

holly hepburn

Return to
Half Moon
Farm

Part Four:
Winter Magic



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Return to Half Moon Farm



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Chapter One

It felt very much like Groundhog Day when Daisy arrived at the school gates to collect Finn and Campbell on Monday afternoon. She kept her head down, hurrying to her usual spot in the playground, determined not to make eye contact with anyone and most especially not with Kit Devereaux. The sea of umbrellas helped, grouped together in multicoloured clusters to ward off the rain showers as their owners chatted underneath, paying less attention than usual to the comings and goings around them. But rainy weather notwithstanding, it was all too reminiscent of Daisy's first few school runs after moving to Mistlethorpe and she wouldn't be surprised if a deadpan Bill Murray popped up in the crowd. Back then, it had been a careless accident involving Kit's car that made her long for an invisibility cloak – now the mixture of embarrassment and resentment crawling down her spine were the result of entirely different actions. She'd had no evidence that her relationship with Drew Entwistle had become the subject of playground gossip, other than a fleeting impression of sideways looks and poorly disguised whispers, until Kit had declared his disapproval of her spending the night with Drew. And she knew it shouldn't bother her, especially since he'd agreed it was none of his business, but hot on the heels of a lecture from her ex-husband about shielding their sons from her romantic encounters, it had sparked an indignation that had smouldered all day. Right now, she didn't care if she never spoke to Kit again.

Except that wasn't quite true, a nagging voice reminded her. Because just after he'd tried to warn her off Drew, Kit had given Daisy a bundle of wartime letters written by her grandmother to his grandfather. It had been a gift that took the wind from her sails, leaving her to stare open-mouthed as he stalked away, and

flipped her perfectly justified umbrage on its head. By the time she had reached Half Moon Farm, surprise had morphed into a grudging gratitude that tempered her irritation. He'd given her something she hadn't dared to dream might still exist – the missing half of the love story between their grandparents. And she hadn't been able to resist diving straight in.

11 Thanet Lane

Mistlethorpe

Kent

8th March

Dear V

Thank you for your letter which came this morning. You say such lovely things, it fair made me blush. You would not be impressed if you had seen me when I got home today, all dusty from work! Mr Athers is making us replant the west side of the walled garden, which will be nice when it is done but looks a terrible sight at the moment. Our tree is as sturdy as ever, though – tiny green buds are appearing on the bare branches. I smile every time I see it, remembering you.

Life in the village goes on much the same, although I expect it sounds ever so boring to you. Mr Barker and his bicycle got waylaid by a squirrel on his way home from church on Sunday and he ended up going over the handlebars into the pond on the green, which made everyone hoot with laughter except for Mr Barker, who was quite cross even though the duck house broke his fall. I daresay he will get over it but I would lay low if I was that squirrel.

I hope you are keeping well. They say on the wireless that the war will be over soon but the longer it goes on, the more worried I get. Mrs Porter at the baker's got the awful telegram last week and it broke my heart to see her sob. I know we must be brave and do our bit to win the war but I wish ever so much that you were home, Val. I am sending you all my love until then.

Write as soon as you get this.

Your Violet

A sudden cacophony of noise, caused by several classroom doors opening at the same time, snapped Daisy back to the playground. Children streamed out, chattering and laughing, exclaiming at the rain. She kept her head down as she scanned the crowd for the twins – in typical fashion, they were among the last to appear. She expected them to be glued to Alice, Kit's daughter, but she was nowhere to be seen. That was unusual and caused Daisy to risk a more detailed look at the assembled parents, who

were flowing towards the gates like the outgoing tide. She could not make out Kit's tall figure among them, even hidden beneath an umbrella – he was not waiting for Alice nor walking with her out of the school grounds. In fact, there was no sign of either.

The mystery was solved as soon as Finn and Campbell reached her. 'Alice vommed all over the carpet,' Finn told her with gruesome relish before she could even ask. 'She had to go home.'

'Oh!' Daisy said with a sudden rush of sympathy. 'I hope she's okay.'

'Probably the norovirus,' Campbell said, with the air of a middle-aged GP. 'Plenty of fluids and rest, she'll be fine in a day or so.'

'Could be the Black Death,' Finn argued. 'We learned about that in history. If she's got boils and pustules then it's definitely the plague.'

'Nah.' Campbell's tone was dismissive. 'You have to try really hard to get the plague nowadays. My money is on some sort of bug, although she did go a funny green colour.'

Finn's eyes widened. 'Ebola. Hundred per cent.'

Daisy looked sternly from one son to the other. 'Can I remind you this is your friend we're talking about? She doesn't have the plague or Ebola, thank goodness, and a bit more sympathy wouldn't go amiss. She probably feels rubbish, poor girl.'

To their credit, both boys appeared slightly shamefaced. 'I didn't say she had either of those things,' Campbell pointed out. 'It was Finn.'

'That's true,' Daisy agreed, herding them towards the gates. 'But you weren't exactly kindness personified. Try putting yourself in her shoes.'

Campbell wrinkled his nose. 'No, thanks. They've got sick in them.'

But it turned out they didn't have to try very hard to empathize; with grim inevitability, both fell victim to the same symptoms just before bedtime. Dabbing their fevered foreheads with cool, damp facecloths long into the night, Daisy could only hope it was a short-lived bug and that she didn't succumb herself. Even if she was lucky enough to avoid becoming ill, it meant an enforced quarantine from Rose and her carers for several days. Her mother was almost fully recovered from her heart surgery a few months earlier but the last thing Daisy wanted was to risk passing anything on. Thankfully, by the early hours of the morning Finn and Campbell's pallor had eased and they slept soundly, the clammy sheen on their skin gone. Daisy brought pillows and the duvet from her room and slept on the floor between their beds.

Their fever was gone the next morning, although both were still noticeably quieter than normal and had no interest in eating. The school secretary told Daisy that a number of children in their class had gone down with similar symptoms. 'Don't bring them back to school until forty-eight hours after the last bout of sickness,' she reminded Daisy. 'I hope they feel better soon.'

They spent the morning playing Uno, sardined in Campbell's bed with Daisy perched on a chair beside them. Around eleven o'clock she managed to tempt them with some toast. While she was in the kitchen, she put aside her prickliness of the previous day and messaged Kit.

I hear Alice has the bug. Hope she's over the worst of it.

It took a few minutes for a reply to pop up on her phone.

Seems to be, thank goodness. Have the twins gone down with it too?

Yes, along with half the class, she tapped. Fingers crossed it's just a twenty-four-hour thing.

His reply didn't arrive until she was back upstairs and coaxing Finn to nibble at the dry toast. *Wishing them a speedy recovery. I'll let Athers know you won't be visiting the gardens for a few days.*

The boys dozed for most of the afternoon. Once Daisy was sure their toast wasn't going to make a reappearance, she retrieved the bundle of letters and settled down at their bedside to read. When she'd first discovered Valentine's letters to Violet, in a cluttered, neglected room at the farmhouse, she'd had no idea who her grandmother's mystery lover had been. It was only when she visited the walled garden at Winterbourne Castle, and Kit revealed two initials carved into a tree, that Daisy had understood why Violet hadn't married the man who had promised nothing would keep them apart. Valentine Devereaux was destined to become the Earl of Winterbourne – marrying a gardener's assistant was utterly out of the question. Even so, Daisy couldn't hold his naivety against him, in the same way she didn't blame her grandmother for being swept along. They were young, their lives overshadowed by war; who could judge them for believing love could conquer all? And they had loved each other, Daisy had never doubted that. But there was no happy ending to come and, as she read, Kit's ominous warning as he'd handed over Violet's replies still rang in Daisy's ears. *Don't thank me yet...*

By the time Finn and Campbell awoke, both looking significantly healthier and demanding food, Daisy had arranged both sets of letters in date order. Often, there were several from Violet to only one reply from Valentine but that wasn't a surprise, given the difficulties of operating a postal service in wartime. She'd gone back to the start, scarcely able to believe her luck in having the two sides of the story within her grasp, and it had been a real wrench to drag herself from the past and into the present when her sons needed her.

Being in solitary confinement also meant Daisy hadn't seen Drew since she'd left him on his doorstep on Sunday morning. They'd exchanged messages around lunchtime – him jokingly checking she'd survived the walk of shame and Daisy thanking him for a very enjoyable evening – but their paths hadn't physically crossed and for that Daisy was slightly relieved. It wasn't that she regretted spending the night with him, more that she wasn't sure

what came next. Would there be another date and another night together? What would happen after that? She had no idea. It had been a long time since she'd done anything like this – in fact, she wasn't sure she'd ever been in a situation quite so fraught with complication. Stuart's admonishment about conducting her romantic attachments out of sight of the twins still felt fresh and there was the undeniable fact that she would be leaving Mistlethorpe in less than six weeks' time. On one hand, that made things simpler for both Daisy and Drew – there was no question of forming a relationship – but it also made her feel oddly unsettled, as though the ground had turned to quicksand under her feet. She couldn't help wondering whether she'd made a mistake.

Nancy's response to this suggestion was brisk. *That's THE FEAR. Ignore it.*

Which was easy for her to say, Daisy thought dryly as she stared at her phone. She might have only known Nancy a few months but she was sure her friend had never experienced a moment's self-doubt in her life. Before she could craft a reply, another message popped up. *You had fun – he had fun. Does it need to be any more complicated than that?*

It took Daisy a few minutes of sifting through conflicting emotions to settle on an answer. *I suppose not*, she typed eventually.

Try not to overthink it. See how you feel once the boys are better.

Daisy had to concede that was also good advice – she didn't have to make any decisions now. Perhaps all she needed was time and space to settle into this new incarnation of herself, a woman ready to take a chance on romance again. As Nancy had once observed, Drew might not be Mr Right, but he could be Mr Right Now. He'd certainly done plenty of things right during their night together, she recalled with a sudden flush of warmth, and then had to fan her cheeks. Nancy had been on the money there too: it had been fun. Maybe that was part of the problem.

By Wednesday, Daisy felt confident that the virus was beaten but it was still another day before Finn and Campbell could return to school. Mindful of keeping them away from her mother, Daisy decided a break from the farm was in order and packed them into the car for a trip to take in some bracing sea air. The golden sands of Broadstairs weren't empty – plenty of families with young children were enjoying the July sunshine – but there was room at Viking Bay for paddling in the sea and even a kickabout with a ball. She'd wondered if the boys would still want to slip off their shoes and socks the way they had when they were smaller but it seemed daring the waves to catch them was as irresistible as ever. Finn fell in, as Daisy had known he would, and was drenched from head to toe. He shrugged off his wet clothes beneath the beach towel she held around him and grumbled about the sand sticking to his skin but it wasn't long before he was dry and dressed in the spare shorts and t-shirt she'd brought. Then they'd spent a small fortune playing the penny games in the arcades, and finally made their way up to Morelli's ice cream parlour to watch the tide roll in. Daisy smiled as she watched them plough enthusiastically through sundaes as large as their heads, glad to see the colour back in their cheeks. Their appetites certainly hadn't suffered any after-effects, at least.

She wasn't sure what to expect from Kit on Thursday morning. They hadn't exactly bonded over their children's shared sickness but it had helped to take the sting out of Daisy's irritation. The letters had played their part too, the poignancy reminding her of the folly in holding a grudge. She replayed Kit's words in her head several times, noting that he'd offered his warning about Drew from one friend to another. Reluctantly, she had come to the conclusion he'd meant well and it was quite possible she'd overreacted. But had their friendship been damaged? She wasn't sure.

That question was answered almost as soon as she entered the school grounds. Kit was waiting just inside the gate with Alice,

clearly determined not to miss Daisy and the twins. ‘Good morning. How are you all feeling?’

‘Much better, thanks,’ Daisy said. ‘How about you?’

Kit patted his daughter’s shoulder. ‘Glad to be back, I think. Alice was worried she’d miss the school disco tomorrow night.’

Daisy nodded. Finn and Campbell had voiced similar concerns. There was still another week until the end of term but she knew they were looking forward to the disco, even though neither would be doing anything as cringeworthy as dancing. It was a chance to let their hair down with their classmates and part of the ritual of saying goodbye, even though they weren’t leaving Mistlethorpe until the end of the summer holidays. ‘Thankfully, that shouldn’t be a problem.’

They stood together, watching as the children headed for the open classroom door. Kit cleared his throat. ‘Have you had time to read any of your grandmother’s letters?’

‘Some,’ she replied. ‘I’m trying to take my time and really savour them, but at the same time I want to gobble them all up at once. They’re making me see my grandmother in a whole new light.’

He dipped his head thoughtfully. ‘I can imagine.’

Daisy wondered if he could. From what little he’d said about his family, it didn’t sound as though they were close, nor given to grand passions – hadn’t he once told her that earls rarely married for love? Then she gave herself a mental shake, because she really had no idea what the Devereaux family dynamics were like; Valentine had definitely known how to express his feelings, at least on paper. ‘Thank you for finding them,’ she said, and pulled a wry face. ‘In case I forgot to mention that on Monday. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate the trouble you took.’

‘It was no trouble,’ Kit said, but Daisy knew he was playing things down. At the very least, he’d had to raise the subject with

his brother, Hugh, which would have involved an explanation of why he was asking. And it was quite likely Hugh would have been ticklish about the spectre of an old family scandal suddenly raising its head – Kit might well have had to convince him Daisy was entitled to the full story. Then he'd had to find the letters, which she presumed were hidden away somewhere at Winterbourne, and give them to her. He had definitely gone to some trouble. 'Well, I'm grateful anyway. Thank you.'

The tide of parents began to flow towards them. By unspoken agreement, they turned and made their way out of the school grounds. A quick glance along the road told Daisy they had parked at opposite ends and Kit seemed to reach the same realization. He straightened his shoulders. 'I owe you an apology.'

She knew instantly what he meant. 'You don't.'

'I do,' he insisted. 'I stuck my nose in something that was none of my business and it upset you. For that, I apologize.'

Daisy was silent, because she had no argument. Her love life was nothing to do with Kit and his unsolicited advice had upset her. 'Yes,' she admitted after a moment, flicking an uneasy look towards her sons to make sure they weren't listening in. 'But I overreacted. It's never fun to discover you're the subject of village gossip.'

'No,' he conceded, and from his rueful tone she guessed he must have had first-hand experience of that when his marriage had broken up. 'Anyway, I'm sorry. It won't happen again.'

The stiffness in his expression reminded her of the first time they'd met but his blue eyes were soft as they sought hers, as though her good opinion of him mattered. 'Apology accepted.'

'Thank you.' He paused. 'Shall I tell Athers to expect you at all this week or will you be catching up with work?'

Daisy considered the question. On one hand, she did need to focus on delivering her final illustrations for *The Secret Garden*

anniversary edition – her deadline was fast approaching – but reading her grandmother’s account of working in the castle’s walled garden only made Daisy want to walk in her footsteps more and she was all too aware that opportunities to do so were slipping away. The end of term was looming and she couldn’t imagine Finn or Campbell showing any interest in admiring the roses or hollyhocks. And above that hung the shadow of their eventual return to Milton Keynes. It wasn’t impossible that she could come back to Winterbourne on occasion but it wouldn’t be a ten-minute drive. Perhaps she should seize the day, allow the glorious flowers to inspire her creativity. If she tried really hard, she might even convince herself it was work. ‘Tomorrow, maybe,’ she said. ‘In the afternoon, if that’s okay?’

‘You’re welcome whenever suits you,’ Kit said without hesitation. ‘I’ll be at the airfield but you know your way around. Just park up and make your way to the garden – Athers will be somewhere near.’

Just the thought of being at Winterbourne gave Daisy a glow of anticipation. ‘I’m looking forward to it already,’ she said.

Chapter Two

‘Here, boy,’ Daisy crooned, prowling through the long grass of the orchard and rustling a packet of *Fisby Delisby* cat snacks in what she hoped was an inviting manner. ‘I’ve got some lovely treats for you.’

There was an unexpected chuckle. ‘Now that’s an offer I don’t get every day.’

Daisy straightened up, flustered, as she looked around. It sounded like Drew’s voice but there was no sign of him. In fact, she’d thought the orchard was empty apart from her and a throng of chirruping crickets. ‘Is that you, Drew?’

The leaves of the trees to her left shuddered and a moment later Drew ducked beneath the greenery, a basket of apples in his arms. Sunlight glinted on the silver strands in his hair as he smiled apologetically. ‘Sorry, did I startle you?’

His gaze was warm and she felt her alarm drain away, replaced by a familiar tug of attraction. She felt her frown soften into a smile. ‘A bit. I’m looking for Atticus – have you seen him?’

Drew nodded. ‘About twenty minutes ago, stalking some poor unfortunate across your garden.’

Daisy groaned. ‘Exactly what I didn’t want to hear. I don’t suppose you know if he caught it?’

‘I don’t think so. He took off suddenly at speed so I assumed he was in hot pursuit.’ He eyed Daisy, who was checking her watch. ‘Do you need to be somewhere? I can help coax him out of hiding if you’re in a hurry.’

She bit her lip. It wasn't that she was worried about leaving Atticus, more that she was keen to avoid him dragging another tiny corpse into the house while she was out. Neither Rose nor her carer, Emily, had proved robust when faced with the cat's previous spoils of war. But time was ticking by and Daisy wanted to get to Winterbourne in plenty of time before the school run. She couldn't spend all afternoon hunting her cat, who might be in the next field by now. 'Thanks, but I need to get going,' she said. 'I'll just have to hope there's no bloodbath when I get home.'

Drew laughed. 'I can keep an eye out, if you like. Find somewhere to bury the bodies.'

He tried to look sinister, which was so out of character that Daisy couldn't help grinning in spite of her concern. 'You're a man of many talents.'

'I try,' he said. 'Although anything bigger than a field mouse and I'm out.'

'Completely understandable,' Daisy replied, laughing. 'Thank you.'

'No problem,' Drew said, tipping his head. 'And I know you're in a hurry but it's good to see you. Maybe we can grab a coffee or a stroll in the woods soon.'

For a moment, she hesitated, recalling the misgivings that had assailed her while she was nursing the twins through their illness. But now that she was face to face with Drew, none of those doubts had any substance and she found herself wanting to spend time with him again. 'I'd like that,' she said. 'Maybe next week?'

A flash of disappointment clouded his eyes. 'You're not free this weekend?'

'I have Finn and Campbell,' she explained. 'They usually spend every other weekend with Stuart but they're going for two weeks once school breaks up next Friday. I'll have a bit more time then.'

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Sorry, I should have realized. How about a picnic lunch? There’s a shady meadow not too far from the farm, we could take a blanket and make the most of the warm weather.’

It sounded idyllic but Daisy was all too aware of how fast things escalated when she and Drew were alone – a romantic picnic carried a definite risk of getting carried away. ‘Let’s start with coffee,’ she suggested, smiling to offset the downgrade. ‘I’m free any day except Wednesday – it’s Sports Day and Finn would never let me forget it if I missed that.’

‘Monday, then,’ Drew said. Shifting the apple-laden basket to one hip, he dipped his head to drop a feather-light kiss on her lips. ‘I can’t wait.’

