loved Demi, however much she'd let him down. If she was back with Allan, then he didn't know how he could continue to work with her and see her every day without pulling her into his arms. He'd been a patient man for years, but she'd pushed him too far and now his heart had snapped in two.

He groaned and held his throbbing head in his hands. She'd hate him even more now, and there was no way he deserved her forgiveness. He'd never behaved like this before in his life. His parents had brought him up to show everyone

the respect they deserved and he'd let them down, too. Demi had hurt him, but his retaliation, however unintended, was his responsibility, not hers. He'd had disappointments, but this blow was crushing and he wasn't sure he'd survive. Sure, he had his business, but he'd built it with one driving force, to build a connection with the woman of his dreams. Now his financial success felt meaningless and hollow.

He gingerly stood up on wobbly legs and ran the tap in the sink in his bar area. He could usually hold his drink comfortably, but today he understood the craving for another glass to drown out his sorrows. He cursed as he'd already been burnt by too much alcohol, which might now change the trajectory of his life. One careless moment, and his whole life plan had gone up in smoke, but then if Demi was back with Allan, it was over anyway. He wasn't about to play second best to anyone.

He gulped down a glass of cold water. It eased his parched throat slightly, so that he could at least swallow more easily. He should get some breakfast, but his stomach wasn't settled yet. And he also needed to see Demi – and Kitty.

As he turned round, Demi walked right into his office, looking sexy as hell in a fitted white T-shirt with a cute strappy summer dress over the top. He immediately felt that gravitational pull towards her and he closed his eyes and tried not to pass out with exhaustion. He held onto the bar for a minute and then went and sat down in his chair. His body sunk into it gratefully and he waited for her to sit opposite him, which she did, crossing her legs to the side so he could see them.

'Demi...' he began.

She held up a hand to stop him. 'Did you see my texts?' she asked.

Miles patted down his pockets and then swore under his breath. 'I... I must have left my phone somewhere.'

'At Kitty's?' she asked.

His face blanched and, although he hadn't eaten anything, he could easily have been sick. He sat forward in his chair and rested his elbows on his desk.

'I'm so sorry, Demi. There's nothing that I can say. I don't understand it and I don't remember it either, which is awful to say and no reflection on Kitty. I must have blacked out.'

Instead of jumping up and screaming at him, Demi came round and led him to stand up and then prop his backside on the edge of his desk, while she stood in front of him. Why wasn't she shouting? He was so confused.

His exhausted brain couldn't quite formulate what she was saying into something he could understand. Didn't she care about him and Kitty, now that she was back with Allan? He tried to straighten his shoulders and tough it out. He would survive this... He might be a different man to the one he was before, but he'd have to move on. He scoffed, as he knew he was talking rubbish to himself, but his mind was all over the place right now. He didn't even know if he had client meetings that day and he hardly cared. Demi seemed to be looking at him sympathetically, which meant she was probably back with Allan and had no clue what had really happened with Kitty.

'What did the text say?' he asked, glad to have a distraction from his imminent confession.

'I asked you to come back to my flat,' she said simply, making his mind even more muddled. 'Allan proposed.' Miles groaned and hung his head, before running his fingers through his hair and straightening his back again. The pain had hit him in the solar plexus and it wasn't an easy feat not to collapse back into his chair or storm out of the room.

'Is that what you want?' he asked, incredulously. 'Why did you call me back, then – and how did you know I was there anyway?' The questions came tumbling out, one after the other.

'The engine,' she replied simply.

He drew in some air and wandered over to look out of the window, desolation filling him. Every bone in his body was

aching and his head was pounding again. Was she gloating? He couldn't be sure. His brain was trying to work out ways to win her back, but he knew it was futile.

Demi came up behind him and turned him to face her. His eyes searched hers.