The memory of that kiss stayed with Daisy all the way to Winterbourne. It had lasted no more than a second, the briefest brush of soft skin against skin, then he’d stepped back and disappeared into the orchard once more, leaving Daisy rooted to the spot among the long grass, gazing after him. He’d kept his eyes open, she remembered as the moment replayed again in her head, which somehow made the recollection more intense and made her wish they’d had longer, even as she was relieved they hadn’t. What was it about Drew that made her behave like a teenager? She wondered as she parked her car on the gravel drive outside the manor house steps. Was it ever going to wear off?

She found Athers in the walled garden, kneeling beside one of the empty flowerbeds with a trowel in his hand. He glanced up as she approached, shading his eyes against the sun. ‘Hello. Kit said you’d be coming.’

‘Couldn’t stay away,’ she said, then glanced around, taking in the freshly laid topsoil that covered the ground nearby, and several new raised beds against the end wall. ‘You’ve been busy.’

Athers got to his feet, blond curls bouncing as he nodded. ‘Getting things ready for the autumn planting. Won’t be long

before we need to get things in the ground.’ He looked past her. ‘No easel today?’

Reaching into her bag, Daisy pulled out a pair of gardening gloves. ‘Nope. I’m here to get my hands dirty. Where do you want me to start?’

If the gardener was surprised, he didn’t show it. ‘There’s plenty of dead-heading to be done, and a jasmine shrub that’s trying to take over one of the beds. Have you got your own secateurs or do you need some?’

She flourished the cutters she’d brought from the farm. ‘I came prepared. Although I’m not sure these will cope with cutting back a jasmine. Aren’t they quite woody?’

Again, Athers nodded. ‘You’ll need tree loppers for that. But why don’t you start with the roses? We can do the jasmine together.’

Daisy did as he suggested and was soon surrounded by the heady scent of mixed roses. Cotton wool clouds had rolled in since lunchtime, offering welcome patches of shade from the mid-July sun, but she was glad to see it didn’t deter the bees. More than once she drew back to allow a bumblebee to navigate a blowsy flowerhead, the buzz so much lower than that of the honey bees. They were the double bass of the garden orchestra, she decided as she snipped her way along the rose beds, with the crickets as percussion and birds providing the woodwind. The thought of a tiny insect conductor made her smile – there might even be a picture book in the idea, she mused, and pulled out her phone to write herself a note.

Athers passed by, bearing a wheelbarrow laden with more topsoil. He paused to survey Daisy’s work. ‘I asked my dad about those roses,’ he said, nodding at the glorious pink and yellow blooms that Daisy felt were the jewels in the crown of the display. ‘You were right, they were planted by Violet – her pride and joy, by all accounts. It’s amazing they’re still going strong.’

Not for the first time, Daisy had a sudden image of her grandmother as a young woman. On this occasion she was tending the roses, removing the faded blooms just as Daisy was doing now. The intermingling of past and present was so real that she felt almost as though she was standing alongside Violet, caring for the garden together, and the sense of their two worlds colliding took Daisy's breath away. And then the ghost of her grandmother was gone, and she found herself alone with Athers. 'Daisy?' he said, frowning a little. 'Are you okay?'

She blinked. 'Yes, fine. I was just imagining what the garden was like back then.'

'Much the same, if I've got anything to do with it.' The gardener offered a lopsided smile. 'Dad said the old earl – Kit's grandfather – liked to feel as though time had stood still inside these walls. He wanted to smell the same scents, see the same flowers. I try to honour that, even all these years later.'

The poignancy brought tears to Daisy's eyes. Could it be that Valentine was trying to recapture the moments he'd spent with Violet there? She would never know for sure but it seemed to match what she knew of him through the letters. 'That's a wonderful thing to do.'

Athers glanced at Violet's roses nodding in the breeze. 'I'll take extra special care over those in future. For your grandmother.'

Daisy managed a wobbly smile. 'Thank you.'

Once she reached the end of the rose beds, Daisy and Athers tackled the overgrown jasmine. It had long since finished flowering and was sending tall spikes of green-leafed branches in all directions. Daisy had been right – the stems were hard and woody – but the loppers made short work of them and the shrub was soon considerably less wayward. 'It looks like a sheep shorn of its wool,' Daisy said, surveying the branches they'd cut away with a sudden pang of regret.

‘Exactly what it needed,’ Athers said pragmatically. ‘Shoots will grow at the base of the stems and it’ll come back stronger in the spring, mark my words.’

Daisy had no doubt the prediction was accurate – there wasn’t much Athers didn’t know about gardening. She wiped her sweaty forehead and checked her watch. There was still plenty of time before school pick up. ‘What else needs doing?’

He opened his mouth to reply but whatever he’d been about to say was interrupted by the sound of feet crunching along the gravel path. They looked up to see a tall, heavily pregnant woman heading towards them and Daisy realized with a jolt of surprise that it was Hugh’s wife, Cressida. Sneaking a glance at Athers, Daisy saw he was unflustered, which suggested he’d known the countess was visiting Winterbourne. Or perhaps he was used to members of the family popping up out of the blue – Daisy had no idea.

‘Excellent, I was hoping you’d still be here,’ Cressida said when she reached them. She smiled at Daisy. ‘Hello, again.’

‘Hello – er –’ Daisy faltered, desperately trying to remember how to address the wife of an earl. Had she curtseyed last time? Should she do so now?

Athers came to her rescue, like a mud-encrusted Sir Galahad. He tipped his head respectfully. ‘Good afternoon, Lady Winterbourne.’

Cressida flashed her dazzling smile his way. ‘Good afternoon, Athers. I hope you haven’t been working our guest too hard in this heat.’

The words made Daisy suddenly conscious of just how red-faced and sweaty she must be. She raised a self-conscious hand to flatten her hair, much of which had escaped the neat ponytail she’d tied before arriving at the gardens. She couldn’t help comparing herself to Cressida, who was a vision of cool elegance despite carrying a mini central heating system, and the results made her

want to sink into the ground. But she didn't want the countess to blame Athers. 'Not at all – it's a real honour to spend time in such a beautiful garden. My grandmother used to work here and I feel a little like I'm following in her footsteps.'

'What a wonderful connection to make,' Cressida said, her gaze warm. 'But I've asked Gladys to lay out some tea in the library – won't you join me for a cup? Kit has told me all about your wonderful new book and I'm keen to hear more about it.'

For a heartbeat, Daisy considered saying no. Cressida might seem charming but she was also glossy and sophisticated and horribly intimidating; Daisy felt very much the grubby yokel in comparison. But the thought of tea in that glorious library was tempting and she suspected it was unforgivably rude to refuse such an invitation. 'I'd love to,' she said. 'As long as Athers doesn't need me.'

He shook his head, as she'd known he would. 'Thank you for your help, Miss Moon. Much appreciated.'

The countess turned towards the door in the wall. 'Shall we, then?' she said to Daisy, who nodded and followed her along the path.

The hallway of the manor house was blissfully cool. Cressida paused to direct Daisy towards a doorway along the corridor that she remembered led to a bathroom. 'I'm sure you're longing to freshen up,' the countess said with a flash of fellow feeling. 'Can you find your way to the library once you're ready?'

Thankfully, the mirror was kinder than Daisy expected. Her face was pink and shiny but nowhere near as tomato red as she'd feared. Cold water removed the sweat and occasional smudge of dirt, soothing her flushed cheeks and cooling her down to the point where she felt less like she'd been dragged through a hedge. There wasn't much she could do about her hair, which the heat had transformed into a frizzy mess, but she did her best to recapture it into a neat-ish ponytail and surveyed her reflection

with a frown. She could never hope to achieve the glamour of Cressida but she did at least look more presentable than she had a few minutes earlier.

The countess was sitting beside the open window when Daisy entered the library. She rose, wincing very slightly as she did so. 'It's obviously a great privilege and joy to be a sacred vessel and so forth but I can't help wishing it was a little easier on the back.'

Daisy smiled in commiseration – there had been times she'd feared carrying the twins might finish her off. 'How much longer do you have to go?'

Cressida rested a hand on her bump. 'Another month, would you believe? They might have to roll me into the delivery suite.'

'I felt the same towards the end,' Daisy admitted, hurrying forward to join her at the side table laden with a tea tray. 'But please don't stand on my account. Shall I pour?'

'If you wouldn't mind,' Cressida said, easing back into her seat. Her eyes twinkled as she glanced at an austere oil painting above the fireplace. 'Although I'm sure generations of Devereaux women are rolling in their graves at my appalling dereliction of hostess duties.'

Daisy laughed, surprised at the mischievous observation. 'Would you like milk?'

The other woman pulled a face. 'Can't bear it at the moment, makes me turn green. Could I trouble you for some lemon instead? Gladys usually puts a few slices in a dish.'

Now that Daisy looked, she saw there was a dish of thinly sliced lemon, along with a pair of delicate silver tongs that had probably been specifically made for the purpose of adding lemon to tea. As Daisy bent over the tray, she pondered Cressida's unexpected self-deprecation. Admittedly, prior to becoming friendly with Kit her experience of the aristocracy had been almost entirely formed from watching *Downton Abbey* and *Bridgerton*, but she'd

imagined Cressida would be coolly gracious, perhaps even a little condescending – she was a countess, after all. Instead, Daisy was finding her witty and warm, and surprisingly normal, in spite of clearly being someone who was used to turning heads. It was the second time a member of the Devereaux family had confounded her expectations, Daisy thought uncomfortably as she passed a cup and saucer to Cressida. Perhaps it was time to stop judging them before she got to know them.

‘Kit tells me you’ve been inspired by the gardens here,’ Cressida said, once Daisy was seated in the chair opposite, a cup and saucer of her own in her hand. ‘Is that because of your grandmother?’

‘Partly,’ Daisy said. ‘Although I fell in love with the walled garden as soon as I stepped through the door. I think it would have inspired my drawings even without the family connection.’

Cressida nodded. ‘It is a lovely place. We don’t spend much time here, as I’m sure you know. Hugh grew up here but he has so many responsibilities elsewhere now.’ Her hand curved subconsciously around her bump and Daisy suspected she was thinking about the tragedy that had befallen Hugh’s first wife. ‘Luckily, Kit is a marvellous help. It’s such a weight off Hugh’s mind, knowing Winterbourne is in safe hands.’

Her words reminded Daisy of a long-ago conversation with Kit, during which he’d explained that he was merely a tenant at the castle, reliant entirely on his brother’s goodwill for a roof over his and Alice’s head. She really hoped Cressida didn’t view him merely as a help. ‘He belongs here,’ she said, almost without thinking, and then remembered who she was speaking to. ‘I mean, of course he does – he grew up here too. But it’s more than that. I suppose what I’m getting at is...’ She trailed off, trying to pin down her thoughts. ‘Do you believe people put down roots, the way trees do?’

The other woman sipped her tea, watching her over the rim of the cup. ‘Of course. The Devereauxs have lived here for centuries –

their roots are deep.’

Daisy flapped a hand. ‘Yes, that’s part of it but I’m not talking about the length of time the family has owned the land. When Kit met me in the hall, the night of the Summer Ball, he looked – he seemed – intrinsic somehow.’ She paused helplessly, seeking insight. ‘As though Winterbourne was an unfinished jigsaw puzzle and he was the piece that completed it.’

She stopped, suddenly aware she had said more than she should. Cressida was still watching her, a slight frown creasing her brow, but Daisy had no idea what she might be thinking. Possibly whether to have her thrown in the castle dungeons.

‘You know, I’d never really thought about it but I do know what you mean,’ Cressida said slowly. ‘Hugh is obviously the earl but I get the sense it’s just a title to him, whereas Kit – well, I’ve always felt Kit *is* Winterbourne. I’m sure Hugh feels the same, although I don’t suppose either of us has ever said as much to Kit. I expect he knows...’

A thoughtful silence ensued, leaving Daisy to stew in the juice of her own consternation. She still couldn’t tell what Cressida truly thought of her observations, in spite of her apparent agreement, and it was making her stomach churn. ‘Sometimes it’s easier to see things more clearly from the outside,’ she offered.

Cressida nodded. ‘Perhaps, but you must understand that the law of primogeniture is non-negotiable,’ she said, glancing at her rounded belly. ‘The firstborn child inherits the title and lands, which then pass to their firstborn. Hugh can’t simply give away the earldom, I’m afraid.’

‘I don’t think Kit cares about that,’ Daisy said, and it occurred to her that none of the Devereaux men she knew of seemed to have enjoyed being the earl. ‘It’s Winterbourne he loves.’

‘It doesn’t matter. The castle and the title are inextricably linked.’ Cressida frowned into her cup. ‘I agree it’s a rough deal for

Kit but I'm really not sure anything can be done. I suppose I could speak to Hugh.'

The words sent a tidal wave of embarrassment crashing over Daisy. 'I didn't mean to suggest –' She stopped as more implications came thundering home. 'Kit didn't ask me to mention this. He doesn't – he's not—'

Cressida raised a hand. 'I know. But it is something that's troubled me, more so since I fell pregnant. Hugh would never ask Kit to leave Winterbourne but that isn't the point.'

Mortification mingled with something approaching horror in Daisy's stomach. Kit would be furious that she'd shared his confidence with Cressida. Why hadn't she kept her stupid mouth shut? 'I didn't mean to interfere. It's absolutely none of my business,' she said wretchedly.

'You haven't interfered,' Cressida reassured her. 'I doubt anything can be done but it won't hurt to look into it.'

Daisy wasn't sure Kit would see it that way but she couldn't take it back now. She was grateful when Cressida changed the subject, and did her best to answer questions about other books she had written and illustrated. Even so, she was aware of a leaden chill that had settled in her gut. It stayed there all the way to the school gates. How was she going to look Kit in the eye, knowing she'd inadvertently stirred up a hornets' nest? And the answer was that she couldn't, not without coming clean. Far better that he was forewarned, she decided as she waited in the playground. She owed him that, at least.

As usual, Kit was a few minutes early, which gave Daisy the opportunity to draw him to one side. She expected him to be angry with her for overstepping their friendship, for hinting at his dislike at being reliant on Hugh's generosity, even though she hadn't meant to do either. She waited, braced, as he silently considered her, while the other parents milled around them. Eventually, he puffed out his cheeks, shaking his head. 'Did you

mean what you said to Cressida, about what you thought when I met you at the ball?’

It was the last thing she’d expected him to zoom in on. ‘Oh,’ she said, wrongfooted. ‘Yes, but it was only a half-formed notion – an impression, I suppose. It wasn’t until a week or so later, when I was doodling and sketched you, that it properly fell into place.’

He stared at her. ‘You drew me?’

Daisy nodded. ‘A rough picture. I often start work by sketching random images, it helps my fingers to warm up. But that was when I understood how perfectly you belonged there. Even then, it wasn’t a lightning bolt moment – it felt more like something I was remembering, having always known it.’ She sighed, wishing once again that she’d kept her thoughts to herself. ‘Sorry, I’m not making much sense.’

His gaze remained on her. ‘When I was stationed overseas and things were hard, I used to visualize coming home to Winterbourne. I’d imagine driving through the gates, crunching across the gravel, running my hand along the books in the library while a fire crackled and sparked in the grate.’ He paused. ‘And of course my family were here but it was always the house itself that got me through the darkest times.’

Daisy understood. She’d felt the same way about Half Moon Farm when she was a child. ‘Because it was your place.’

‘Yes,’ he said simply. ‘But I don’t need to own Winterbourne to feel that. Which is a good thing because it isn’t mine and it never will be.’

‘But you look after it,’ Daisy observed with rising indignation. ‘You care. Hugh doesn’t even like it there.’

‘For a good reason,’ Kit reminded her, then sighed. ‘Look, being the second son meant I had a lot of freedom – freedom Hugh never had, because he carried the weight of inheriting the titles and responsibilities and everything that goes with it. Looking

after Winterbourne takes some of the load from him, plus Alice and I get to live in the place we both love.’ He offered her a crooked smile. ‘And it’s not so terrible – I spend a lot of my time messing about with planes, which I also love.’

When he put it like that it was hard to argue, Daisy thought. ‘But you’re not cross with me for blabbering away to Cressida? I really didn’t mean to, it just sort of slipped out.’

Now Kit’s smile became a grin. ‘No, I’m not cross. It was very sweet of you. No one’s ever tried to circumvent the laws of inheritance on my behalf before.’

At least he wasn’t angry, Daisy thought with a hefty dose of relief. ‘Maybe Hugh will find a way,’ she said, as the bell rang and they began to move into the playground.

‘He won’t,’ Kit replied firmly. ‘But that’s okay. I made my peace with it a long time ago, even if I do occasionally grumble.’

She smiled. ‘You’ll just have to marry a wealthy heiress. Isn’t that the done thing in aristocratic circles?’

Kit laughed as he raised a hand to wave at Alice. ‘Luckily, I don’t think any of them would want me. I’ll just have to make my fortune as a flight instructor instead.’

Chapter Three

‘Going anywhere nice?’

Daisy glanced at her mother, who was hovering in the kitchen doorway, watching her lace up her trainers. ‘Coffee with Drew.’

Rose folded her arms. ‘A coffee date. Very romantic.’

As usual, Daisy’s natural inclination was to shrink away from discussing anything about her love life with Rose. She’d been an expert in deciphering her mother’s body language while growing up – the folded arms suggested disapproval but that wasn’t reflected in her tone or her expression, Daisy thought. If anything, she looked faintly pleased. And Daisy hadn’t been a teenager for quite some time – surely she could talk to her mother as an equal now. ‘It’s not really a date,’ she said. ‘We’re just friends.’

With benefits, she added silently, but Rose was eyeing her beadily. ‘He’s a good man. You could do a lot worse.’

‘He is a good man,’ Daisy agreed. ‘Which is why we’re friends.’

‘Kind and helpful, and good looking. You make a nice couple.’

‘We’re not a couple,’ Daisy insisted, wishing she’d said she was meeting Nancy instead. ‘Apart from anything else, I’m going back to Milton Keynes soon, remember?’

Her mother sniffed. ‘What’s that got to do with anything? It’s hardly Timbuktu, is it?’

‘But it’s not around the corner, either,’ Daisy said. She took a deep breath. ‘Look, I’ll admit Drew and I enjoy each other’s company but that’s all there is to it.’

‘You could do a lot worse,’ Rose said again, as though she hadn’t heard Daisy. ‘He’s such a help. Did I tell you he’s going to get the roof fixed?’

Daisy frowned, feeling an altogether different type of unease. This wasn’t the first time Rose had mentioned repairing the roof. ‘I sorted that out months ago, don’t you remember?’

Rose waved a hand. ‘There’s a leak. Drew’s going to get someone in to fix it.’

‘He hasn’t mentioned it to me,’ Daisy said, her frown deepening. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course I’m sure,’ Rose snapped. ‘Why would he mention it to you? It’s not your house.’

‘No, but—’ Daisy stopped. There was an obstinate set to her mother’s expression that she recognized all too well. ‘It’s very kind of Drew to help.’

Instantly, Rose’s irritation was smoothed away. She gave a nod of satisfaction. ‘He’s a good man. You could do worse.’