'I told Allan that I was fed up with his games – especially after he took the rubbish out and then threw half of it on his T-shirt and shoes so that he had to take them off. He did that so you'd see him half-naked and coming out of my flat. He saw your car parked outside from the window. It spurred him into action.'

'Bloody hell,' swore Miles, groaning again and leaning back against the window for support. Perhaps she had seen through Allan at last, but he'd still ruined any chance of a future with Demi, all by himself. 'You actually refused him?' he clarified, trying to stay calm and hold onto the flame of hope that ignited in his heart. But then it snuffed out, as he knew he had to tell her about waking up in Kitty's bed.

'Demi,' he said, before he bottled out. 'I need to tell you something. I think I've made a huge mistake, but I can't remember what I've done.'

She put a finger up to his lips to stop him talking. Maybe she thought everything was okay now, but he was about to wipe the sweet smile from her lips and extinguish the happiness in her eyes and turn it to hate.

'Miles,' she interrupted. 'I've spoken to Kitty. I know you. I should have trusted you before when Allan said you were out to hurt me, but I was protecting my heart. You have the ability to smash it to smithereens and I got scared. I'm sorry.' She bit her lip and frowned suddenly and more than anything he wanted to kiss her worries away. 'You'd never hurt me,' she added. 'I know that now.'

She took his hands and kissed them and his heartbeat ramped up as it always did when she was near. He wanted to pick her up and press the button on the wall, opening up the computer room. He wanted to make love to her until she forgot about the world outside, but he knew he had to speak

up. He was glad she'd finally seen the light and trusted him, but now he'd broken that trust in a different way and it killed him to have to speak the truth.

'But Demi... I stayed the night at Kitty's. It wasn't her fault. It was mine. I was blind drunk, and I must have given her the wrong signals. I'm so sorry, Demi.' He wished he could take the words back as soon as he'd said them, but it was too late now.

'I know.'

'You know?' he frowned and looked at her sceptically. What had Kitty said, he wondered? Had she lied, or made things worse?

'You're an idiot, Miles,' she said, leading him to his seat and sitting him back down.

'I know,' he sighed. 'Everyone seems to be telling me that lately.' His head whipped up when Demi slid her shapely derriere onto his lap and wound her arms around his neck. His mind was filled with confusion because she was never openly affectionate where anyone could see them at work.

'Demi...' he tried, but couldn't help that his hands had a mind of their own and were already sliding around to cup her bottom and pull her closer.

'Miles,' she countered, kissing him gently on the lips so that he growled and pulled her closer still. It was minutes before they stopped kissing and suddenly his body was full of energy. All he could think about was this woman and how much she meant to him. He never wanted to let her go. Demi dropped another quick kiss onto his lips and sat back, making her aware of just how pleased he was to have her in his arms again. She smiled beguilingly and ran her fingers through his mussed-up hair. 'I trust you,' she reiterated. 'I know that even if you were absolutely plastered, you wouldn't do what Allan did.'

Miles shook his head sadly. 'But... I can't remember what happened.'

‘Kitty can,’ she said. ‘Even before that, I already knew. You love me and you won’t hurt me,’ she said, dropping feather-light kisses all over his face. ‘Kitty put you to bed in her spare room. She’s happy with Jed, you know, the mechanic she’s dating.’

‘Jed even popped in to check on you this morning,’ said Demi. ‘He said you were spark out in the spare room. Apparently, you told everyone in the bar about Allan and your engagement plans and then bought shots for the whole place. Kitty was pretty angry with me this morning for turning you down, even though you technically never actually asked me. She was avoiding me and didn’t want to discuss it at all, but Jed says you’re now a legend,’ she giggled at that last part, her cheeks flushed. Miles finally smiled, but then frowned again.

‘Eventually you passed out,’ Demi continued. ‘Kitty and Jed brought you home with them because they were worried about you. Jed thought it was hilarious, but Kitty insisted they keep an eye on you. She was a bit cross with me for not having more faith in you and I apologised and explained why.’ Demi took a deep breath and pulled a face at her own stupidity. ‘They left you to sleep in and were going to check on you after the morning rush.’

Relief filled Miles’s body and he finally began to comprehend what Demi was saying. She trusted him. And he hadn’t betrayed her, he’d just passed out! He pulled her body closer to his and his worries melted away.

‘You trusted me?’ he shook his head in wonder. ‘I wasn’t sure. I woke up in a strange bed and had no recollection of the night before. I needed to find you to tell you, but when I got into the office you weren’t here.’

‘Oh Miles,’ sighed Demi. ‘What a mess.’

Miles picked Demi up and put her back on her feet, then did what he’d been dreaming of all day, he walked purposely over to the computer room and pressed the button to open the sliding door. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Kitty, who was carrying two steaming mugs of coffee, shrug and head back the way she came from. Miles grinned. She had probably

been wondering if they were over their tiff, and was now shaking her head that they were already back to work and sorting out some of their technical issues in the back room. So much for romance!

As the door slid open, he pushed Demi up against the wall and pressed himself into her soft curves. She sighed and moved her face to one side so that he could kiss her neck. He happily obliged, his hands already trailing up her thighs. She was making that purring noise in the back of her throat that he loved. Her own hands were sliding into the waistband of his trousers and touching his skin.

‘I thought I’d lost you forever,’ he ground out between kissing her eyelids, her cheeks and her mouth.

‘You can’t lose me, Miles. I’m yours.’ She pulled away from him for a moment, but he immediately wanted to be closer to her again and swooped in for a deeper kiss that made her legs buckle. He caught her in his arms and let her catch her breath.

‘Will you marry me?’ she blurted out suddenly, then shyly put some space between them, not meeting his eyes.

They were both breathing hard and Miles’s mouth hung open in shock. Demi lifted her head and gave him an unsure smile. ‘I know I’m not doing it with a big family party, or an expensive gift, but this is our special space and I want you to know that if you’d proposed at the barbeque, I’d have accepted, however angry I was at that moment. We’d have worked it out, like we always do.’

She blushed and he knew how much this was costing her, though she was so much more confident these days. Miles swept her off her feet and into his arms and kissed her with all the pent-up longing of the past few days until she cried out his name.

‘Is that a yes?’ she panted, when they finally parted for a moment.

‘It’s a yes,’ he grinned, pulling her further into the room with him and intending to explore every inch of his fiancée,

before someone realised they were both missing and sent out a search party.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

International bestselling author and award-winning inventor, Lizzie Chantree, discovered her love of writing fiction when her children were little. She now writes books full of friendship and laughter, that are about women who are far stronger than they realise. She lives with her family on the coast in Essex. Visit her website at www.lizziechantree.com or follow her on Twitter @Lizzie_Chantree

For more writing news, subscribe to my newsletter: www.lizziechantree.com

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PRAISE FOR LIZZIE CHANTREE

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THE LITTLE ICE CREAM SHOP BY THE SEA

Escape with an uplifting, feel-good romance, set by a sun-drenched beach.

CHAPTER 1

Not again! Genie Grayson wanted to scream and throw her hands in the air. Instead, she stuffed her fist in her mouth and turned away. She'd thought she had her terrible phobia under control – she was a perfectly sane twenty-two-year-old – but the last few weeks had been stressful, and this was her Achilles heel. She looked around furtively to see if anyone had noticed, but there was hardly anyone enjoying breakfast in her family's seafront restaurant.

The evil seagull had dropped a lump of cheese onto her pristine outdoor tablecloth. After flying right into the restaurant awning. It had obviously been at the beer that always ended up in the gutters after a busy night at one of the clubs further down the beach.

Genie rarely admitted to having this issue, as who in the world, other than herself of course, had a problem with cheese? No one who managed a restaurant and ice cream parlour, that was for sure. Not a responsible professional who served food all day and had to be surrounded by the awful stretchy stuff that smelt like her grandad's old socks after a day on his feet.