It was clear there wasn’t much to be gained by arguing, Daisy thought, but her mother’s conviction that there was an issue with the roof still troubled her. Before she left to meet Drew, she went upstairs to the bedroom that had suffered the worst damage before the hole in the farmhouse roof was repaired. The clutter that had filled the room had long since been cleared; broken furniture had been dumped, ancient magazines had been recycled and the boxes of old papers were now stacked in one corner, waiting for Daisy to sift through them when she had time. The ceiling was smooth, freshly plastered, and the strong smell of damp had gone now that the old, almost threadbare carpet had been replaced. Daisy’s eyes scanned the ceiling and walls, alert for evidence of a leak but there was nothing. Her mother must have misunderstood, she decided, closing the door and hurrying to get her bag. Except that it wasn’t the first time Rose had been muddled when talking about repairs to the house – had there been other lapses Daisy hadn’t noticed?

She bit her lip. Perhaps it was time to ask Emily if she'd noticed anything unusual when talking to Rose.

She should have known Drew would pick up on her mood, no matter how hard she tried to push the conversation with Rose to the back of her mind. They'd agreed that the Oast House café was too close to home – much to Nancy's good-natured annoyance – and had arranged to meet in Mistlethorpe instead. Daisy had only been seated opposite Drew for a few minutes before he threw her a concerned look. 'You're quiet today. Is everything okay?'

She didn't answer immediately, fretting that she was over-reacting, that everyone got their wires crossed from time to time. But there was a chance he'd be able to set her mind at rest – perhaps he'd have some idea how the mix up had happened. Daisy cleared her throat. 'I had an odd conversation with my mum this morning. She's got it into her head the roof is leaking.'

Drew frowned. 'It's not that long since the repair. Do you need to get Jonny to take another look? He usually does a thorough job but mistakes happen.'

Daisy shook her head. 'I checked the ceiling this morning and I can't see what she's talking about.' She gave him a helpless look. 'I think she's confused. She said you were going to sort it out, which obviously doesn't make any sense. Unless you mentioned something in passing and she's got the wrong end of the stick.'

He puffed out a long breath. 'Not that I remember. But I'd be more likely to speak to you if I noticed a problem. I certainly wouldn't take it upon myself to sort anything out.'

'No,' Daisy said, sighing. 'That's what I thought. But it's not the first time she's said something like this and I can't help wondering whether she's not quite as well as I thought.'

She closed her mouth quickly, as though doing so would stop any more of her fears from escaping. Drew was silent for several seconds. 'You're worried about dementia.'

‘No,’ Daisy said. ‘Maybe. I don’t know. She seems to be herself most of the time but that’s often how it starts, isn’t it? With little moments of disconnection or confusion. And obviously I’m going back to Milton Keynes soon – how am I going to know if she’s getting worse?’

‘You’ll have Emily,’ he offered and took her hand. ‘I’d be very happy to keep a closer eye on her too, if it helps. But try not to panic – as you say, it might be nothing.’

The reassurance made her feel a little better. ‘Thank you.’ She managed a fleeting smile. ‘There’s always something, isn’t there?’

‘Always,’ Drew agreed. He squeezed her fingers. ‘I appreciate we haven’t known each other that long but I hope you know I’m here for you, Daisy. You don’t have to do everything alone.’

The words caused a sudden lump to form in her throat; she hadn’t realized how much her worries about leaving Rose and Half Moon Farm had been weighing on her mind. It was kind of Drew to offer his help and the truth was she would feel better knowing someone beside Emily was watching over things. ‘That’s good of you. Thanks, Drew.’

‘No problem.’ His eyes crinkled into the smile that never failed to make her stomach swoop. ‘And in the meantime, why don’t you let me treat you to a slice of that carrot cake?’

She glanced across to the counter, where a sumptuous, nut-speckled gâteau glistened under the glass, and felt the last of the morning’s anxiety slip from her shoulders. Her mother had been right about one thing, at least – Drew Entwistle *was* a good man. Daisy smiled back at him. ‘How could anyone say no to an offer like that?’

What are you doing tomorrow morning?

The message from Kit arrived on Wednesday evening, when Daisy was wrangling a protesting Finn into the shower. A

momentary frown crossed her forehead as she mentally reviewed her diary while simultaneously wondering why he was asking. Did Athers want her help in the gardens? Daisy had stood beside Kit for most of the afternoon, watching their children compete at Sports Day, and he hadn't mentioned anything then.

She tapped on the bathroom door. 'Wash your hair, Finn. Use shampoo this time, not bubble bath.'

A muffled howl of outrage told her Finn had heard. She turned her attention back to her phone. *Taking Mum to an appointment first thing but free after that. Why, what's up?*

The sound of tuneless singing drifted over her as she waited. Finn liked to indulge in the full shower experience once he was in there, despite having to be almost forcibly thrust under the water to begin with. Campbell had always been more fastidious – even as a toddler he'd hated getting dirty and Daisy had never had any trouble getting him to take a shower. He also liked to sing but she could usually recognize the song. Not so with Finn, who valued volume over the right notes or lyrics.

Her phone buzzed just as Finn reached his loudest. Wincing, Daisy stepped away from the door and opened Kit's reply. *I've had a cancellation. How do you fancy a flying lesson?*

The question was so unexpected that Daisy's jaw dropped. A flying lesson? Where had that come from? But at the moment, the sound of running water stopped, along with Finn's singing, and the bathroom door opened. 'I accidentally threw the towel in the toilet,' Finn said plaintively.

By the time Daisy had fetched another towel, retrieved the one in the toilet and dried the wet footprints that criss-crossed the floor, her initial surprise at Kit's message had faded and she was able to consider it more objectively. He'd often waxed lyrical about how beautiful the Kent countryside looked from the skies, and about the sense of freedom he felt in the air. She'd certainly never have a better opportunity to see what he meant.

What time? she typed.

His reply was immediate. *Eleven, at Marston airport. Does that work?*

She did some rough calculations. Her mother's dental appointment was at nine-thirty in nearby Pelby – as long as the dentist was running to time, she could be at Marston by eleven o'clock. If she wanted to be...

Okay, she tapped out, before she lost her nerve. *Do I need to bring anything?*

Once again, Kit's response was fast. *Only your spirit of adventure. But make sure you eat breakfast – there's a kettle in my office but not much more. See you tomorrow!*

By the time Daisy arrived at Marston, she was seriously regretting saying yes to Kit's offer. The airport seemed impossibly small compared to the vastness of Gatwick or Heathrow, just a winding ribbon of concrete nestled in what looked ominously like a field. There was a control tower, she noted, and several hangars. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting but a sign at the entrance gate reminding drivers to watch out for incoming planes was not on her list.

Kit beamed at her as she got out of her car. 'Good morning,' he called, crossing the tarmac to meet her. 'It's a lovely day for taking to the skies.'

Daisy swallowed, trying not to stare past him at the small blue and white plane just beyond a low building. She'd never been a nervous flyer but the planes had always been reassuringly large, making it easy to forget how far from the ground she was. There was no chance of forgetting in a two-seater, she suspected. Not even if she closed her eyes. But it was far too late to back out now. She summoned up what she hoped was a breezy smile. 'Hello.'

If Kit noticed her trepidation, he didn't say anything. Instead, he nodded at the brick building off to one side. 'There are lockers in there, if you want to leave anything on the ground.'

The suggestion put Daisy in mind of the rollercoasters she'd been on with the twins, where the risk of losing things was high. She felt a spike of anxiety. 'Do I need to?'

'No,' he said, eyeing her handbag. 'The cockpit is cosy but you'll have room for a bag that small. We don't do loops until your second lesson.'

She thought he was joking but it was hard to tell. 'Great,' she said weakly. 'Is that your plane?'

Kit nodded. 'It is. She's fully fuelled and ready to go. I thought a trip to Dover might be nice, since the weather is good. You'll probably be able to see France and the cliffs are spectacular when it's sunny.'

Daisy hadn't actually considered where they might go but she had to concede that flying over the famous white cliffs sounded appealing. 'Okay,' she said, doing her best to squash the storm of butterflies in her stomach. 'Sounds good.'

He hadn't lied when he said the cockpit was cosy, Daisy observed once she was seated snugly on the left-hand of the plane. She'd had to duck underneath a wing to clamber in and almost banged her head on one of the struts – if she looked out of the side window beside her seat she could see the wheels. How Kit managed to fold his tall frame into the space inside was a mystery. Before her lay a bewildering array of panels and controls inlaid in a walnut dashboard, and beyond the windscreen the nose of the plane was alarmingly close. But even more disconcerting was her proximity to Kit – their bodies almost touched along their entire length once they were both strapped in side by side. His warmth mingled with hers, making her wish the sun wasn't quite so strong.

'As you can see, it's dual control,' Kit said, tapping on the control column that was duplicated on her side of the cockpit. 'I'll take control initially and you can have a go once we're in the air. Happy?'

The thought of actually taking over control made Daisy want to hyperventilate. ‘Do I have to?’

He laughed. ‘No, but I promise it’s easier than you think.’ He patted the dash with obvious affection. ‘This girl practically flies herself. Now, let me explain what all these dials do.’

Daisy tried to take everything in. There was a compass – that was easy enough to understand – and a speedometer, which also made sense. Another dial told them how high up they were, while what looked like a rolling ball in the middle of a sea of horizontal lines was to ensure the plane stayed level. Numbers swam in front of her eyes as they slid from display to display. And finally, Kit pointed out the radio that sat in the centre of everything; somehow Daisy doubted it was tuned to Heart FM.

‘You’ll need to wear these,’ Kit said, handing her a bulky set of headphones with a microphone attached. ‘As we fly, we’ll communicate with various air traffic control towers – they need to know we’re heading into their airspace. The microphones are voice-activated – all you need to do is speak.’

She slid the headphones on, a little surprised by their weight. ‘Will anyone else be able to hear me?’

He shook his head. ‘Just me for today. Oh, and when you do speak, there might be times when I don’t answer right away. There’s usually a lot of radio chatter, sometimes I need to listen so I know who else is in the air around us.’

Daisy hadn’t considered that. ‘Will there be much traffic?’

‘It’s not the M25,’ he said, grinning. ‘Don’t worry, I haven’t hit anyone yet.’

‘Ha ha,’ Daisy said weakly.

All signs of flippancy vanished once he started the engine, however. She watched as he methodically checked each screen and dial, his attention suddenly laser focused, and her nerves lessened. Kit was a highly trained RAF pilot, she reminded herself, he’d

flown in some of the most difficult conditions possible. An hour-long jaunt to the English Channel and back was nothing, yet he was still intent on making sure everything was as it should be before they took off. Apparently satisfied, he adjusted his headphones and reached for the radio.

A hiss of static filled Daisy's ears, softening the thrum of the engine. 'Marston air traffic control, this is Golf-Bravo-Romeo-Charlie-Delta requesting permission to take off, over.'

A male voice crackled in reply. 'Good afternoon, Golf-Bravo. Where are you heading today, Kit? Over.'

'Due south towards Dover,' Kit replied. 'Return ETA is twelve-thirty, over.'

'Very good, Golf-Bravo,' the voice said. 'Taxi to the runway when ready, over.'

Kit glanced at Daisy and she saw his eyes were dancing as though he were a child on Christmas Eve. 'Ready?' he asked, his voice cutting through the faint buzz of static.

The point when she might have said no was long since past. Bracing herself, she tipped her head. 'Ready.'

There were foot pedals that worked in much the same way as a car, although Kit explained that they also steered left and right. Daisy was glad she didn't have to worry about that – as much as he reassured her it was as easy as driving a car, she didn't believe him. They trundled around the concrete curve, passing the point where Daisy had obeyed a sign to stop and check for landing planes when she'd been driving in, and reached the start of a long, straight stretch that she guessed must be the runway. 'Marston, this is Golf-Bravo-Romeo-Charlie-Delta, ready for take-off,' Kit said.

'Golf-Bravo, you are cleared. Have a good flight. Over.'

The plane began to move forwards, picking up speed. Daisy felt herself jolt in her seat and put one hand against the door on her left to brace. The noise of the engine increased, a dull roar that

made her feet vibrate against the floor, and she saw Kit checking the dials once more. Then he eased back on the yoke and it seemed to Daisy that he might have been pulling the nose of the plane itself because suddenly they were off the ground. Her stomach swooped as they rose upwards smoothly. Automatically, she glanced out of the side window and saw the runway falling away. She bit back a gasp and turned to the front, her eyes blurring as the dials swam before them. Everything felt so close. Everything except the ground.

Kit's voice broke through her careening thoughts, calm and matter of fact. 'We'll climb to just over one thousand feet, then level off. If you check the altimeter, it should confirm how high up we are.'

Daisy blinked, trying to remember which dial that had been. Then she saw it. 'Uh, around six hundred feet now, I think.'

'We should be passing over Mistlethorpe in a minute,' he said. 'You'll be able to see the farm.'

'Great,' Daisy managed, fixing her gaze on the nose of the plane while she got her breathing under control. It really wouldn't do to pass out, she thought as the propeller blurred the air. The twins would never let her hear the end of it if she did.

Gradually, she felt the plane's climb start to lessen and she risked another glance out of the side window. The ground was a patchwork quilt of green and yellow, dotted with woodland and sewn together by hedgerows and roads. Houses were sparse at first – they reminded her of Lego bricks – but then she caught a sparkle among a cluster of trees. 'Is that the River Mistle?' she asked Kit, who nodded.

'Yes. You can trace its path by following the lines of trees – they're thickest along the riverbanks.' He eased the controller to one side and the plane banked slightly left. 'Look, there's Winterbourne.'

Sure enough, Daisy saw the castle and the manor house blossoming into view. The moat shimmered like a priceless diamond collar around the castle walls. 'It looks big and small at the same time,' she said, and instantly cringed. 'Sorry, that sounds stupid.'

He glanced at her, smiling. 'I know exactly what you mean. It's bigger than everything else but still tiny from the air. Pocket-sized, in fact.'

The idea made her giggle, although she thought adrenaline might be playing a part too. 'You'd need much bigger trousers. Or a TARDIS.'

They were flying over the village now, the High Street curving alongside the green, with the river flashing in the sunlight. And then Half Moon Farm appeared, nestled between the winding road and woodlands like a toy. Daisy's breath caught in her throat as she stared through the window. It was as though she was Alice gazing down at Wonderland having eaten the cake, except that this was no dream. 'It's magical,' she murmured to herself, forgetting the headphones for a moment. 'Just magical.'

'Isn't it?' Kit said, and she knew without looking that he was smiling. 'So, are you ready to fly yourself?'

In a heartbeat, Daisy's delight vanished. She stared at him in consternation, dread gnawing at her stomach. 'Now? But what if I can't do it? What if we crash?'

'We're not going to crash,' he said patiently. 'All you have to do is keep the nose level with the horizon and fly straight. You can do this, Daisy. Just put your hands on the yoke in front of you and I'll pass control across.'

Her palms were sweaty as she reached reluctantly for the control column. Easier than driving a car, she reminded herself, which might be true but she'd felt sick with nerves the first time she'd driven a car too. 'Ready?' Kit asked.

No, Daisy wanted to say but she knew he wouldn't accept that as an answer. He thought she could do this and she supposed she would simply have to trust his judgement. 'Ready.'

'You have control,' he said coolly and Daisy noticed an instant change in the yoke, a thrum of tension that caused her stress levels to spike. Her fingers tightened instinctively and the plane bounced very slightly in response.

'Oh!' she squeaked, panic coursing through her. The yoke responded to her movement, juddering a little and tilting left.

'Steady,' Kit soothed. 'Don't grip so tightly. The controls are very responsive – loosen your hands and keep an eye on the nose.'

Daisy took a breath and forced her fingers to uncurl. With infinite concentration, she pressed forwards, watching as the nose dropped to align with the horizon. 'Much better,' Kit said, and she thought he sounded pleased, although she didn't dare look at him. 'See? You're flying. Didn't I say you could do it?'

She didn't reply, too busy focusing on keeping the plane level, but she felt her shoulders drop down from around her ears as some of the tension leached out of her. It was odd not having to check her mirrors or consider other vehicles but she had plenty to think about. Occasionally, the plane would tremble, sending fresh spikes of worry through Daisy but Kit explained it was caused by pockets of warm air. The radio crackled as new voices came into range – sometimes Kit answered, with a bewildering range of acronyms that seemed to encompass the whole phonetic alphabet. Then she suddenly became aware that the view beyond the nose was no longer green. A thin line of blue had appeared and was growing thicker with every passing moment. 'The sea!' she exclaimed with a tiny bubble of delighted laughter. 'I've flown us all the way to the seaside.'

'You have,' Kit said, smiling. 'I'll take over now, if you like. Let you enjoy the view.'

Perversely, Daisy felt a small stab of disappointment at the suggestion. ‘Oh. Okay.’

He laughed. ‘Don’t worry, you can fly us home.’ Beneath Daisy’s fingers, the yoke became unresponsive. ‘I have control.’

There was no trace of anxiety in Daisy now when she peered out of the side window. They were passing over a well populated area; houses huddled together and roads twisted like strands of cotton between them. But her attention was caught and held by the ever-expanding swathe of turquoise up ahead, sparkling in the sunshine. It met the forget-me-not sky at the horizon and the contrast seemed to darken the water, turning it an intoxicating emerald green. She wasn’t surprised Kit loved flying so much. Right now, Daisy felt as though she never wanted to come down.

‘Time to turn around now.’ Kit sounded regretful as he banked the plane right. ‘I hope you’ve got some sunglasses – the cliffs will probably be blinding today.’

She thought he was joking, although the white chalk was bright. Birds were circling around the cliff-face, some coming in to land, others whirling away to soar over the white-tipped waves. Gulls of some description, Daisy guessed, but she wasn’t much of a twitcher and had no real idea. Campbell would know.

It wasn’t until they were back over land and heading for Marston that Daisy became aware of the creeping nausea laying siege to her stomach. Kit had passed control to her again and she’d been concentrating hard on riding the small buffets of wind that occasionally spiralled up to jolt the small plane. At first, she tried to ignore the queasiness, telling herself it would pass, but her mouth grew dry and her tongue felt thick. A throb began in her temples and although she hated to admit it, it was something of a relief when Kit announced it was time for him to take over. She took a swig of water, hoping it was simple dehydration, but the nausea didn’t fade. By the time they touched down at Marston –

as smoothly as any heavier plane she'd travelled on – she couldn't wait for some fresh air and to feel her feet on the ground again.

Once the plane was at a standstill beside the low building once more, Kit turned to smile at Daisy. 'I hope you're proud of yourself. Well done.'

She did her best to return the smile, although it felt like a poor effort. 'Thank you. I can't believe I flew us all that way.'

'But you did,' he replied. 'Not everyone takes to it that well. You're a natural.'

Daisy's stomach gurgled unpleasantly and she clenched her fingers until the sensation passed. 'I don't feel like a natural,' she admitted, swallowing a groan. 'To be honest, I feel a bit sick.'

Kit studied her more closely. 'You do look a bit peaky, now you mention it,' he said, and patted her arm sympathetically. 'Come on, let's find you some peppermint tea.'