She knew if she recited the alphabet backwards she'd be ok. She'd had years of practice. She usually got to about W, and then her pulse slowed down and she was able to take a deep breath and move on. She looked up and saw the gull sitting on the wall above the restaurant, its piercing red eyes like lasers. She shushed it away, but it just turned its back on her.

She often wondered if she had an allergy to wild animals. She'd tried to pet one at a zoo on a school trip and got bitten, then her hand had swollen up and she'd been rushed to hospital, even though she'd been fine after a few hours. She'd avoided zoos ever since. She gave the jungle a wide berth too. It wasn't too difficult from her current location on the coast of Essex, but she wasn't taking any chances. Cheese, on the other hand, was impossible to dodge. Not only did she work in kitchens, she cooked when her dad had a day off. Luckily, their bestsellers were their huge breakfasts, and plates of fish and chips.

Genie knew that if she gave into the urge to shove the offending messy table into the road, she'd get herself into all kinds of trouble with her parents, and probably the local council. She was already on their radar for changing all the restaurant's lightbulbs to a deep shade of red one weekend, to create an ambience. She'd had a formal letter the following week suggesting she might be moonlighting as a sex worker. That was slander! She might be a bit busty, and she was down on her luck, but she was too tired to blink some days. She just plastered on a smile and worked through it. Takings really had to pick up, at the restaurant though. They needed more customers.

She had to find a way to calm down and reasonably work out a plan of action, either by talking to her mum, Milly, about their current dilemma, or by finding a boyfriend and having some hot steamy sex to take her mind off things. While she pondered that thought, she grabbed the tablecloth by the edges with a couple of forks and shoved it behind the counter into the washing basket, quickly re-covering the table with a fresh cloth.

Genie smiled brightly at two school mums who were perusing the menu but her grin dropped as she turned towards the kitchen at the back of the little restaurant. She wondered if anyone would notice if she stood in the middle of the room and screamed. Probably not.

The mums were the only two customers, and they'd already caught her cursing in Spanish under her breath as she

wiped down the tables when they'd arrived. They had looked at her in confusion. She'd picked up a 'learn to speak Spanish' course at the charity shop the week previously, in the hope that she might one day travel abroad with friends. She'd also thought it might help if they ever got a foreign customer, however unlikely that seemed. But when she'd got the disc back to the house, it was a homemade knock-off copy and the only vocabulary was swearwords. She hated being conned, so she'd resolutely learned the whole tape, which consisted of about fifty phrases that all sounded mightily dodgy. They were great for easing frustration, though, as no one else knew what she was saying. She hoped. She'd looked up a few of the words, but then been worried her parents would question why she was Google-translating so many profanities. She didn't want them to start to wonder if that council letter had been spot on.

Usually, the breathtaking panorama of sandy beaches and the endless skyline across the road were enough to lift her spirits. But today she felt she might as well go and bang her head against a wall, instead of trying yet again to reason with her parents. The family business *had* to be brought into the twenty-first century. She knew she had a temper and didn't always explain things clearly without combusting into flames, but they still treated her as if she was nine years old.

All she was asking of her parents was that they let her try out a few new business ideas and a handful of new ice-cream flavours. She didn't want to reinvent the wheel. Their business hadn't changed for decades. They still had the same chairs and tables, and even the menus, that her grandad Gus had installed. Her parents' restaurant, Graysons', offered bought-in, basic puddings, but Genie had seen massive growth in big gooey ice cream desserts presented in glass mugs or tall glasses. She didn't see why they couldn't try this. They had a prime site on the seafront, for goodness sake! She could feel her temper begin to rise again. Then she remembered – their customers. She didn't want to scare them away. She twirled round to face them again with another smile.