He climbed out of the cockpit and came round to her side of the plane, ducking beneath the wing to open her door. Daisy swung her feet onto the step, desperate to be back on solid ground, but her legs had other ideas. They buckled when she put her weight on them, sending her heels slithering painfully to the tarmac. She grabbed the door for support – it swung away, knocking her further off balance. With a startled yelp, Daisy let go and stumbled forwards on jelly legs, only to find herself caught by Kit before she could collapse fully into an undignified heap. 'Oh!' she cried as he steadied her. 'I'm sorry.'

He didn't let go immediately. Instead, his fingers slid down her arms to cup her elbows, supporting her. 'Are you okay?'

Daisy swallowed another wave of queasiness. She couldn't decide what was more gut-wrenching – the fear that she might vomit on Kit's feet or the knowledge that she was only standing because he was holding her up. 'Fine,' she said, sounding unconvincing even to herself. 'Just a bit wobbly.'

Still he did not let go and Daisy had a sudden flash of him sweeping her into his arms and carrying her to the nearest bench, like a blond Richard Gere. Buoyed up by an acute desire to avoid that at all costs, she took a step backwards. ‘See?’

His hands hovered at her sides until he was apparently satisfied she could indeed stand up, then relaxed. ‘Good. Do you want to take my arm?’

Daisy shook her head, then wished she hadn’t as wooziness washed over her. The last time Kit had offered his arm had been at the Summer Ball and the occasion had been very different. ‘I’ll be fine,’ she said again. ‘I think my legs sort of went to sleep while we were flying – it will do me good to stretch them out.’

‘If you’re sure?’ he said, regarding her intently.

‘Positive,’ she said, and took a bracing gulp of air. ‘Did you mention a cup of tea?’

Inside the squat building was blessedly cool. Daisy excused herself the moment they were through the door. She made for the bathroom, splashing cold water on her face and letting it pour across the pulse point on each wrist, closing her eyes and resting her forehead against the mirror. The nausea was constant, even though she was as sure as she could be that she wouldn’t actually throw up. As a child she’d often felt this way after reading in a moving car, but the knowledge that the unpleasantness would eventually pass did nothing to ease her suffering now.

‘That’s exactly what you’re feeling,’ Kit said, when she described the sensation to him. ‘It’s an imbalance between what your eyes can see and what your brain thinks is happening. Quite a lot of people suffer from it when they first go up in a smaller plane.’

She fought the urge to blink hard. The room wasn’t quite spinning but she couldn’t be sure it was totally still. ‘Did you?’

‘No,’ he said, smiling. ‘But flying is in my blood, remember? I’ve been doing it as long as I remember.’

Daisy took a mouthful of steaming peppermint tea, wondering how many other would-be pilots had sat where she was sitting and felt the way she felt. ‘You might have warned me,’ she grumbled.

He spread his hands. ‘Not everyone suffers – I didn’t want to put the idea in your head. I did suggest you ate a good breakfast. A full stomach often helps.’

She shifted in her seat, not quite meeting his gaze. Between the school run and the dentist, she hadn’t found time to eat. Something to bear in mind for next time, she thought and then remembered there was unlikely to be a follow up lesson. It was probably a good thing, she decided as she took another gulp of tea. At least she wouldn’t have to worry about literally throwing herself at him again. ‘I’ll bear it in mind,’ she said. ‘Thanks for taking me up. I really did enjoy it, even if I do look a bit green around the gills now.’

‘You’re welcome,’ he said. ‘Let’s call it a professional trade. You put Winterbourne’s gardens into your book and I let you fly my plane.’

Daisy shook her head carefully. ‘Except I’m pretty sure I owe you for that, too,’ she replied. ‘I heard back from my agent and she said the publisher is thrilled with the illustrations. They’re planning a big launch party next year – you should come.’

The invitation popped out before she’d thought it through. By the time the party happened, she would have been back in Milton Keynes for the best part of seven months – there was every chance Kit would have forgotten all about the book by then. But she couldn’t take the invitation back, not when she realized how pleased he looked. ‘I might just do that,’ he said. ‘But of course we’ll buy some stock for the castle shop. Maybe you could sign them, if it’s not too much trouble.’

‘No trouble at all,’ Daisy said, then winced as her head thudded painfully. ‘Sorry to fly and run but I think I need to go home for a lie down.’

She gave an embarrassed laugh but Kit’s concern was instant. ‘Of course. Are you well enough to drive?’ He glanced at his watch. ‘I have another lesson in half an hour but I could take you home first.’

Daisy didn’t want to imagine the disgust on her mother’s face if she was escorted home by a Devereaux. ‘Please don’t worry. I’ll be fine.’

Kit appeared far from convinced. ‘Let me collect the boys from school for you, then. I can drop them home – it’s no trouble.’

Again, Daisy declined the offer. ‘It’s very kind of you but, honestly, I’ll be fine in a little while.’ She got to her feet, on legs that felt so much steadier than they had thirty minutes earlier. ‘Thanks again for letting me do this. It really was incredible.’

He rose too. ‘I enjoyed the company,’ he said, smiling. ‘You’re welcome to fly with me any time.’

She had almost reached her car when she heard footsteps behind her. Turning, she saw Kit had a black A5 book in his hands. ‘I forgot to give you your flying log,’ he said, holding it out. ‘It contains the records of today’s flight, in case you’ve really got the bug and decide you want to get your pilot’s licence.’

It was a nice touch, Daisy thought. ‘Thank you,’ she said, taking the book and running her fingers over the embossed silver wings on the cover.

‘And if not, then it’s something to remind you of the day,’ he went on. ‘Assuming you don’t feel so dreadful that you never want to think of it again.’

She laughed. ‘I don’t feel that bad. Thanks for this, it’s a lovely memento.’

It seemed to Daisy as though her smile lasted all the way back to Half Moon Farm, in spite of her thumping head and roiling stomach. She kept stealing looks at the flying log on the passenger seat beside her, wondering what Finn and Campbell would think of it. But regardless of whether she ever flew again, she didn't need a book to remind her of soaring over the white cliffs, almost at one with the gulls. Nor would she forget Kit's calm competence, the patience with which he'd allowed her to learn, or his consummate skill. She'd thought he belonged at Winterbourne but now she realized she'd been mistaken – where he truly belonged was in the sky. The whole exhilarating experience was seared into her soul – she knew she'd never forget a moment. And she had Kit Devereaux to thank for it. How had she ever disliked him?

Chapter Four

11 Thanet Lane

Mistlethorpe

Kent

14th April

Dearest Val

I hardly know what I should write, or if I can write, after our last meeting. Of course I am only a stupid village girl, I don't have your fancy words or fine education, but I don't believe you meant the things you said. How could you say you don't love me after writing those very words so many times? After you held me close under our tree and told me which star to look out for when you were away? Love like that can't be thrown away because your family don't think I'm good enough. You said you would fight for me, Val. You said we were forever. My heart is still yours and I beg of you to run away with me tonight. I will wait by the mill on the High Street until midnight. If you do not come, I will know nothing you ever said was true.

Always yours,

Violet

It was the last letter in the bundle addressed to Kit's grandfather and even now, Daisy could see the dried tear that stained the paper and smudged the words. Her own tears had flowed freely, although she'd made sure they didn't join her grandmother's on the letter. Poor Violet, she thought dully. It seemed as though Val had broken every promise he had made and even though Daisy had known it was coming, it still felt like a kick in the ribs. When Kit had first given her the letters, she'd interlaced the two sets in date order, reading the back and forth as they would have been written and received. After Violet's heartbreaking letter to Valentine, there was only one envelope remaining in the pile addressed to Violet. It was thicker than the others, which she'd assumed was because it hadn't been sent on Active Service – the post mark was November 1946, when she knew Val had long been

home from the war, and the envelope was cream-coloured instead of blue or grey. Violet's name and address was printed in block capitals, which was another departure that made Daisy frown. In the letter she had just read, it sounded as though Val had at least had the decency to break things off in person but perhaps he'd risked one final reply. Leaning back against her pillow, she picked up the envelope and slid the contents out.

At once, she knew she'd been wrong. This wasn't a letter from Val – the handwriting was all wrong, more of a scrawl and considerably less elegant. There was no address at the top, simply the date – 2nd November 1946 – and the salutation below it was equally abrupt.

Miss Finch,

Kindly stop writing to me. I am sorry for the situation you find yourself in but I cannot help. The accusation you make is entirely wrong – I suspect there are several other hop pickers who might be responsible, if farm gossip is to be believed. Perhaps you will have better luck by writing to one of them.

Do not contact me again or I will write to Mr Moon, revealing your shame.

Gerry

Daisy stared at the words, open-mouthed. She read it again, astonished all over again as she took in the coldness of the words. What situation had Violet found herself in? And who the bloody hell was Gerry?

Puffing out her cheeks, she set about examining it line by line. It was clearly not the first time Violet had written to this man – he sounded utterly exasperated with her. Could it be something to do with the loss of her job at the castle? Daisy wondered, then dismissed the idea as ridiculous. The timing was wrong for a start, and Gerry made reference to hop picking and farm gossip, which suggested Violet had started work at Half Moon Farm by then. That she'd taken a job there was something Daisy had always known – it was how Violet had met Daisy's grandfather. Could he be the Mr Moon mentioned at the end? She suspected not – Peter Moon would have been a young man in 1946. Gerry probably

meant Peter's father – Daisy's great-grandfather. But what shame was Gerry threatening to reveal? What had Violet done to put herself in such peril? Daisy eyed the date again – November 1946. Her grandparents had got married in December of that year, and Rose had been born the following year. Whatever Violet's supposed shame had been, Gerry's threat had been toothless. Violet Finch had become a Moon and lived happily ever after.

Even so, the incongruity nagged at Daisy. Frowning, she read the letter again. It sounded as though Gerry might be a hop picker, which meant he would have been at the farm for the harvest in August and September, but he had moved on by the time Violet wrote to him in November, some two or three months later. Had he stolen something that belonged to Violet? But why would that result in Violet's shame? Daisy lowered the letter to the duvet in frustration. None of it made any sense.

With a weary sigh, she decided it would have to wait until the morning. Replacing the letter in its envelope, she put it with the others on her bedside table and turned off the light. But the mystery whirled around in Daisy's head and it took a long time for sleep to come. Perhaps she would ask Rose if she knew anything about the enigmatic Gerry, she resolved at last, after what felt like hours of staring into the darkness. Because if Rose couldn't shed light on the secret behind this last letter, it was very likely no one could.

Nancy's eyes were wide when Daisy finished filling her in on Friday morning. 'It's like a real-life detective novel,' she said breathlessly across one of the tables in the Oast House café. 'Ooh, what if Violet witnessed a murder but she wasn't sure who the murderer was and she accused this Gerry guy but it wasn't him? So she tracked down the others and eventually the killer was caught but not before he tried to silence Violet.'

Daisy raised her eyebrows. ‘This is my grandmother we’re talking about. She went on to have a long and happy life – I don’t think she was running around trying to catch murderers.’

‘But that’s the thing,’ Nancy said, folding her arms. ‘What you’re discovering is that there’s a lot about your grandmother you didn’t know. She had a fling with a Devereaux, for a start. That was probably a big scandal at the time.’

The café owner had been agog when Daisy revealed she had uncovered the reason for the long-running feud between the Moons and the Devereauxs, so much so that Daisy had initially regretted telling her. But she’d needed someone to confide in and she wasn’t sure she was comfortable discussing something so personal with Kit, in spite of the fact that he’d read Violet’s letters to his grandfather and knew some of the rest from Daisy. Nancy had been the obvious, maybe the only, choice for a confidante. ‘Even so, I doubt very much she was Half Moon Farm’s answer to Miss Marple,’ Daisy objected. ‘It must be something else.’

Nancy sat lost in thought for a moment, nibbling on a biscuit. ‘Could it have been the affair with the earl, then? I bet that was seen as pretty shameful.’

‘I think it was all kept quiet,’ Daisy said. ‘And how would a hop picker know about it? They didn’t stick around for more than six weeks.’

‘Farm gossip,’ Nancy said, tapping the letter. ‘But you’re right, it doesn’t really fit. All that stuff about not being responsible, and the other hop pickers being to blame for her situation, whatever that means. If I didn’t know better I’d think—’

She broke off, staring at the letter with sudden understanding. ‘You’d think what?’ Daisy demanded.

Nancy shook her head. ‘You know what? You should ask your mum about this. I’m not saying another word.’

Now it was Daisy’s turn to stare. ‘Nancy?’

Her friend pressed her lips together and shook her head again, as though she was afraid her suspicions might sneak out. 'Ask your mum,' she repeated. 'And if she doesn't know then I'll tell you what I reckon happened.'

A frown creased Daisy's forehead. 'Why don't you tell me now?'

'Not my place,' Nancy said, getting to her feet. 'If it's what I think it is then it might change everything.'

Daisy groaned. 'You're not making any sense!'

Nancy patted her arm. 'Go and ask your mum. I bet she knows.'

But there was no opportunity for Daisy to ask Rose – Emily had taken her to her monthly knitting group and the farmhouse was empty. Daisy set about clearing away Finn and Campbell's breakfast dishes, trying to distract herself as she pondered Nancy's words. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't see what her friend had seen. Clearly she was not destined for a career as a sleuth.

Once the kitchen was clean, Daisy went upstairs to pack the boys' bags. Stuart was arriving that afternoon to take them back to Milton Keynes for the first two weeks of the summer holidays and she knew he would want to beat the Friday evening traffic – it made sense to make sure everything was ready. She stood in the middle of the room Finn and Campbell shared, gazing around and marvelling at how different it was now to when they had first arrived. Children tended to spread out in any case but this was most definitely their room now. It felt strange to think she would be packing it all up soon and transporting it back to their own house in Milton Keynes. She wasn't entirely sure it was going to fit.

The unexpected creak of a floorboard made Daisy stop what she was doing. She frowned, cocking her head to listen. Had Emily and Rose forgotten something or come home early? She

wondered, but there was no telltale chatter, no thud of feet in the hall. Daisy was just about to dismiss the sound as her imagination when she heard the unmistakable click of a door closing elsewhere in the house. Galvanized into action, she crossed the room and stared around the landing. 'Who's there? Emily, is that you?'

There was no reply. Hurrying down the stairs, Daisy made for the living room. The door was closed but she pulled it open and peered inside. 'Drew!' she gasped in astonishment. 'What are you doing in here?'

He was frozen in the act of rifling through a drawer in the bureau along the far wall, gazing at her as though she was the intruder. 'Hi, Daisy,' he said, after a momentary pause. 'I didn't know you were home.'

She blinked. 'Clearly. Are you looking for something?'

'I am, yes,' he said with an apologetic smile. 'The key to the old shed at the back of the orchard. I thought I heard Atticus in there, decided I'd better check he hadn't got himself trapped.'

'Oh god, that's all I need,' Daisy said, groaning. 'Mum keeps the key in that drawer, does she?'

Drew looked down, rummaging half-heartedly through the contents again. 'I thought she did. Maybe she's moved it.'

Daisy threw up her hands, imagining Atticus stuck in the shed. She didn't want to think what dangers there might be in there. 'Perhaps it's in the kitchen. There are some keys hanging on the wall in the pantry.'

'Well remembered,' Drew said, and he closed the drawer. 'Shall we take a look?'

They checked all the keys. None bore the label *Shed*. 'Now what?' Daisy asked, gazing around the kitchen fretfully. Where might Rose have put the key? And then she saw it, a long stretch of ginger tail dangling from one of the kitchen chairs. Bending down, she peered underneath the table and saw Atticus curled up,

fast asleep. ‘Panic over,’ she said, straightening up in relief. ‘He’s not in the shed.’

‘Phew,’ Drew agreed, clearly as relieved as Daisy. He cocked his head at her as though something had just occurred to him.

‘What?’ she asked. ‘Don’t tell me you’ve remembered where the key is.’

‘No. I was just thinking that we have an empty house and at least an hour before anyone will be back.’ He reached out to caress her cheek and she was suddenly in no doubt about what he had in mind.

‘Drew, I don’t think we can—’

But then he was kissing her and all her objections melted away. His fingers tangled in her hair, tugging it free of the band that held it, sending it cascading down her back. She let out a soft moan as his teeth grazed her neck, running her hands across the muscles of his back. ‘Upstairs,’ he murmured against her skin. ‘Your room.’

They shouldn’t, Daisy thought distractedly, her mother might come back early. But now Drew was pulling her t-shirt free and sliding his hands underneath and she suspected if they didn’t go upstairs now, they might not make it out of the kitchen. ‘Okay,’ she gasped, stopping his fingers from wandering any further. ‘Let’s go.’

It felt all wrong having him in her bedroom but somehow deliciously right. When it was over and they were curled together, tired but content, Daisy found herself smiling against his chest. She hadn’t wanted to start anything with him – had fought against it for a long time – but she had to admit she enjoyed their time together. She was going to miss this when she went back to her old life.

It seemed Drew was having similar thoughts. ‘Do you have to leave Mistlethorpe?’ he asked, brushing his lips across the top of her head. ‘Can’t you just stay here? The boys seem happy at school

and you said yourself Rose needs you. Surely there's more for you here than in Milton Keynes.'

She stirred restlessly. 'It's not that easy. Finn and Campbell need their dad.'

Drew was silent for several seconds. 'But they see him every other weekend. Would it be any different if you lived nearer?'

'Well, no,' Daisy conceded. 'But neither of us would have to drive for hours to drop them off and pick them up. And then there's school – Finn is keen to get back to his football team and Campbell misses his friends.'

He sighed, his breath ruffling her hair. 'And what about what you want, Daisy? Doesn't that count for anything?'

She didn't answer. Having children frequently meant putting their needs above her own – Daisy didn't know many mothers who would be any different. A fleeting image of Alice Devereaux crossed her mind, with a mother who rarely seemed to put her daughter first but with a father who would move heaven and earth for her, and amended her thinking: she didn't know many *parents* who wouldn't put their children's needs above their own.

'What I'm trying to say is that I'm starting to feel something for you, Daisy,' Drew went on. He wriggled out from under her and propped his head on one hand so he could look into her eyes. 'And I think you feel something for me too. So why not stay and see if we can make a go of things?'

Daisy stared at him, the last of her contentment ebbing away. She'd had no idea this was brewing. 'I can't, Drew. It's not that simple.'

'Isn't it?'

'No,' she said, hearing her voice sharpen. 'I have Finn and Campbell to consider.'

He regarded her patiently. 'I know and they're great kids. The kind I would have liked to have, if I'd met the right woman.' Reaching out, he stroked her cheek. 'It's just that I think I have met the right woman now. And she comes with a ready-made family.'

Daisy's head whirled. Where had this come from? She'd assumed they were on the same page – no strings enjoyment of each other's company. When had he begun to make plans for the future? It was all happening so fast. 'Drew, I don't think we can—'

There was a crunch outside, the sound of wheels on the gravel. Daisy disentangled herself, jumping out of bed to peer through the window. 'It's Mum and Emily,' she said, throwing Drew a panicky look. 'Quick, get dressed! You'll have to sneak out when they're not looking.'