Her parents were worried about upsetting her grandad, who ran the ice cream bar. He only offered about six flavours

these days. She had spent much of her time with him and her grandma when she was growing up. Her parents had stepped in to take over the business when her grandma had died a few years previously. Her grandad had begun wandering around the small garden at the back of the restaurant and shouting at the plants, raging at the loss of his wife. In the end, they'd explained to customers that he was an inventor seeing if upsetting plants stunted their growth. It was the only explanation they could come up with for his behaviour, which was becoming more and more erratic.

Their regulars knew about Genie's grandma and understood Gus's sorrow and anger, but occasionally a new customer would start to glance around to see if there were spaces to eat elsewhere, which meant even less income for them all. Genie missed her grandma Vera terribly, as she had always let her sit with them after school. Genie would perch on a high stool behind the ice cream counter and Vera would tempt her with her latest ice cream concoction and cuddle her, while Gus served a steady stream of customers anxious to get Vera's new flavours before they sold out.

With Genie's parents selling breakfasts and lunches, and Gus and Vera on ice cream, the restaurant had worked like a dream. Then her grandma died and Genie's parents had taken the reins, working harder than ever to cover their grief. They looked more frazzled as each year passed. Genie was used to coming home from school to the empty house they lived in, up the hill, as her parents were always working. Soon, she was roped into doing her homework at the restaurant, and then it seemed a natural progression for her to help out. She'd been doing that since she could walk anyway. She loved the restaurant and was proud of her family's heritage. She needed to spread her creative wings, though, and felt that since Vera had passed away, Gus was wilting. She wanted to keep her grandma's spirit alive, and Gus needed Genie more than her parents did right now.

She spent her weekend evenings making batches of ice cream for him to sell, though he kept telling her she should be out partying with people her own age, not keeping an old man company and trying to keep his business alive. He was bored

one night and bought two whippy-type machines for simple, smooth ice cream and declared that she wouldn't need to help him anymore. It broke her heart. She could see that he was trying really hard to manage alone, but he was struggling with his memories of his beautiful wife and the happiness she'd given everyone with her smile and her amazing ice cream flavours. He just couldn't replicate them.

Genie had asked him about trying different recipes, but he'd harrumphed and told her that if she thought she knew better, then she could get on with it. And besides, he'd added that there wasn't enough business to try new ideas. He liked his whippy ice cream machines and they did sell a fair amount of cones, but there was no love in the ingredients. Vera used to sprinkle chocolate chips, lemon rind, tiny bites of apple and many other incredible ingredients into her mixes to make you feel like you were eating a mouthful of magic. Your tongue would tingle and most people came back to order more. People visited from miles around to try her latest flavours. Recently Genie had decided to try to keep the tradition going. After five generations of her family running this business, she was determined to make it shine again, in honour of her grandma.

As far as she was concerned, Gus had given her the green light. She'd always worked hard for her parents and was determined to turn their fortunes round. All the shops along the seafront were looking a bit tired these days. She felt they'd get stuck in a time warp if something didn't change.

She tried to calm herself down. She chanted a mantra in her head that she'd heard on the radio that morning. It was supposed to make you feel zen, but it soon irritated her now she couldn't get the stupid phrases out of her mind.

Her parents had often told Genie she was too bossy for her own good, but then, she'd had to be. Her schoolwork had suffered and she'd failed most of her exams, because she was always helping out at the restaurant or washing and cleaning at home while her parents were at work. Her parents had despaired, but what else could they have expected?

It was why she hadn't yet found a home of her own, even at her age. Her parents had moved into her grandparents'

Georgian seafront property when Genie had been just two. The house and the business were their lives. She secretly couldn't imagine living anywhere else, but she'd never tell her mum and dad that. Her grandad had moved into the annex, which was separate from the main house. He'd recently paid a man to put a fence up between the two buildings, saying he needed more privacy. Genie suspected that he wanted to be able to hide away with his grief. She felt that she couldn't express her own sorrow, as she had to keep everyone else's spirits up. Her dad walked around looking permanently grumpy and her mum often wrung her hands, which in turn made Genie anxious. Genie did the restaurant books, so she knew that they could just about scrape by for now, but how long that would last for, she had no idea. They needed something to change – and fast.