His lips quirked as he reached for his clothes. 'Wow. I feel like a teenager again.'

Daisy didn't smile back as she dragged her t-shirt over her head. 'Hurry up.'

'On one condition,' he countered, snaking an arm around her waist and pulling her close. 'Spend the night with me tonight. Come to the cottage – I want to wake up with you beside me tomorrow.'

In spite of everything, Daisy was tempted. 'I can't.'

Drew stopped in the act of putting on his socks. 'Then I'm not sure I can hurry up.'

It was blackmail, she knew, but the way he was looking at her made Daisy want to give in. 'Maybe,' she said. 'But not if you don't get out without my mother seeing you.'

'Promise me,' he countered, smiling.

'Maybe,' she repeated firmly, and thrust his shoes towards him. 'Now finish getting dressed and wait five minutes. I'll get Mum

and Emily chatting in the kitchen so you can sneak out.'

He didn't take the shoes. Instead, he stood up and kissed her, hard and urgent and demanding. 'Eight o'clock,' he murmured. 'You know the address.'

She danced free, throwing him an exasperated look. 'Be as quiet as you can,' she whispered from the doorway. 'Don't get caught.'

Thankfully, Emily and Rose were already in the kitchen, making tea. Emily bent down as Daisy entered, scooping up the hairband Drew had tossed onto the floor. 'I think this is yours,' the carer said, as Daisy did her best not to turn scarlet.

'Thanks,' she said, taking care to shut the door before she took the hairband. 'How was knitting club?'

Rose tutted loudly. 'Elsie Wicks is a show off. She wants to yarn bomb Mistlethorpe High Street but she won't let anyone else submit designs.'

Emily raised her eyebrows but said nothing. Daisy bit back the sudden desire to giggle. 'Oh dear. And do you have a design?'

'No, but that's not the point,' Rose snapped. 'Who died and made Elsie queen, that's what I want to know.' Her eyes flitted to the window and suddenly, her expression changed, like the sun emerging from a cloud. 'Oh, there's Drew.'

Daisy's gaze followed. Sure enough, Drew was passing the window. He raised a hand to wave. 'Such a good man,' Rose said, sighing. 'You could do a lot worse, Daisy.'

Too wrung-out to argue, Daisy simply nodded. 'Yes, Mum. I know.'

Chapter Five

Both Finn and Campbell were subdued as Daisy drove them back to Half Moon Farm at the end of their last school day. Campbell sighed, staring out of the window as the trees flashed by. ‘It felt weird saying goodbye to everyone. I mean, it was hard when we left our old school but we knew we’d be back. This feels like forever.’

Probably because it was forever, Daisy thought, but she wasn’t about to say it: today had been tough. She’d already promised to arrange some play dates with Alice over the summer holidays, although Finn rolled his eyes at her use of the words *play date*. But there was no denying that the clock was counting down on their time in Mistlethorpe. They might come back to visit but it wouldn’t be quite the same. ‘I know,’ she said quietly. ‘But Dad will be here to collect you soon. Being back in Milton Keynes will take your mind off saying goodbye.’

Thankfully, Stuart’s arrival did seem to have the desired effect. As usual, both boys went into excitement overdrive when his car pulled up outside the farmhouse and it took Daisy several minutes to calm them enough to gather their bags and last-minute essentials. Once outside, she nodded coolly at Stuart, reminded that things were still strained following their argument a few weeks earlier. ‘Hello,’ she said. ‘How was the journey?’

‘Not bad,’ he said, stretching his back. ‘I’ll be glad when I don’t have to do it anymore.’

‘Mmmm,’ Daisy said noncommittally. ‘I’ll pick them up in a couple of weeks. Don’t let Finn buy that horrible, overpriced drink he’s obsessed with. I’m sure it’s got something bad in it.’

Stuart laughed. 'Noted. Anything else I need to know?'

She lowered her voice. 'Campbell is a bit upset about leaving his classmates here. They both are but Cam might need a few extra cuddles tonight.'

'Of course,' he replied. 'It's hard on them, all this moving around. Things will get easier once they're settled in one place.'

It was probably true but Daisy still felt a pang. 'Don't let them stay up too late.'

'I won't.'

The twins appeared in the doorway of the farmhouse, bags in hand. 'Dad!' Finn bellowed, racing across the gravel. 'Can I get some football cards? The new season is out now.'

'We'll see.' Stuart ruffled his hair, then reached across to pat Campbell on the shoulder. 'Cheer up, mate. It might never happen.'

Campbell didn't reply. Instead, he slung his bag into the boot and slid into the back seat of the car. Stuart's gaze met Daisy's. 'Extra extra hugs, I think.'

She nodded. 'Let me know how they're doing,' she said. 'I don't have any plans this weekend.'

Apart from a possible night of passion with Drew, she added silently, but Stuart definitely didn't need to know about that. She waved them off, feeling the usual stab of loss as the car vanished from view. She still hadn't decided whether she would give in to Drew's demand; on one hand, it would be a good distraction from missing the twins but his words from that afternoon pressed heavily on her mind and she couldn't shake the certainty she was already in too deep. What had started as fun was now in danger of careering into a mess as she prepared to leave Mistlethorpe. And as she'd said all along, the last thing she needed was complications.

In the end, she took the line of least resistance and drove to Drew's cottage. Part of her reasoning was purely selfish – the farmhouse felt too empty and two weeks seemed like an eternity, even though she knew she'd be pulling her hair out within an hour of Finn and Campbell's return. She wanted to be distracted from missing them, not moping from room to room, and Drew was undoubtedly very good at distracting her. Besides, there wouldn't be many more opportunities like this – once the twins were back, Daisy would be caught up in the whirl of packing. There would be no nights with Drew then. She would just have to make sure he understood that this was all she could give him, reinforce that she fully intended to leave at the end of August and no amount of persuasion would make her change her mind.

But it seemed Drew had picked up on her reticence that afternoon. During the course of the evening, he didn't raise the spectre of her leaving and focused instead on making her laugh. And later, when they went to bed, he did what he did best, so that she fell asleep spent. In the morning, he made her a late breakfast and made no argument when she said she needed to leave. 'Come back soon,' he whispered as he kissed her goodbye. 'I'm missing you already.'

Sunday was Emily's day off. Daisy spent the day with Rose, taking her out for lunch in Mistlethorpe and watching for any signs of mental deterioration. She'd asked the whereabouts of the key to the shed, had observed Rose's bewildered expression as she tried to think of its location. 'But I don't remember having a key to that shed,' she said, her brow crinkled. 'It's always been left unlocked.'

'Drew said there's a key,' Daisy said and Rose's frown had deepened.

'I suppose if Drew says there's one then there must be,' she allowed. 'But I don't know where it is.'

In the evening, Daisy joined Rose in the living room, half watching a quiz while her mother knitted. The two bundles of letters were on the coffee table. Daisy was scouring them for any clue to the identity of Gerry, even though she knew she wouldn't find one. After a short while, Rose lowered her knitting and fixed Daisy with an impassive stare. 'Are those Violet's letters?'

'Some of them,' Daisy replied. 'The rest belonged to Valentine.'

She watched her mother from under her lashes, gauging her reaction. Sure enough, Rose stiffened. 'Where did you get those? The ones to him.'

Daisy took a breath. 'From Kit Devereaux. He asked his brother, Hugh, for them.'

Rose's nostrils flared. 'You're on first name terms with them now, are you? Your grandparents will be rolling in their graves.'

Weary after a long day, Daisy felt her temper slip a little. 'Yes, I am, as a matter of fact. They're not monsters, or even especially terrible. I don't see the point in nursing a feud over something that happened more than seventy years ago.'

'They ruined your grandmother's life,' Rose bit back. 'And they tried to ruin mine.'

Daisy shook her head. 'That's not entirely true. I've read these letters over and over – both sides of the story – and I've come to realize that Violet made her own choices.' Rose started to argue but Daisy held up a hand. 'I'm not saying Valentine acted well but she must have known she was playing with fire. And of course I'm sorry she got burned but her life wasn't ruined. She married Grandpa, had you. I think she found happiness in the end.'

Rose glared at her. 'And what about me? What excuses are you going to make for the way that family treated me?'

'None,' Daisy said simply. 'They behaved badly, refusing to allow you into the castle that night, without a thought of how you might get home, but it wasn't Hugh's fault and it certainly had

nothing to do with Kit, who wasn't even born. Sooner or later, we have to let go of the past before it consumes us.'

Again, Rose looked ready to argue but something in what Daisy had said seemed to hit home. She deflated back into her chair, suddenly looking old. 'Some of them were monsters. But I suppose you might have a point,' she allowed grudgingly. 'You let go of the past when you came back here to look after me.'

It was the tiniest chink in her mother's bitterness but at least it was a start. 'I did,' she said steadfastly. 'And I would do exactly the same thing again. It's only when we give the past power that it can hurt us.'

Rose grunted. 'Sounds like one of those motivational posters they have in the library.'

Daisy couldn't help it. She laughed. 'Fair point,' she conceded. Her gaze came to rest on the cream envelope containing the letter from Gerry. 'Speaking of the past, there is something I wanted to ask you about.'

'Oh?' Rose said, her gaze suddenly wary once more. 'What's that?'

Unfolding the letter, Daisy held it out. 'This is a letter to Violet, from someone called Gerry. I don't really understand it, or even who he is – do you know anything about it?'

For a moment, she thought her mother would refuse to take the single sheet of paper. Seconds ticked by while she stared at it, her mouth pressed into a hard, thin line. 'Gerry,' she said at last. 'That's a name I haven't heard in a long time.'

'There's no surname, and no address,' Daisy said. 'Just that first name and some pretty confusing assertions.'

Still Rose didn't take the letter but the tension around her mouth lessened. 'I suppose it was inevitable,' she said, shaking her head. 'You'd better let me see it.'

Slowly, she unfolded the paper and gazed down at the words. More seconds ticked by, stretching into minutes now. Eventually, Rose sighed and lowered the letter to her lap. 'What do you want to know?' she asked Daisy, her voice curiously leaden.

Daisy frowned. 'Who Gerry is, for a start. And what Grandma was accusing him of. I can't imagine it was anything too terrible, since nothing ever came of it.'

Her mother let out a low, mirthless laugh. 'Not nothing,' she said in a flat tone. 'Just me.'

Daisy felt the world flip upside down. She stared at Rose, certain she'd misheard. 'What?'

'I said, just me,' Rose repeated. 'I was what came of my mother's relationship with Gerry. Although relationship is too generous, as far as I can tell – it was just one night. Probably not even that.'

The air in the room seemed to have turned to treacle, thick and heavy. Daisy struggled to breathe. 'But Grandpa – they got married that December.'

Rose nodded. 'He knew, of course. She was scared witless, didn't know where to turn. He found her crying in one of the barns, made her tell him everything. The next thing she knew he'd proposed. Said it didn't matter that she didn't love him, he'd take care of her and the baby no matter what.'

And at last, everything fell into place. 'Oh,' Daisy murmured. Tears sprang into her eyes as she thought of the kind and gentle man who had been her grandfather, even more of a gentleman than she'd ever known. 'Oh.'

'She'd have been ruined otherwise,' Rose went on, matter of fact. 'Unmarried mothers went into a home, their babies were taken away. We didn't always see eye to eye, me and him, but I always loved him for that.'

Daisy almost didn't hear – she was too busy revisiting her childhood memories, seeing them through the filter of this new understanding. 'And she loved him,' she said, after a moment. 'Violet, I mean. I saw them with each other – they always seemed so very in love.'

'They were,' Rose acknowledged. 'It might have been a marriage of convenience at first but they were true soulmates. And he never made me feel like I wasn't his.'

'No,' Daisy said, as a memory of Peter Moon presenting her with her first bike floated across her mind, followed by another of him bathing her knee when she'd fallen off. A tear squeezed its way out of the corner of her eye. 'Me either.'

Rose sighed. 'I think he blamed Valentine more than Gerry. He thought Valentine led her on, made promises he couldn't keep and broke her heart, made her vulnerable. So when Gerry appeared the following summer, hops weren't all he picked.'

In the midst of all the revelations, this was the one that gave Daisy a sharp needle of anger. 'He didn't own up, though. He denied you were his, threatened to tell everyone Violet was pregnant.'

'Turned out that was a blessing in disguise,' her mother said in a practical tone. 'It took me a long time to see it but eventually I realized what kind of man he was. Around the same time that I came to see your grandfather for the man he was too.'

It was almost too much for Daisy to take in. The man she'd always known as her grandfather wasn't her blood relative, and yet somehow that made him more her grandfather than ever. But having the final piece of the puzzle only raised another ghost from the past. She gazed at her mother. 'So what made you do the same to me?' she asked quietly. 'Why did you let me grow up without a father?'

Rose met her eyes without flinching. 'Because I was a fool and went looking for love with someone who didn't deserve it,' she

said. 'When I realised I was in trouble, I told him what had happened, and just like Gerry, he didn't want to know. So I came back here and confessed everything to the one man I knew I could trust. And he told me I didn't have to worry – that he would be father and grandfather to you, for as long as I needed him to be.'

The dam broke. The tears that had been stinging the back of Daisy's eyes coursed down her cheeks as she realized the true marvel Peter Moon had been. She wished she'd known the truth but at the same time, she was glad she hadn't. Being protected had allowed her to love him exactly as she should. The fact that they didn't share the same blood didn't matter at all.

When Daisy's tears slowed, she saw her mother's cheeks were wet too. Pushing past the table, she knelt at Rose's side. 'Thank you for telling me.'

Rose pursed her lips, then let out a long, shuddering sigh. 'It's about time. I might have done it years ago but Vince always said I shouldn't.' She shook her head. 'It was the biggest mistake of my life, listening to him. I'm sorry, Daisy. You deserved to know the truth long ago.'

Daisy glanced at the letters, laid out on the table, and wondered how her younger self would have reacted. 'I think I found out when I was supposed to.'

'Maybe,' Rose said, blinking as though she might cry again. 'But I'm glad you know now. I've been carrying this secret a long time.'

Daisy wrapped her arms around her mother's shoulders. 'You don't have to carry it anymore, Mum,' she said, her own eyes growing damp. 'Like everything else that went before, it's time to let it go.'

Chapter Six

In the immediate aftermath, Daisy wasn't sure why she thought of Kit first. It should have been Nancy she went to – she was convinced her friend had guessed the truth already – or even Drew, but for reasons she only partly understood, Winterbourne was where she longed to be. She wanted to sit under the tree Violet had loved and sift through everything she'd discovered during her tumultuous conversation with her mother. But perhaps it wasn't so very strange that she felt drawn to the walled garden, since that was where it had all started. Perhaps that was why she trusted Kit with the whole story, that Monday afternoon, as they nursed mugs of hot chocolate under overcast skies. He'd been the one who'd revealed the carved initials in the trunk of the tree, setting Daisy on this journey, and Valentine was his grandfather. She thought he had a right to know how the ripples of that doomed love affair had affected so many lives.

'Wow,' he said, when Daisy finally drew to the end. 'Wow.'

'I know,' she said, taking a long sip of her drink. 'I had no idea when I found those letters that I'd end up unravelling the fabric of my own family.'

'But you didn't. What you found was that the fabric had been stitched differently than you expected. In a way that made it stronger and more likely to endure.' He gave her a pensive look. 'I wish I could say the same about my lot. We've been coming apart at the seams for a long time.'

'I'm sure that's not true,' she objected, although she knew exactly what he meant. 'You've got centuries of tradition holding you together.'

Kit snorted. ‘But no actual love. Your grandmother was lucky – she got over my grandfather and found a happiness she would never have had with him. Whereas he chose his title and all this—’ He waved an encompassing hand. ‘And he never got over losing the love of his life. Then there’s me, determined to marry for love, except I had no idea what a healthy relationship looked like and ended up marrying a woman who only wanted my title.’

Daisy frowned. ‘But you don’t have a title.’

‘She didn’t know that when she married me,’ Kit said, shrugging. ‘Back then, Hugh and his wife were struggling to conceive. It seemed quite likely they couldn’t have children and Araminta quite naturally assumed everything would come to me. When she realized it wouldn’t...’

Daisy’s mouth dropped a little. ‘She left you,’ she finished indignantly.

‘She left me,’ Kit echoed. ‘But worse than that, she left Alice. I took her back a few times, hoping she’d see how much Alice needed her, but it was never enough. *We* were never enough. And now Hugh has Cressida and the baby, so I still have nothing to offer.’ He managed a bleak smile. ‘It’s Alice I feel worst for. She didn’t do anything wrong.’

Daisy placed a hand on his arm. ‘Nor did you. Except for marrying the wrong person but that happens all the time.’

That elicited a reluctant smile. ‘Is that what you did?’

She conjured up a mental picture of Stuart, who had been everything she wanted and needed for years, and who was as devoted to the twins as he’d ever been. ‘No, I married the right person,’ she said. ‘He just wasn’t forever.’

‘Ah,’ Kit said, and hesitated, as though unsure whether to go on. ‘And Drew? Is he someone you want to spend forever with?’

Daisy glanced at him, remembering his vehement, eloquently expressed dislike. What was the story there? she wondered, not for

the first time. There had to be more to it than a childhood friendship that hadn't lasted. 'Drew is...' she trailed off, trying to marshal her thoughts.

'An absolute cad?' Kit put in, then lifted his hands in surrender. 'Sorry. I know it's none of my business. Go on. Drew is...'

Excellent in bed, Daisy wanted to say but felt that was probably more information than Kit needed. 'He's what I needed in the short term.' She stopped and considered the words again. 'Or what I thought I needed.'

He was watching her carefully. 'But now you're not so sure?'

Daisy puffed out her cheeks. 'I don't know.' She glanced at Kit, wondering how much she could trust him. 'He wants more than I can give. More than I'm ready to give, maybe.'

Kit sipped his hot chocolate in silence. 'That doesn't sound like a forever match.'

Which was easy for him to say, she thought with a flurry of irritation, given he didn't like Drew. 'What about you?' she challenged. 'Have you thought about giving love a second chance? And don't tell me you're in love with your plane or something lame like that.'

He laughed and she found herself noticing the way his face lit up when he was happy. 'No, I'm not in love with my plane,' he said, throwing her an amused look. 'I suppose I'm just waiting for the right person. One who understands about Alice and accepts we come as a package.'

Her heart ached a little for him, and the scars that clearly still pulled. He was a dedicated father who put his daughter first, as well as a talented pilot and successful businessman who lived in a *bona fide* castle, albeit one he didn't actually own. There would be a queue of women eagerly waiting if he ever joined a dating app. And yet it seemed he couldn't see his own worth. Araminta had a

lot to answer for, Daisy thought darkly. ‘For what it’s worth, I think you’re a catch,’ she said stoutly. ‘Even without a title.’

‘Thanks,’ he said, his smile widening as he dissected the compliment. ‘I think.’

She raised her mug to his. ‘Here’s to finding our forever person.’

Kit chinked his cup against hers. ‘And recognizing them when we do.’