Maintaining the house, her family and the restaurant was a full time job. Although none of the whole parade of restaurants were up to date, they were still quite busy as very few bars and eateries were allowed on each stretch of beach. They rarely came up for sale, tending to stay within a family. Everybody was friends with everyone else, but the décor in each venue was old fashioned, as far as Genie was concerned, and their clientele was getting older too.

That was fine, Genie respected older people, but a few tended to sit for hours, hogging the tables, and they didn't spend much money. She'd almost poked an elderly man's eye out once when she'd thought he might be dead and was checking he was still breathing. Thank goodness, he'd woken up with a start. As an only child, she loved it when there was a mix of ages mingling around. Her dad was an only child too, so there were no siblings to help him run the restaurant. It had fallen to Genie and her mum. But since Vera had died, it felt like the life and soul of the place had gone with her.

The school mums, who were regulars and probably their youngest customers, checked their designer watches to see how much time they could spend relaxing before rushing off to pick up various offspring. It was still only 9.30am, so she wandered over to take their order and chatted amiably, as she did with all their customers, biting back her frustration.

It was hard keeping up a cheerful face with the customers, when she knew that the restaurant's takings were down again that quarter. The quiet worry that seemed to be with her most days was starting to make itself more apparent. Even if it meant more of her mum's death stares, or her dad's rolling eyes, she was determined to turn the family's fortunes around.

CHAPTER 2

Ada stared out at the beautiful sea view in front of her, but couldn't really take anything in. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes, but she was tougher than that. She refused to feel sorry for herself.

Since her darling Ned passed away last year, she'd been determined to stay in the apartment they had bought together when they knew he was unwell. He'd wanted to come back home to the seaside town he'd been born in. Although it had meant leaving their friends and family behind, he yearned to wander along the sandy beaches and sit and watch the seagulls. He wanted to wriggle his bare toes in the sand and eat melting ice creams as the sun went down.

The months before he went were bittersweet. He had been at peace in his hometown, so she couldn't be cross with him for leaving her alone. She'd never lived here before, though, and the endless beaches and little shops and eateries dotted around were a far cry from her past life, full of interesting people and endless social engagements. Here she had a beautiful home, but her family lived abroad and she could not – would not – let them know how much she was still grieving, and move home. Here she felt close to Ned. She could run her fingers through the sand and picture him next to her doing the same. The joy on his face, when he'd recounted stories of his childhood in the old fishing town and told her of his summers building sandcastles on the beach and riding the waves with his friends. She remembered it so well.

They had only visited his birthplace once before. But as soon as he was diagnosed with his illness and given such a short time to live, he suddenly craved home.

To her, home was their huge house in America. Ned had been a celebrity photographer and they had moved often, but they had settled down in the States. She had adored the huge rooms with high ceilings and the warmth of the sun that eased her old bones, but here she was, in a new place, a place that wasn't really home for her.

Her sons called her almost daily, but so far, she'd refused to go back. Ned was here with her, she could feel him, even though she couldn't see his kind face anymore.

He would be telling her to get onto that plane and stay with their children, but they were busy. They had careers and families of their own. What would they want with a heartbroken old woman, wandering around their houses looking lost and frequently bursting into angry tears? They didn't need her dragging them down, when they were coping with their own grief. Ned had filled the room with his presence and people clamoured for his attention. He was one of those souls that others gravitated towards, to bask in the glow of his golden personality. She had been well used to it, though, and his gaze always found her in a crowded room.

She knew she could get through this, but she would have to do it in her own time. They would all probably demand that she visit them, or they would descend on her at Christmas, so until then, she had almost a year to compose herself and to let the outside world think she was recovering. She was an actress. She could do this. She would make damn sure that by the time her boys got here, they'd think she was coping beautifully, rebuilding her life and staying strong. She gripped the handrail of the panoramic balcony on her penthouse flat and gazed through a sheen of tears at the waves kissing the shore. She tried to feel some of the peace that Ned had found here.

Movement caught her eye on the promenade below and she recognised the young woman from one of the breakfast places along the beach. She was looking mutinous, even from

this distance, stalking back and forward and muttering to herself. Her hands were bunched into fists and she was brandishing one of them at a very innocent-looking bush, before she swung a kick at a plant pot and then hopped about holding her toes. Ada couldn't help but smile. She had met the girl and her parents a few times and exchanged pleasantries, but Ned hadn't really wanted to eat out. She'd only been there alone, when the isolation had got too much for her. Perhaps she'd go there today and try and chase away her demons. If Genie – she remembered the girl's name at last – was in a bad mood, then they could be grumpy together. She might even have a little chat to the hedge as she walked past, too. It wouldn't answer back. She was pretty sure everyone in her building thought she was an eccentric recluse, so no-one would bat an eyelid to see her talking to a plant.

The little cafés and bars along the seafront were quaint and beautiful and looked as if they hadn't been touched by time, which was charming. Ada did think that they could do with a few modern touches, like softer cushions on their seats for frail bottoms like hers and maybe the odd tweak to the menus as a change from cooked breakfasts and chips. The beach was popular, though, and the street below was often bustling with people. It was just the restaurants that seemed eerily quiet. She couldn't understand why, as the prices were very low for the huge plates of food that were served. Seaside fry-ups were usually a crowd pleaser. They were too heavy for a little woman like her, though. She wished they offered something a bit healthier. Perhaps she ought to ask for a children's portion, but she always felt embarrassed to do that and ended up leaving at least half her meal.

Maybe if she went for brisk walks along the shoreline, then her appetite would return. She knew she was wasting away here. Her children would be horrified if they could see how much weight she'd lost. She always hid most of her body behind a table when they video-chatted with her. She wore a bulky jumper and stuck a smile on her face and told them she was *fine*.

She straightened her back, which ached slightly from all her tossing and turning at night. She often thought she must be

searching for Ned in her sleep, as she woke up feeling like she'd done a workout. She felt the worse for it, not better. Her building had a gym downstairs and a spa, but she'd never ventured in. She used to swim every day at her old home, but now she worried that she'd pass out through exhaustion while in the pool, and hadn't plucked up the courage to risk it yet.

She occasionally wondered if she should just let herself drift off and be with Ned, but she was stronger than that. She would survive this. Brushing a tear from her eye, she turned and decided that she needed some fresh air. In fact, today was going to be the day when that huge breakfast at Genie's restaurant didn't defeat her.

CHAPTER 3

Genie smiled politely at the little woman in front of her, who was becoming a regular. She had beautiful skin, and her soft grey hair was always pulled back into a perfect chignon, but her eyes were so sad. Genie didn't know her well enough to ask her if she was ok, but she could feel the unhappiness emanating from her, even though she always looked up at her with a bright smile.

Today she was working her way through a huge plate of food and had been bravely tackling it for the last hour. She had only got about a third of the way through, and looked exhausted. Genie had once asked her parents to offer smaller portions for different sized appetites, but they had told her not to be silly, their prices were so cheap and no one would want a smaller plate for the same money. Genie secretly thought they overloaded the plates too much. If they would just take two or three ingredients off the breakfasts and add them as extras, they would make much more money. People could still have a hearty breakfast, but the pound or two on each plate for beans, mushrooms, and extra toast would make such a difference to their bottom line. It would give them a chance to improve everything else.