The two weeks passed more quickly than Daisy would have thought possible. She spent several nights with Drew, who seemed to have realized he’d come on too strong and had reverted to his previous carefree self, allowing Daisy to pretend she wasn’t hurtling towards a painful break up. She visited Winterbourne too, and managed to find the peacock mosaic Violet had written about creating from shells in one of her letters to Valentine. One day Daisy hoped she would show her mother the mosaic, and let her breathe in the heady scent of the roses Violet had planted – the blooms she had loved so much that she’d named her only child for them – but for now she enjoyed these small pleasures on her own.

She was washing up in the farmhouse kitchen on Thursday morning when a pair of arms encircled her waist and a voice whispered ‘Boo!’ in her ear. Yelping, she spun around, finding herself face to face with Drew. He kissed her, a long and thorough effort that left her leaning against the sink, rather weak at the knees. ‘Don’t do that in here,’ she said, although the words lacked any actual rigour.

‘Why not?’ he said, leaning in to kiss her again.

This time, she wriggled away. ‘Because my mother might walk in at any moment.’

‘Let her,’ he said, shrugging. ‘She’ll be happy. Rose loves me.’

Daisy couldn't argue with that. 'How did you get in here?' she asked, with a sudden frown.

'The door was open,' he replied. 'I saw my gorgeous girlfriend standing at the sink and couldn't keep my hands off her. There's nothing wrong with that, is there?'

Except that she wasn't his girlfriend, Daisy thought with a little nigger of annoyance. 'Please don't do it again,' she said, and now her tone was much more forbidding.

He sighed. 'But I want people to know about us. Can't we at least tell your mother?'

'Tell me what?' Rose asked from the doorway. She looked from Daisy to Drew. 'Well?'

Daisy opened her mouth to speak but Drew got there first. 'I'm in love with your daughter, Rose. And she's in love with me, although she's not ready to admit it yet.'

'Drew!' Daisy stared at him in consternation.

'Oh, I knew it!' Rose clapped her hands with joy. 'I knew he'd win you over in the end.'

'He hasn't,' Daisy said, glaring at Drew.

'She's not ready,' he said confidently to Rose. 'But one day soon she'll realize the truth.'

Daisy's simmering temper began to boil. 'I won't.'

Rose rolled her eyes. 'Stubborn. Just like her grandmother.'

'Mum!' Daisy exclaimed. 'Please stop this. Drew is not my boyfriend. We're not—this isn't—' She broke off helplessly because it was clear Rose was only prepared to hear what she wanted to hear. 'Drew, I think you'd better leave.'

He didn't argue but, to her fury, he winked at Rose on the way out. Daisy ground her teeth and turned back to the sink.

‘He’ll win you over in the end,’ Rose repeated knowingly. ‘You’re wasting your time fighting it.’

‘Not when I’m going back to Milton Keynes in a month,’ Daisy said, her tone more clipped than she intended.

She heard Rose sniff. ‘A bit of distance never hurt anyone. If you want to make it work, you will.’

‘And what if I don’t want to make it work?’

‘You will,’ Rose said confidently. ‘Just wait and see.’

It was all Daisy could do not to slam the last plate back into the soap suds. Instead she carefully rinsed it, placed it on the draining board and dried her hands on a tea towel. ‘I’m going to the café,’ she said, striving to keep her voice light and even. ‘See you later.’

She’d been hoping Nancy would be there, ready to lend a sympathetic ear, but her friend had gone to the wholesaler. Daisy ordered a tall latte and a Chelsea bun. When she tried to pay, the card machine merely beeped. ‘Been having trouble with this all day,’ the girl behind the counter said, her cheeks growing pink. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve got cash, have you?’

Daisy nodded and rummaged in her purse for the twenty pound note she’d tucked inside yesterday. It wasn’t there. Frowning, she dug deeper, then scoured the inside of her handbag. The money was nowhere to be seen. ‘I’ve done that,’ the girl said sympathetically. ‘Gone to pay for something and the note has slipped out of my pocket somewhere. Annoying, isn’t it?’

‘Mmmm,’ Daisy said distractedly. Her purse had been zipped closed – surely the money couldn’t have slipped out.

‘You can pop in and pay later if you like,’ the girl said. ‘Nancy won’t mind – she knows where you live, after all.’

‘Thank you,’ Daisy said. ‘I was sure I had some cash. Never mind.’

She retraced her tracks, keeping her eyes on the ground in case the money had fallen out en route but there was no sign of it. Irritated, Daisy took her coffee up to her room, preferring that to risking another run in with her mother. Drew's behaviour had set her teeth on edge – more than that, had made her angry – and Rose had done nothing to help. But the scene had made Daisy realize she needed to have a serious chat with Drew, and soon. There could be no more nights spent at his cottage, not when he trampled roughshod over her wishes and ignored her protestations. It was time to do what she really should have done weeks ago and end things. She would do it the next day, before she went to collect the twins from Stuart.

By the time Daisy went downstairs again, her bad temper had cooled. She found Emily in the living room looking puzzled. 'Emily? Is everything okay?'

'I suppose so,' the carer said, and let out a shaky laugh. 'I lost my purse for a while but it's turned up.'

Daisy frowned. 'That's odd. Did you put it down somewhere and forget?'

'No,' Emily said, then shook her head. 'It doesn't matter. I expect it was my mistake.'

Daisy felt her frown deepen, sensing there was more to it than the carer was letting on. Emily was usually very sensible and well organized. She always knew where everything was, including Finn's shin pads, which got lost every other day. 'Where did you find it?'

Emily didn't meet her gaze. 'In your mother's knitting bag.'

It was the last thing she'd been expecting to hear. Under the sofa, perhaps, if Atticus had mistaken it for something he could kill, or snagged down the side of a chair. But in Rose's knitting bag was a bit of a head scratcher. It was possible it might have fallen there but Daisy had to admit it seemed unlikely. 'How did it get there?'

‘I don’t know,’ Emily said unhappily. ‘It was under all the wool. And there’s something else – I’m sure I had a couple of twenty-pound notes in there but it’s empty now.’

And now Daisy felt something else settle in the pit of her stomach. It couldn’t be a coincidence that she’d also lost money from her purse, could it? But why would Rose steal from them? She had plenty of money of her own. ‘I’m so sorry, Emily. I’ll replace the missing cash.’ Daisy held up a hand as the carer tried to object. ‘No, I insist. I’ve been meaning to talk to you for a while about Mum but this has brought it to a head.’ Taking a deep breath, she sought the right phrasing. She didn’t want to use the D word. Not yet. ‘I’ve noticed she’s said a few odd things recently, maybe even done some strange things. Do you think there’s a chance she might have – that there could be something wrong with her?’

Emily looked wretched. ‘Not before today,’ she said. ‘But stealing is so out of character. It might be a sign that there’s something we don’t know about.’

‘I think so too,’ Daisy replied. ‘Perhaps it’s time for a visit to the GP.’

The theft of the money niggled at Daisy all afternoon. It was so very strange for Rose to suddenly start helping herself – she couldn’t understand what had prompted it. Hearing Rose in the living room, Daisy decided to see if she could catch her out. ‘Mum, we’re out of milk. Have you got any cash so I can nip to the shops?’

She held her breath, watching her mother’s face closely. It wasn’t something she’d ever asked before, so a moment of confusion would be understandable but that wasn’t what Daisy was interested in. She was alert for a sly flash of guilt. But Rose simply nodded. ‘Of course,’ she said, digging into her battered leather handbag. ‘Is ten pounds enough?’

Daisy peered beyond her mother's fingers, trying to see whether a sheaf of notes nestled in the purse, but she couldn't see clearly. Then Rose frowned and looked up, embarrassed. 'Oh, it seems I don't have any money after all. How strange.'

She held up the purse, giving Daisy a bird's eye view of the red-lined pockets, both of which were empty. 'Did you have some earlier?' Daisy asked, taken aback.

Rose offered a helpless shrug. 'I thought I did. Perhaps I spent it, although I'm not sure where.'

She looked so distraught that Daisy wanted to comfort her. There had been no disingenuity in her expression when she'd opened the purse, no guilt when Daisy had first asked. No sign of anything other than a willingness to help. 'Not to worry, I'll pay by card. Honestly, it's fine.'

She walked into the kitchen as though in a trance. One lot of missing money might be carelessness – three was looking like something else entirely, assuming Rose wasn't simply mistaken. But when had the money been taken? And, more importantly, how? Only three people had been in the house – Daisy, Emily and Rose – and all of them had lost money, albeit relatively small amounts. She'd heard tales of magpies flying in through open windows to steal jewellery but never the kind of money that folded. And Atticus was wily and determined in pursuit of his prey but Daisy doubted he had learned how to open zips or undo a press stud. No, unless they were all mistaken in their belief that they'd lost money, there was only one explanation. Someone else had been in the house.

And then it hit her – the memory of Drew sneaking up behind her that morning. He'd said the door was open – could someone have crept in and rifled through their purses while they were talking in the kitchen? But the farmhouse was hardly on the beaten track. The thief would be taking an enormous risk – if they were caught, they'd need a plausible reason for being there. Her

thoughts coalesced. Someone who could reasonably claim they were there to see a member of the family, or trimming the apple trees, or looking for the key to a shed. Daisy's stomach flipped. Someone like Drew.

She sat down heavily at the kitchen table, scarcely able to believe what she was thinking. A bee buzzed through the open window and she absently waved it back out, her mind whirring. Surely there must be another solution, some other way to explain the missing money. But she knew, even as she considered and dismissed the possibilities again, that Drew was the only answer that made sense. What if he hadn't been rifling through the drawer in search of the key at all, but in search of money? The lie had come fast and easily to him, if so; she'd had no idea he wasn't telling the truth. And doubting his honesty now made Daisy wonder about the times her mother had told her Drew was organizing some work on the house – the windows or the roof. She'd assumed Rose was confused but what if that wasn't the case at all? What if Drew had been taking money from her for work that didn't need to be done?

It was a wild accusation and one Daisy wasn't about to make without proof. But she had no idea how to get it, short of laying a trap for him, and she didn't know how to go about that either. If this was a detective novel, she would have a clever plan that enlisted the help of her trusted associates but she didn't want to share her suspicions with Rose or Emily yet. She wanted to be sure. And she thought she knew someone who could help.

Kit answered immediately. 'Hello, Daisy. Everything okay?'

The enquiry wasn't a surprise – she didn't think she'd ever called him before. 'There's something I need to ask you,' she said, aware her voice sounded tight. 'Have you got a minute?'

'Sure, hold on.' There was a muffled mumbling, a random series of bumps and clicks that suggested he was moving, and then he was back. 'Okay, I'm outside. What's up?'

She took a long breath in and let it out slowly. ‘You once told me Drew wasn’t the person I thought he was. What made you say that?’

There was a short silence, during which she pictured him gaping in surprise. ‘Why are you asking? Has something happened?’

‘I’d rather not say right now,’ she replied. ‘Can you tell me why you don’t like him?’

She heard his tone stiffen. ‘What’s going on, Daisy? If he’s hurt you then—’

‘He hasn’t hurt me,’ she cut in reassuringly. ‘I just – well, I have a suspicion. Something I can’t prove and I wondered if your reason for warning me off him was connected, that’s all.’

Another silence. ‘I see,’ Kit said eventually, and she got the impression he was wrestling with a dilemma. ‘But unless Drew has had an affair with your wife, I don’t see how it can be.’

The phone almost slipped from Daisy’s fingers. She fumbled to catch it, somehow managed to turn it upside down, and then swore as Kit’s words replayed in her head. So *that* was the reason they were no longer friends. She let out a low groan. ‘Bloody hell, Kit. I wish you’d told me.’

‘I tried. That morning outside the school. You told me it was none of my business.’

She had, Daisy remembered as hot and cold shivers chased each other down her spine. She’d been positively rude. Because Drew had laid the groundwork, telling her Kit had come back from the RAF with PTSD, that his wife had left him because of his erratic moods. And instead of comparing the story to what she knew of Kit, she’d taken Drew’s explanation at face value. Then again, she’d had no reason to think he might be lying. Until now. ‘I did,’ she said into the telephone, the words little more than a moan.

‘I’m so sorry, Kit. That was unforgivable, especially given you were trying to protect me.’

He grunted. ‘Never mind that now, tell me what he’s done. Do I need to pull one of my great-grandfather’s rapiers off the wall and come round there?’

That image at least made her smile. ‘No, it’s nothing like that.’ She puffed out her cheeks and lowered her voice. ‘I think he’s been stealing from us. It sounds like Mum has been giving him money for bogus repairs and I caught him going through some drawers the other week, although he explained it away convincingly enough. But I’m starting to suspect he has a key to the house and I’m wondering how many times in the past he’s let himself in.’

The silence stretched even longer this time and Daisy didn’t like to imagine Kit’s stony expression. ‘Those are criminal offences. Do you want to involve the police?’

‘No!’ Daisy said instantly. ‘Like I said, I don’t have any proof. And the boys will be home tomorrow – I don’t want their last few weeks in Mistlethorpe ruined by this.’

‘Okay,’ Kit said. ‘I’ll have a think. Just don’t confront him, whatever you do. I know from experience that he’s a nasty piece of work when he’s cornered. Try to keep out of his way, if you can. And double lock the doors.’

‘I will,’ she said, feeling shaky at the thought of Drew turning on her. He’d never shown the slightest sign of a brutish temperament but she was starting to realize she didn’t know much about the real Drew at all. ‘And thank you for telling me about Araminta. I’m sorry to drag up more unhappy memories.’

‘It just reminds me how much better off I am without her,’ he replied. ‘Call me if you need me, okay?’

‘Okay,’ she said, and hung up.

On autopilot, she got up and switched the kettle on. She couldn’t remember when she last ate or drank anything – the latte

she'd got from the café, she supposed, which felt like days ago now. Without thinking, she started to lay the tea tray but she was distracted by the ping of a message – Stuart, reminding her to bring some trainers for Finn. She put her phone down on the worktop without replying. Another bee, or perhaps the same one, buzzed around the open window. 'Shoo,' she said in exasperation, stepping forward to wave it out again. 'I don't need you in here, I'm trying to think.'

Then a movement caught her eye. She looked up to see Drew standing outside. 'Hello, Daisy,' he said, smiling the same smile that used to make her stomach flip with desire but now only filled her with trepidation. 'I think we need to talk.'

Chapter Seven

Forcing herself to breathe, Daisy tried to look unconcerned. She raised her chin and met his gaze with cool indifference. ‘So it seems,’ she said, stretching out a hand towards her phone, beside the tea tray and, she hoped, just out of Drew’s line of sight. ‘How long exactly have you been stealing from my mother?’

He ran a hand through his hair. ‘I haven’t. Look, I can explain everything.’

Daisy’s gaze slid carefully sideways as she pressed her fingerprint onto the screen of her phone. Slowly, without appearing to take her attention from Drew, she navigated to the list of recent calls and pressed redial. The screen lit up with a green icon – *Calling Kit...* ‘It’s too late for that,’ she said, praying Kit would answer but not wanting to watch the screen in case Drew guessed what she was doing. ‘Don’t treat me like an idiot. How long have you been stealing from this house?’

He studied her narrowly, as though trying to gauge her conviction, then shrugged. ‘A few years. Since your father died.’

‘He wasn’t my father,’ she snapped, causing Drew to raise his eyebrows.

‘Okay, since your *stepfather* died,’ he corrected. ‘I knew better than to try and con him. As a matter of fact, he was the one who gave me the idea – he had his feet nicely under the table here, didn’t want for much.’ He smiled and she felt a sudden crawl of revulsion that she’d ever allowed his hands to touch her. ‘Once he was gone, it was easy. But I only took what I needed – for food and to pay my bills. You have to believe me, Daisy, I’m not proud of myself. But I can change – with your help, I can change.’

She stared at him. ‘What do you mean, with my help? Why would I help you?’

He fixed her with a beseeching look. ‘Because I love you. And I think you love me.’

Daisy wanted to laugh. ‘Don’t give me that rubbish. If you loved me, you wouldn’t steal from me.’

‘I didn’t,’ he insisted. ‘Not at first, anyway.’

Now she did laugh, a harsh incredulous bark that hurt her throat. ‘Don’t waste your time, Drew. I don’t actually care why you took the money. I’m just sickened that you preyed on an old woman.’

He stared at her wide-eyed, as though determined to make her see sense. ‘I do love you, Daisy, even if you don’t believe me.’

He looked so convincing, so much like the man she’d thought he was, that for a moment Daisy wavered. Then she shook the glamour away. ‘I don’t think you even know what the word means. But I’m curious, what was your plan – to bleed my mother dry and then move onto the next victim?’

There was a wounded silence. ‘How can you say that? I’m not heartless.’

Daisy merely waited, her face cold and implacable. Finally, Drew sighed. ‘Okay, I admit there was a plan but it isn’t what you think.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I did it for the farm. When Vince died it started falling down around Rose’s ears. I thought if I moved in, I could repair it. But I couldn’t move into Half Moon Farm with Rose – too many alarm bells would have rung. And then you came and all my prayers were answered.’

Daisy gawped at him. ‘I’m sorry – what? You did it for the *farm*?’

‘And for you, Daisy. It would have been so easy and I knew we’d be happy.’

It was all too much for Daisy. ‘But—’ She shook her head, realizing he was weaving another spell around her. ‘I don’t believe you. Or maybe I believe half of it. You wanted the farm, the life my stepfather lived, but not me. I was just a bonus.’

Drew studied her, then seemed to realize she was not going to be fooled. ‘You were the perfect cover. Like I said, I couldn’t move in with Rose, but you? No one would have questioned it if we’d fallen in love and decided to live together.’

The admission was so revolting that Daisy thought she might be sick. ‘But why? You’ve got your own cottage, a decent business with the mistletoe and the brewery.’

He shook his head, still faintly sorrowful. ‘The business barely earns enough to cover my rent at the cottage and don’t even get me started about that loser, Nigel.’ His eyes narrowed. ‘By the time I’ve paid everything, I don’t have enough to buy food. I knew Rose had far more money than she needed, so I decided we could help each other – a bit like the mistletoe and the apple trees – symbiosis in action. I did some odd jobs around the farm and she paid me.’

‘Except that you didn’t actually fix anything,’ Daisy pointed out in a scathing voice. ‘The roof was falling in when I arrived.’

Drew threw her an injured look. ‘I was going to get that done. But everything changed when you turned up – all of a sudden I needed money for dinner and wine. It seemed like a worthwhile risk to cream a bit more cash. I wanted to impress you.’

Daisy’s lip curled. ‘So you could get the ultimate prize – Half Moon Farm.’

‘Not just the farm,’ he said, shaking his head with an earnestness she didn’t buy for a second. ‘You as well. I wasn’t faking all that passion, Daisy. I wanted you the moment I saw you, suddenly the farm wasn’t enough.’ He pursed his lips as though deep in thought. ‘The kids I could have done without but I figured I could put up with them.’

It was the first honest thing Daisy thought he'd said and it filled her with a white-hot rage. 'It's a good thing you screwed up, isn't it? You didn't get the prize – not the farm, not the money and most definitely not me and my sons. So this is what's going to happen next. You're going to leave this place. Leave Mistlethorpe, in fact.'

'Says who?' He sneered, as the last veneer of pretence dropped away like a discarded costume and revealed who he truly was. 'Like you said, you've got no proof. It's your word against mine.'

Adopting what she hoped was an expression of supreme confidence, she waved a hand at her phone. 'That's where you're wrong. I called Kit back when I saw you outside the window. He's heard every word of your confession.'

'You're lying,' he said but she saw from his nervous glance that he was worried.

'I'm not,' she replied, hoping against hope that Kit had picked up her call. 'And I think the testimony of a Devereaux would carry a lot more weight, don't you? If you don't leave Mistlethorpe today and never come back, we'll go straight to the police and tell them everything.'

He shook his head. 'You're lying,' he said again, and this time there was a snarl beneath the words.

'I'm really not,' she said, and crossed her fingers as hard as she could. 'Am I, Kit?'

For a nano-second nothing happened. And then Kit's voice, tinny but unmistakable, sounded from the handset. 'Sorry to disappoint you, Drew, but Daisy is correct. You'd better do as she says.'

'Oh, please,' Drew said, rolling his eyes. 'What are you going to do, posh boy? Give me a stern talking to?'

'I think we'll leave that to the police,' Daisy said, digging her fingers into the worktop to hide her relief. 'Go away now, Drew. I

never want to see you again.'

His scowl contorted into an ugly mask. He stepped forward, raising a clenched fist, and Daisy honestly had no idea what he might have done if Atticus had not chosen that moment to leap at the window ledge and launch himself, hissing and growling, at Drew's head. There was a furious slash of ginger paws, a screech of pain and suddenly Drew was backing away, swiping at the cat in an effort to pull it from his face. Atticus increased his frenzy, yowling like a banshee and digging in with his claws. Daisy saw blood trickle down the side of Drew's face. 'Atticus, leave!'

The cat hissed his disagreement but Daisy, fearful that he might get hurt, steeled her voice. 'Atticus, STOP!' When he showed no sign of obeying, she gazed wildly around the kitchen for something else to tempt him. Her eyes came to rest on an open packet of *Fishy Delishy* and she snatched it up, tipped the treats into her palm and waved the packet so it crackled. The effect was instant. Atticus sheathed his claws and bounced off Drew's head, landing neatly on the ground and prowling towards the window. Leaping lightly up, he bent to delicately swipe one of the treats from her outstretched palm.

'That cat's a menace,' Drew roared, dabbing his wounds with his fingers.

'Luckily, he's not your problem, Drew,' Daisy called, as her hands started to shake. 'Now get off my land before I call the police.'

Kit didn't want her to drive alone to Milton Keynes the next day but Daisy insisted she was fine. 'It'll do me good to get out of the village,' she replied. 'And perhaps by the time I get back, Drew will have cleared out too.'

Although there was a decent chance he'd gone already. Kit and Athers had visited his cottage and reported that no one seemed to be home. Kit himself had stayed the night at Half Moon Farm,

much to Rose's barely hidden disgust. But by bedtime, he'd managed to charm her, if only a little. Daisy was sure she'd almost seen her mother smile at one point.

She'd rung Stuart from the car on the way up, preferring to explain what had happened without the told-you-so look in his eyes. He hadn't said much, beyond reassuring himself she was unhurt, but had met her on the drive of his house and pulled her into an enormous hug the moment she'd got out of the car. She'd nearly cried then but the sight of Finn and Campbell in the doorway encouraged her to hold things together. And now she was leaning against the counter in Stuart's kitchen, her fingers wrapped around a mug of tea as she tried to avoid meeting his gaze.

'I can't believe you got fooled by a confidence trickster,' Stuart said, shaking his head in wonder. 'You've always been so smart about that kind of thing.'

It wasn't anything Daisy hadn't berated herself for a thousand times. She sighed. 'I know. But everyone seemed to like him – Nancy said he was a good guy, if a bit commitment shy, and Mum absolutely loved him. Only Kit had a bad word to say about him, which makes sense once you know what Drew did with his wife.'

'Kit,' Stuart said, frowning. 'That's the earl, right?'

'No that's Hugh,' Daisy corrected. 'Kit is his brother but he lives at the castle. Campbell and Finn are friends with his daughter.'

Stuart nodded. 'That would be Alice, yes? They haven't stopped talking about her. I think they've been chatting on the PlayStation or something.'

'Sounds about right,' Daisy said, smiling.

He leaned against the opposite counter and studied her. 'So what are you going to do?'

It was the question she'd been dreading the most. 'I don't know,' she said helplessly. 'Obviously Mum can't be left on her own, not even with Emily or Magda, but I suppose I could look at getting a male carer to stay over at night. Not that I think Drew will come back but you never know.'

'He'd better not,' Stuart growled.

'Anyway,' Daisy went on, 'I think I can get away with going down there every other weekend, as long as you're okay to have the boys, and maybe with more care, Mum will be all right.'

He held up a hand. 'With respect, Daisy, that isn't going to work.'

Her heart sank. He'd always been so good at co-parenting the twins. Was he about to tell her he wasn't prepared to do that anymore? 'What do you mean?'

'You can't live like that,' he said. 'Finn and Campbell can't either. They need a full-time mum, not one who always has an eye on the traffic to Kent.'

'Then what do you suggest?' she asked, suddenly aware that tears were prickling her eyes. 'I can't just pretend Mum doesn't exist – look what happened last time I tried that.'

Stuart's eyes were calm on hers. 'Move down there,' he said as she gaped at him. 'Stay until the twins finish primary school at least, and then we can reassess.'

'But you hate being so far away from them,' she managed. 'You hate the travelling.'

He shrugged. 'I'll cope. It's more important that you're there for your mum. You lost enough years while that menace Vince was getting in between you – don't waste the time you have left now.'

Daisy stopped fighting and let the tears trickle down her cheeks. 'You'd do that for me?'

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘For you and the boys. Like I said, they need you with them, in body and in mind. Another twelve months of Friday night traffic won’t kill me.’

She put her cup on the counter and crossed the kitchen to wrap her arms around him. ‘You’re the best man I ever married.’

He rested his head on the top of hers. ‘And you’re the best woman I ever let go.’

Chapter Eight

Once the decision had been made, the realities of staying on longer in Mistlethorpe dropped into place with an entirely bearable level of grumbling from Campbell and Finn. Daisy's biggest concern had been for their school places but Kit had been helpful there – an informal conversation with the headteacher reassured Daisy that they would be welcome back for the new term. Both boys trotted happily into their classroom on the first day after the holidays, grinning at Alice and bursting to share stories of their summer adventures. Daisy herself had kept her head down, anticipating a barrage of inquisitive looks following Drew's sudden departure from the village but while some people had to know what had happened, no one seemed to be blaming her. If anything, she was on the receiving end of more nods, smiles and waves than she had been the previous term, which made her wonder whether Drew had been as far above suspicion as he'd believed. And of course Kit was there. His smile had been the most welcome of all.

September slipped by in a flurry of homework, muddy football boots and gently spiralling leaves. Daisy spent much of her time at the farm, undertaking the final adjustments to the page proofs of *The Secret Garden* and starting two new picture book projects that promised to be fun. Her agent, Phoebe, anticipated a flurry of interest in her work once the anniversary edition was published and had told Daisy in no uncertain terms to relax while she still could. 'Autumn is a sign to slow down and winter is a time to hibernate,' she advised Daisy down the phone. 'Then you emerge like a phoenix in the spring, ready for all the plaudits and wonderful jobs that are certain to be coming your way.'

It wasn't the worst advice Daisy had ever been given and she found it suited Half Moon Farm too. It had been a long time since the land had yielded much that needed to be harvested but she was aware that the apples were dropping from the trees in the orchard now that Drew wasn't there to pick them. She gave Nigel from the microbrewery permission to collect as many as he wanted but there were still too many and she didn't want to leave them for the wasps to infest, so she invited the children from Finn and Campbell's class over for an apple picking day. Emily had taken a basketful home to make into chutney and Daisy had even tried her hand at apple crumble, using a recipe of her grandmother's she'd found in an old notebook. It hadn't been bad – both Finn and Campbell had taken seconds, drowned in custard – and Daisy tried not to mind that it hadn't been a patch on Violet's. Perhaps the perfect crumble took practice.

The orchard mistletoe had caused Daisy some sleepless nights at first. For all Drew's faults, he had tended it well and she was loath to leave it to overrun, or worse, bring someone in to chop it all down. But Michaela from *Darling Buds* had stepped in, offering to take over both the management of the plants and Drew's old premises, *Merry Mistletoe*. 'There'll be a big order from the castle in December,' she told Daisy as she signed the contract and took the new set of keys. 'Drew used to say the money was a nice little stocking filler but I reckon I can do better than that.'

'Oh?' Daisy said curiously. 'Do they decorate the castle with it in December?'

'A bit,' Michaela said, 'if you know where to look. But most of the order is for the Winter Ball. It's on the first Saturday in December every year – the whole village is invited. I usually do the floral displays but this year I'll have mistletoe as well.'

'Good for you,' Daisy said, glad all over again that the lush green leaves and white berries would not be going to waste. 'I can't wait to see what you do with it.'

Stuart was as good as his word, navigating the traffic without complaint, even as the nights drew in and the weather took a turn for the miserable. Daisy had finished clearing out the room damaged by the leaking roof and had fitted it with a bed – on more than one occasion, Stuart had been obliged to stay at the farmhouse, thwarted by the vagaries of the Dartford Crossing or M25. Finn and Campbell loved it when that happened, and Daisy found she didn't mind so much cooking for him occasionally when it made their sons so happy.

At the start of November, two gilt-edged envelopes were delivered to the farmhouse. One was addressed to Mrs Rose Bickerstaff, the other to Miss Daisy Moon and Sons. Guessing what it must be, Daisy rescued her envelope from Finn's eager hands and carefully peeled it open. Just as she'd expected, it was their invitation to the Winter Ball at the castle on Saturday 2nd December. Finn wrinkled his nose when he saw it. '*Carriages at Midnight?*' he read. 'What are we, Victorians?'

Campbell gave him the dead-eyed stare he only seemed to use on his brother. 'It's fancy speak – it means cars. Taxis, minibuses...' He trailed off, clearly trying to come up with other modern forms of transport. 'Scooters. Not carriages with horses.'

Finn perked up. 'It'd be better if everyone arrived by dragon. Dad let us watch this show about them and they burned an entire city to the ground just by breathing on it.'

His brother pushed his glasses up his nose. 'And then we had to stop watching because that lady took all her clothes off.'

'Good,' Daisy said faintly. 'Why don't you take Granny her envelope? I bet she'll be excited too.'

'I bet she won't,' Campbell observed. 'She said last week that she'd rather die than set foot in Winterbourne Castle.'

Daisy took a deep breath. It was true that her mother had thawed towards Kit while he'd been acting in the role of bodyguard but her antipathy had soon resumed its natural

forcefulness. Still, a personal invitation might work wonders, she thought as she watched the twins carry the envelope to the living room. She could only hope.

‘Lucky you,’ Emily sighed when she saw Daisy’s invitation. ‘I’d almost consider moving to Mistlethorpe if it meant getting one of those. What are you going to wear?’

‘I have absolutely no idea,’ Daisy admitted as her stomach went into gloomy freefall. She’d bought a beautiful ball gown for the Summer Ball but she couldn’t possibly wear it again. ‘I’ll have to go shopping, I suppose.’

‘You don’t need to worry about what I’ll be wearing,’ Rose said, moving into the kitchen to slap her invitation onto the table. ‘I’m not going.’

There was a blob of strawberry jam from breakfast on the table. Hastily, Daisy gathered up the ornate card and reached for the kitchen roll. ‘Everyone will be there.’

‘Except me,’ Emily said mournfully.

‘There you are, then,’ Rose said with relish. ‘Another reason to stay at home. We can have a nice night in watching the telly instead.’

Poor Emily looked as though she lost a pound and found a penny, and Daisy resolved to speak to Kit. Emily spent so much time at Half Moon Farm that she practically lived there. Surely there was room for one more guest at the ball, especially if it persuaded Rose to go too? ‘I hear Elsie Wicks is going,’ she offered, changing tack slightly.

Rose sniffed. ‘Huh, she would. I bet she’ll knit a dress, show herself up as usual.’

Daisy hid a smile. Her mother’s rivalry with Elsie grew every time they attended knitting club together and she was quietly confident that Elsie’s presence at the ball could only encourage Rose to finally make her peace with the Devereaux family. ‘It’s a

month away yet,' she observed. 'See how you feel when we get a bit nearer.'

As the ball approached, Daisy began to grow even more apprehensive about what she might wear. The twins were easy – they'd been fitted for suits to attend a wedding on Stuart's side of the family in October and therefore had ready-made outfits that Daisy knew they would have grown out of by the time summer rolled around. She was glad of another opportunity to get some wear out of them. Daisy herself had nothing in her wardrobe that was remotely ball-worthy and a hopeful expedition to Canterbury had yielded nothing that was not drenched in sequins.

'Not that I have anything against sequins,' she'd confided in Nancy during their monthly cocktail night at the Green Dragon in Mistlethorpe. I just don't feel they'll suit the understated class of a Winter Ball.'

Her friend had nodded wisely. 'There is that. But aren't you going up to London for lunch with your agent next week? Can't you look for something then?'

She could, Daisy thought, and if she was really lucky, Phoebe might take pity on her and tell her where to find a hidden gem. Her agent was always immaculately dressed and never seemed to wear the same outfit twice, despite being snapped at all the most high-profile parties. 'That's a good idea,' she said to Nancy. 'What are you going to wear?'

'Head to toe sequins,' her friend said promptly. 'I don't do understated. In fact, I fully intend to upstage the glitterball.'

Daisy grinned at the image that presented. 'Nice.' She paused, remembering the Summer Ball guest list, which had been an altogether more select affair. 'Do you think Nick Borrowdale will be there this time?'

'I bloody hope so,' Nancy said. 'Michaela's going to give me my own sprig of mistletoe so I'm never knowingly unsnoggable.'

And now Daisy laughed, remembering how charming Nick had been and how lightheaded his gentle flirtation had made her feel. ‘Who are you hoping to catch under the mistletoe?’ Nancy went on, with a shameless wink. ‘A certain pilot, maybe?’

‘No one,’ Daisy said firmly. ‘I’m off men, remember?’

Nancy gave her an old-fashioned look. ‘Got to get back on the horse sometime.’

‘That’s what you said last time,’ Daisy pointed out. ‘And looked what happened there.’

Her friend had the grace to look shamefaced. ‘I didn’t know Drew was a wrong ‘un. I’d never have encouraged you if I did. But Kit is different. He really is a good man. And he’s got a castle.’

She winked again, causing Daisy to frown. ‘It’s not his castle and I wouldn’t be interested even if it was. We’re friends and that’s how I like it.’

‘Keep an open mind, that’s all I’m saying,’ Nancy suggested. ‘If you find yourself under the mistletoe with him – well, it would probably be rude not to.’

‘It’s not happening,’ Daisy said, adopting the voice she used on the twins when they begged for just five more minutes of TV before bed. ‘Now can we please change the subject? I don’t want to think about kissing Kit, or anyone else for that matter.’

Except that was a lie, she acknowledged as Nancy gave up and launched into a tale about a rude boorish customer she’d thrown out of the café that morning. Because Daisy *had* thought about kissing Kit lately – more than once, in fact, and with or without mistletoe. But she could never get past the thorny issue of who he was. True, he wasn’t the earl and never would be, but that didn’t make him ordinary. She couldn’t imagine planning the supermarket shop with him, or arguing over the recycling or taking the kids shoe shopping, although she assumed he must do that with Alice because she always had shoes, but still. They came

from different worlds and while she suspected it would be heaven to kiss him, she couldn't help wondering what would come next. They might manage a fling, in the same way their grandparents had done decades earlier. But ultimately, she was a Moon and he was a Devereaux. Exactly the same barriers faced them that had kept Violet and Valentine apart. And Daisy's heart had taken enough of a bruising from Drew. She wasn't about to subject it to another battering. Besides, she valued Kit far too much as a friend to risk messing everything up over a kiss. She didn't want to go back to dreading the school run every day.

As the week of the ball arrived, Phoebe was only too happy to take her under her wing. 'You want Gigi's, on the King's Road,' her agent declared, stepping out into Charing Cross Road to hail a black cab after their lunch together. 'They have all the best dresses. I'm thinking midnight blue taffeta, perhaps, or sequinned—'

'No sequins,' Daisy interrupted, remembering Nancy's comment about outshining the glitterball. 'Taffeta sounds okay, as long as I don't end up looking like a blueberry.'

But it was a crimson velvet dress that caught her eye, with puff sleeves and a nipped-in waist above a skirt that ballooned ever so slightly to flatter her hips. Admittedly, there were some sequins scattered on the sleeves but she thought she might get away with those. The assistant helped to fasten the buttons at the back, then stood back with Phoebe to assess the effect. 'Gorgeous,' Phoebe declared, as Daisy spun self-consciously round and risked a look in the mirrors. 'You'll steal the show.'

'It is lovely,' the assistant said. 'Would Madam require some shoes to go with the dress? I have some velvet slippers that would be a dream.'

Daisy couldn't help recalling the Summer Ball, where she'd swapped her expensive shoes for a pair of wellies. But that was unlikely to happen this time. She nodded. 'Yes, please.'

Of course the slippers were perfect, as she'd known they would be. She reviewed her reflection again, imagining this version of herself twirling through the candlelit ballroom. It was the kind of dress she would only wear once but wasn't that a small price to pay to feel like the belle of the ball? Even if she was still very much a Moon underneath. And then she took the dress off and saw the price tag.

'How much?' she gasped, feeling some of the blood drain from her face.

Phoebe waved her objections away. 'You can't put a price on the way it makes you feel,' she insisted. 'And you're making good money. I know – I see your royalty statements.'

There wasn't much Daisy could say to that: Phoebe knew exactly how much she earned and her statements were always healthy. But she'd never spent that amount of money on an item of clothing. She might buy a car for that amount – not a new one, certainly, but a fairly reliable one.

'Do you need another car?' Phoebe asked, when Daisy shared her observation.

'No.'

'Then buy the damn dress,' Phoebe said. 'Put it on eBay afterwards if you have to but wear it to the ball. I promise you won't regret it.'

Daisy returned home to find Kit's red Audi parked outside the farmhouse. Hurrying inside, she came across an incongruous scene: Rose was sitting in the living room with Kit, drinking tea and laughing at something he'd said. They both turned to gaze at her as she opened the door. 'Hello,' she said, glancing from one to the other. 'Is everything okay?'

Rose tipped her head. 'Kit here was just telling me about the guests at the Winter Ball. Do you know that nice man from the

television is going to be there? The Irish one with the dancing eyes who plays that smuggler so roguishly.'

'Is he now?' Daisy said, looking at Kit for confirmation. 'What a treat. Shame you're not going.'