Genie took Ada the fresh pot of tea she'd asked for and gave her a warm smile. There was something about her that drew Genie to her. She wanted to reach out and give her a supportive hug. Instead, she whipped the plate away as soon as the lady put her cutlery down and was rewarded with a grateful glance. A woman that size probably ate muesli for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Genie looked down at her own ample hips and bulging bosom and decided that she was going to try and take her nextdoor neighbour's dog out for a morning walk along the shore more often. She'd also try not feel so stressed that she couldn't be bothered to cook a proper meal at night. Her parents loved food that was quick and easy to whip up, but Genie enjoyed fresh ingredients and spent ages scanning new recipe ideas and trying out different flavours at home. It didn't have to take an age to make a meal from scratch – as long as it didn't contain cheese. If it did, she had to put on gloves to handle it. This often caused her to spill most of the ingredients. She'd then have to put on wellington boots to sweep up the disgusting, cheesy tendrils before they touched her toes. Genie's parents had lost a bit of weight recently, but this might have been because they were stressed out about the businesses along the seafront, rather than her delicious evening meals.

She eyed her dad's not-quite-so portly stomach. She was pleased to see he was in slightly better shape these days. He wasn't as grumpy either. Her mum, on the other hand, always made an effort with her appearance and scolded Genie about being such a slob. But Genie didn't have time to spend ages shopping with friends for the latest fashions. Besides, her clothes usually stank of grease from the fryer in the back kitchen by the time she got home, so she had given up on that years ago. She was clean and presentable at work, with her long dark hair pulled back in a ponytail to keep it away from the food (and cheese) and a fresh blouse and skirt every day. Even that seemed an effort.

She had piercing blue eyes that customers often stopped her to ask about, and long silky black lashes, which meant she didn't need much make-up. Her skin was slightly tanned from working outdoors, even at this time of year. Half the chairs and tables were inside, but the other half were under an awning. This could be swept back at the touch of a button, allowing diners to sit in the sunshine. The British weather was actually good this year, so the awning was open for a lot of the time, even though Christmas wasn't all that long ago.

Genie glanced up from a table she was clearing. Trudie, from one of the other restaurants further along, had popped her

head in to say hello. She glanced around to see if they were busy and grinned a hello at Genie.

‘Hey Trudie, how’s business today?’

Trudie paused to say hello to Ada, which surprised Genie, as she’d thought the older lady pretty much kept herself to herself. Ada greeted her politely and then turned back to her tea.

‘We’re really busy,’ said Trudie. ‘And I’ve run out of milk already. I forgot to send the order today. We’ve got a coach party in and they’re causing havoc, moving all the tables round.’ Trudie smiled happily.

Genie knew she wouldn’t mind a huge crowd. These businesses were used to being packed to the rafters at weekends, but being busy on a weekday and not having to pace up and down the road looking for customers was a complete bonus.

Genie grinned at the other woman’s infectious smile. Everyone along the parade called her Tantalising Trudie, because her hips swayed mesmerizingly as she weaved between tables. Trudie kept Genie sane and was always dropping in for a chat with her or her parents. Genie had tried to copy Trudie’s sashay once and had tripped over and almost landed face-first in the lap of one of their male customers. She’d looked up to apologise, and seen Bob from the local council office staring disapprovingly down at her, his face bright red. She wouldn’t be trying that move again in a hurry.

Everyone along this parade of restaurants got on so well. It was what had kept Genie going when her own friends stopped coming to the restaurant and she had fewer people of her own age to chat to. Trudie was more her mother’s friend than hers, but they still got on really well.

‘Of course!’ she responded to Trudie’s appeal for milk. ‘I’m sure Dad ordered enough and we’re quiet today, so I’ll grab you a couple of cartons.’

Trudie smiled her thanks and pulled out a chair and sat chatting quietly to Ada, who seemed pleased at the

interruption. When Genie returned, Trudie jumped up, waved her thanks and jogged back to her own establishment, waving to Genie's dad who had just come out of the kitchen with huge breakfasts for a table of two.

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