Her mother leaned forwards and Daisy swore she looked suddenly ten years younger. 'That's the other thing. Kit tells me he's found a ticket for Emily but she can't go if I stay at home. So it seems very selfish of me to make her miss out.'

Daisy hid a smile. 'I see your dilemma,' she said carefully. 'I'm sure you won't want to deprive Emily. Does that mean you'll be coming?'

'I think it does, yes. Kit is going to send a driver to collect us – won't that be nice?'

'Very,' Daisy said, turning to Kit with a smile of appreciation. 'Thank you.'

Nodding in acknowledgement, he got to his feet. 'I won't take up any more of your time, Mrs Bickerstaff, but I'm very much looking forward to seeing you at the ball.'

Daisy watched in disbelief as her mother actually blushed. 'What lovely manners,' she said, one hand fluttering girlishly. 'If only I remembered how to jive.'

It was all Daisy could do not to grin. 'I'm sure you've still got it, Mum. Why don't I show you out, Kit?'

When they reached the hallway, he noticed the enormous, ribbon-tied box from Gigi's. 'You've been shopping. Is that your dress?'

She nodded. 'Yes.'

His gaze sparkled with curiosity. 'Can I see it?'

'No!'

He sighed in good-natured resignation. ‘Fine. I’ll just have to wait. Oh, the car will arrive to pick you up at seven-thirty. I hope that’s okay?’

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘And thanks for taking the trouble to visit Mum. I knew she wouldn’t be able to resist a personal invitation.’

He nodded. ‘That’s me – utterly irresistible to elderly ladies.’

‘Oh, shush,’ she said, batting his arm lightly. ‘I’ve seen you in a dinner jacket, remember? You’re utterly irresistible to everyone.’

He glanced at her. ‘I assure you I’m not,’ he said, then cleared his throat. ‘Cressida says she’s looking forward to seeing you again.’

The thought of seeing the countess pleased Daisy too. ‘Oh, how is she? How’s the baby?’

‘Both well,’ he said. ‘Cress is positively glowing and Louis is shamelessly stealing hearts across the London society scene. Hugh is hopelessly proud, so don’t expect to get any sense out of him.’

‘As he should be,’ Daisy observed, smiling at the thought. ‘I’m looking forward to seeing them all.’

Kit pulled a face. ‘Oh, and Nick Borrowdale asked me to pass on his regards most particularly. He really is the most terrible flirt.’

She threw him a guileless look. ‘I thought he was pretty good at it, actually.’

‘For goodness’ sake, don’t tell him that,’ he said, then paused. ‘So I’ll see you on Saturday.’

Daisy nodded. ‘See you on Saturday. But also in the playground tomorrow morning.’

His mouth quirked into a grin. ‘That too. See you soon, anyway.’

She watched him climb into the Audi, the very same car she'd reversed into all those months ago, and smiled to herself. The Winter Ball was promising to be a night to remember.

Chapter Nine

Daisy's expectations were high but even she was blown away by the beauty of Winterbourne Castle lit up against the black velvet sky. On the seat beside her, both Finn and Campbell were rendered mute and even Rose had nothing bad to say, although Daisy was sure she must be acutely aware of the last time she'd visited the castle, when the Devereaux family had refused to allow her inside simply because of her name. That wasn't going to happen this time, Daisy wanted to reassure her but it appeared she didn't need to, because Kit was waiting at the top of the stairs, blond hair gleaming amid the golden light. He waited until the car had stopped, then crunched down the gravel towards them and Daisy thought he'd never looked more handsome.

'Mrs Bickerstaff,' he said, helping Rose out of the seat and tucking her hand into the crook of his arm. 'Would you allow me the honour of escorting you inside?'

Rose tutted and for an excruciating moment, Daisy thought she might refuse. Then her mother spotted Elsie on the steps of the house and she drew herself up to her full height. 'Of course, Kit. Do lead on.'

Turning to glance at Emily, Daisy saw the carer's eyes were wider than dinner plates. 'Come with me,' she said, holding out her own arm. 'It's even grander on the inside.'

It seemed to Daisy that the ballroom was more brilliant than it had been in the summer. Every light glowed, augmented by candlelight that flickered and danced on the exquisite tall vases of evergreen bouquets. Vast globes of mistletoe hung suspended from the ceiling. Daisy knew the green and white had been trained around silver wire cages because she'd watched Michaela making

one but she'd had no idea how spectacular they would look once in place. It was the trio of Christmas trees in the centre of the room that really drew the eye, however, lit with tiny twinkling lights and each topped with a sparkling star. The sight made Daisy pause at the entrance of the room, and beside her, Emily gasped. But the twins were made of sterner stuff; they spotted Alice in the crowd and darted away to join her, leaving Daisy in no doubt they would be up to no good very quickly indeed. Emily spotted Rose surrounded by a group of elderly women and hurried over to her, leaving Daisy alone to survey the crowd, which seemed considerably bigger than in the summer. In one corner, she saw Nancy, resplendent in sequins, exactly as she'd promised. The café owner feigned astonishment at Daisy's dress, creating a heart with her hands across the room. 'She's not wrong,' a smooth Irish brogue cut into Daisy's thoughts. 'That is a banging dress you've got on.'

Daisy turned to find herself face to face with Nick Borrowdale. 'Thank you,' she said as he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. 'I see you've lost none of your charm.'

He offered her a sorrowful smile. 'It's a blessing and a curse. A blessing because it allows me to talk to the most beautiful woman in the room, but a curse because she won't take me seriously.'

'Oh, stop it,' she said but she was still ridiculously flattered. There were many women here who were more beautiful than her but that didn't seem to matter when she was standing with Nick. 'So how are you?'

'Pining away for the love of a good woman, but otherwise fine,' he said. 'Busy. Too busy. And how are you? Still single, I hope?'

Daisy laughed, because his relentlessness held a charm of its own. 'Still single.'

Nick shook his head. 'I swear, if Kit doesn't do the decent thing soon, I'm going to—'

‘You’re going to what?’ Kit asked smoothly, somehow managing to materialize out of thin air to stand next to them. He paused to place a kiss on Daisy’s cheek, just beside her ear. ‘You look incredible. Just radiant. And that dress...’

Nick gave him a mildly affronted look. ‘Hey, don’t come over here being all 007 and sweeping my girl off her feet with your poshness. I saw her first.’

Kit smiled. ‘I really don’t think you did. But I’m not here to quibble. The Earl and Countess Winterbourne request the pleasure of your company, Miss Moon.’

And now Nick rolled his eyes. ‘Oh, and now he plays the trump card – the hoity-toity family.’ His roguish gaze came to rest on Daisy once more and he smiled. ‘I’ll see you later, I hope. I’m pretty sure you owe me a dance.’

Daisy couldn’t help laughing. ‘My speciality is the Macarena, if that helps...’

‘Sounds perfect,’ Nick said, not missing a beat. ‘I guarantee James Bond here thinks that’s some kind of cocktail.’

‘Have you quite finished insulting me?’ Kit asked with long-suffering good grace. ‘Thank you.’

He offered Daisy his arm and she took it, allowing him to whisk her through the crowd to where Hugh and Cressida waited, surrounded by a small crowd of mostly cooing ladies as they admired the latest addition to the Devereaux family. ‘Daisy!’ Cressida said, beaming in delight. ‘I’m so happy to see you. What a gorgeous dress – I’m terribly jealous of your waist.’

‘Don’t be,’ Daisy said, smiling at the other woman’s radiant glow. ‘I haven’t touched bread for a week.’

At that, Cressida snorted, an unladylike laugh that caused a momentary silence among the assembled ladies. Eyes sparkling, Cressida tilted the baby towards her. ‘May I present the Right Honourable Louis Devereaux? I’d offer you a cuddle but I’m

afraid he might throw up on you and Kit would never speak to me again.'

'I'm sure he would do no such thing,' Daisy cooed, taking in the baby's chubby cheeks and clear blue-eyed gaze. She smoothed the velvet of her dress and sighed. 'But perhaps I'll wait until I'm slightly less easily stained.'

'Sensible,' Kit said. He turned to his brother, who was hovering at Cressida's elbow. 'Hugh, you remember Daisy, don't you?'

The earl gazed at her blankly for a moment, as though accessing a database of names and faces, then he gave a brisk nod. 'Daisy Moon. The lady of the letters.'

'That's right,' Daisy said. 'I must thank you for sharing them with me. I very much enjoyed reading them. They helped me understand what happened all those years ago.'

Hugh grunted. 'A pleasure.'

Cressida placed a hand on his arm. 'Daisy is a celebrated illustrator, darling. She's been inspired by the gardens here.'

'That's right,' Daisy said. 'They're so beautiful, even in winter when the flowers are all hibernating and the ground is hard with frost.'

'Helps to have a good gardener,' Hugh said. 'And what do you think of my boy, here?'

For one toe-curling moment, Daisy thought he meant Kit. Then the confusion cleared and she realized he meant the baby. Of course he meant the baby. 'Utterly adorable, you must be so proud,' she said, and when it seemed Hugh was waiting for more, she went on, 'Strong. Um, healthy. A good head of hair.'

She saw Cressida's lips twitch but Hugh seemed to appreciate her observations. 'He's a Devereaux. We all have good hair. Good teeth, too.'

Beside her, Kit seemed to be wincing. He tucked Daisy's hand into the crook of his arm once more. 'I must just show Daisy the outdoor lights. Will you excuse us? I promise I'll bring her back soon, Cress.'

The other woman smiled. 'Make sure you do.'

Daisy nodded a goodbye to both Hugh and Cressida, half-wishing she'd managed a little cuddle with the baby in spite of the danger to her dress. But for now Kit was leading her towards the tall doors that opened onto the formal gardens and she was vaguely surprised that he hadn't secured any champagne from one of the passing waiters. 'I did warn you about Hugh,' he said. 'Cress says he dotes on the boy already.'

'Who can blame him? He's clearly an angel,' Daisy replied, and shivered as the night air hit them. 'Ooh, it's chilly out here. Where are we going?'

'To the walled garden, of course,' he said and reached down to produce a pair of wellies.

Daisy couldn't help laughing. 'I see you're prepared this time.'

He nodded. 'I knew you'd be wearing the wrong shoes. But they do go beautifully with the dress.'

She leaned against his arm to remove the slippers and put the wellington boots on. They felt all wrong after the softness of the velvet but she soldiered on, trying not to galumph too inelegantly. 'Is this becoming a tradition?' she asked as they passed through the topiary hedges, lit up by swirling, multicoloured lights.

'I don't know,' Kit replied. 'Are you going to come to every ball here?'

'Maybe,' she said, even though it was unlikely to happen if she moved back to Milton Keynes. 'Are you going to invite me?'

Kit pushed back the door to the walled garden and ushered her through. 'I think so, yes.'

But Daisy barely heard. Her breath was stolen by the sight before her. The garden should have been dark but instead it was lit with a thousand twinkling lights – some high and strung like fireflies against the night sky, some dotted among the flowerbeds and shrubs, and others wrapped around trees. Brightest of all was the horse chestnut tree, whose bare branches looked as though they were covered in tiny candles. It was a festival of radiance, a roar against the coming of winter. ‘Do you like it?’ Kit asked when she didn’t speak and simply stared in wonder for a full minute.

She turned to him then, her face alight with joy. ‘I love it. It’s perfect.’

His face seemed to light up then too, as though she’d said exactly what he’d wanted to hear. ‘Come on. I’ve put some seats under the tree.’

As Daisy got nearer, she saw tiny gold baubles hung from the branches of the chestnut tree, reflecting the shimmer and making it seem as though every inch was covered in light. There were two wooden chairs at the base of the trunk, softly lit and inviting. Both were bedecked with cushions and blankets and she saw a small side table to one side, laden with a champagne bucket and two crystal flutes. Once Kit had guided her to a seat, he popped the champagne. ‘To you, Daisy,’ he said, passing her a fizzing glass. ‘For giving me the greatest gift I’ve ever had, apart from Alice.’

She stared at him, not understanding. ‘Sorry?’

He smiled. ‘We’re celebrating something incredible. I still can’t quite believe it but Hugh took me to one side this evening, before the ball began, to tell me he’s spoken to the family solicitor. As of January, Winterbourne Manor will no longer be part of the earldom, or automatically passed on following the law of primogeniture.’

Daisy still wasn’t sure she followed. Where had she heard that term before? ‘Ah. And that’s something to celebrate, is it?’

Kit held her gaze, his eyes warm. 'It is, even though it also means baby Louis won't inherit the manor when he's older, even though he keeps the title of earl and the castle itself.' He took a deep breath. 'And that's because Hugh has passed the deed to me. It all needs to be finalized, legally speaking, but as of next year, Winterbourne Manor will belong to me.'

Daisy gasped, almost spilling her drink. Cressida had been so sure nothing could be done that she'd almost forgotten the conversation in the library back in the summer. 'Really? That's incredible – you must be so happy.'

He beamed at her. 'I am. It means security for Alice and me. It means I can start planning our future. It means—' he hesitated, his smile faltering a little as he regarded her earnestly. 'It means I have something to offer.'

She shook her head. 'You've always had loads to offer, I told you that before. But this is brilliant, I'm so thrilled for you.' She held her champagne flute towards his. 'Congratulations, Kit.'

They chinked glasses and each took a sip. As always, the bubbles fizzed in Daisy's nose, making her want to sneeze. 'It's all thanks to you,' Kit said, his expression growing more serious. 'You and Cressida. I won't forget that.'

'I should hope not,' Daisy said, grinning. 'That's why I expect an invitation to every party you throw, even when I eventually go back to Milton Keynes.'

An odd look crossed his face. 'I think I can promise that. But there's something else I wanted to ask you,' he said, reaching across to gently take the glass from her and put it on the table. He took her hands, eased her carefully to her feet, then cleared his throat. Daisy waited, watching the fairy lights twinkle and dance. Perhaps it was the excitement of his big news but whatever Kit wanted to say must be important, she thought in wonder. She'd never seen him so nervous.

‘You might not remember this but when we talked about finding a forever person, months ago, I said that I didn’t have anything to offer them,’ he began. ‘Well, now, thanks mostly to you, I do. No, don’t interrupt, I need to say this.’ Pausing to collect his thoughts, he fixed her with a quizzical gaze. ‘And I’ve known for some time that the person – the woman – I wanted to offer everything to was you.’

It wasn’t at all what Daisy had been expecting. She felt her jaw drop. ‘But—’

‘No, don’t say anything yet. Wait until I’ve finished.’ Kit wrapped his fingers around hers so that his warmth infused her skin. ‘I’ve thought about telling you this for so long and now it’s finally happening I can’t find the bloody words.’ Taking a breath, he tried again. ‘The thing is, I love you, Daisy. You’re on my mind all the time, when I wake up, in my dreams, even when I’m flying. Most especially when I’m flying, to be honest. I don’t think I’ve met anyone like you – you’re not scared of anything, you see what you want and you go and get it.’ Stopping, he shook his head. ‘I can’t imagine my life without you, Daisy. I don’t want to imagine it without you. And I hope – god, I really hope... Please say you’ll be my forever person. Please say you love me too.’

The lights around Daisy’s head spun and she felt as though she was whirling through the night on a rollercoaster. Had she just heard him correctly? Had cool, impassive, maybe even a tiny bit arrogant Kit Devereaux really said all those wonderful things? Had he actually just told her he loved her? And had he begged her to say she loved him too? It was all too strange, she must be asleep and dreaming. And yet... she could feel the coldness of the ground radiating into her toes, was aware of goosebumps raised on her skin where the night air touched it, knew her fingers were shielded from the chill by Kit’s touch. And she could see him in front of her, anxiously waiting for a reply. All the strangeness fell away as she gazed into his eyes – those blue, blue eyes – and she remembered where she was, beneath the horse chestnut tree that

bore the initials of their grandparents, a testament to a love that could never be. The magic vanished and Daisy knew she was going to break both their hearts with her reply. 'I'm sorry, Kit. I can't.'

The words hung in the air, then melted into nothing as though the night itself was disappointed in them. Kit waited to see if she would say more, then shook his head. 'Can I ask why?'

She sighed, for the first time wishing she hadn't found Violet's letters. 'Look around. Here we are in this glorious garden – a garden my grandmother helped to build and your grandfather owned. This is why I can't be your forever person, Kit. I'm a Moon and you're a Devereaux and that is never going to change, no matter how many pretty stories we tell ourselves. We don't fit together. You know that.'

He ran a despairing hand through his hair. 'I don't know that. We're not our grandparents, Daisy.'

'No, but you're still – not quite an earl but a long way from ordinary.' She blinked hard at the glowing garden. 'We don't belong in the same worlds.'

He groaned in frustration. 'Times have changed. I don't give a fig if you're a Moon or a Star or a Smith – no one cares. My family doesn't – Hugh told me years ago to find someone I could love, no matter who they were. And that's you, if you'll only let go of the past and let it be.'

A breeze made the lights shimmer and blur. Daisy stared at Kit, her heart thudding. Every cell in her brain was telling her he was wrong, that it didn't matter what she felt because there was an invisible barrier between them, an insurmountable wall that meant they could never be together. And yet her heart clung onto the line about the past... Hadn't she said almost the same thing to her mother in the summer, exhorting her to let go of the past so that it couldn't hurt her anymore? Wasn't Daisy guilty of doing exactly that now, clinging onto the wreckage of an ill-fated love affair when what she wanted to do more than anything was to wrap her

arms around Kit and kiss him? So perhaps, she thought dully, shivering slightly as the wind chilled her skin, she should stop trying to think her way out of this and just follow her heart.

Evidently realizing she was cold, Kit draped a blanket across her shoulders. The gesture caught Daisy by surprise but it was so thoughtful, so perfectly him, that it warmed her inside as well as out. He was always looking after her, even though she was capable of looking after herself, there for her without ever once intruding. It was what she missed most about Stuart, even though she no longer loved him the way she once had. And now Kit was watching her, waiting with hope and dread in his eyes and she couldn't bear to see him that way any longer. Without another thought, Daisy stepped towards Kit and stood on tiptoes to press her lips to his.

It was like a glass of water after a week in the desert, she thought afterwards, although right at that moment she was only aware of drinking Kit in, of slaking a thirst that had been troubling her for longer than she could remember. She had no idea when she had fallen in love with him, she only knew that she wanted his lips on hers here, now, in this garden and forever afterwards. She felt his arms slide around her, heard him sigh as she tangled her fingers in his hair, and she wanted the kiss to go on and on. If they could just stay like this, in this perfect moment, nothing could ever go wrong. And then Kit broke away, leaving her mouth swollen and hot even though it had been the gentlest of kisses. He smiled at her, a tentative, uncertain smile that she hardly recognized. 'Is that a yes, Daisy Moon?'

And suddenly, beneath the chestnut tree and bathed in shimmering light, all her fears evaporated. There would be problems – there always were – but if he kissed her like that every day for the rest of their lives, there was nothing they couldn't overcome.

Summoning up a wavering smile of her own, Daisy took a breath in and let it out. 'Yes, Kit Devereaux,' she said, reaching up

to caress his cheek with fingers that hardly felt like her own. 'I will be your forever person. But why don't we start with right now?'

The End

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