



ROSIE GREEN

The
Cheesecake
Challenge

Little Duck Pond Cafe

THE CHEESECAKE CHALLENGE

Little Duck Pond Café

An uplifting story about the power of love, community
and fresh starts . . .

ROSIE GREEN

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(LITTLE DUCK POND CAFÉ)

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Jaz

CHAPTER ONE

I never thought I'd be the type to hide in a bush and spy on my other half.

But apparently, I am.

I'm not actually *in* the bush, to be fair. I'm lurking behind it, crouched down at a really uncomfortable angle that's giving my thigh muscles a good old workout. A low-hanging branch from the tree behind me pokes at my nether regions and I wriggle away, causing the leaves to shiver.

From my position here – in the trees by Sunnybrook village green duck pond – I have a good view of Harry's car parked on the high street. That alone was enough to set the alarm bells ringing as I walked back from dropping Emma off at nursery. According to his diary and the conversation we had before he left the house first thing, Harry has a meeting in Brighton scheduled for ten o'clock. He left soon after eight to give himself plenty of time to drive down there and find the location – a start-up kids indoor play area (he's taking their publicity photos).

So how come it's now after ten and he's still in Sunnybrook?

I've a gut-wrenching feeling I know the answer to that. And *she* happens to be sitting in the Little Duck Pond Café right now, drinking coffee and pretending to read a crime thriller.

The reason I know this is because after spotting Harry's car earlier and dropping Emma off, and getting just the answerphone when I called him, I decided I needed to talk to Ellie. But I'd no sooner arrived at the café when *she* came in and walked breezily up to the counter.

Vivien was a 'big mistake', according to Harry. A stupid fling that should never have happened.

Vivien is also the kind of woman who can carry off a shirt tucked into jeans no problem at all. And that day, the jeans in question were black, the shirt an eye-catching lime green. Her long chestnut hair was freshly-washed, her smile was radiant

and to top it all off, she smelled of peaches. I mean, how could I possibly compete with that?

I had an urge to growl at her and give her a fright to derail her rather smug smile. But instead, we gave each other a fake grin and Ellie, seeing who it was, also smiled and made sure Katja was taking Vivien's order.

Then she murmured to me, 'I'll just see to this coffee order, Jaz, then we can nip through the back for a chat, okay?'

I nodded, thinking that Ellie didn't look her usual cheerful self. 'Is everything okay?'

'What? Oh, yes, yes.' Her smile looked forced. 'Business woes. But we'll be fine.'

I watched as she started frothing milk for the cappuccino.

'By the way, I'm not supposed to tell you,' she said, turning with a grin, 'but you look like you need cheering up. Madison's taking up tap dancing.'

'She's what?' I frowned, straining to hear above the noise of the coffee machine.

'Tap-dancing lessons?' She stopped frothing and silence descended. With a practised hand, she poured the frothed milk onto the hot coffee.

'Really? I used to do that myself many moons ago.'

'You did?' Ellie grinned. 'Sorry. It's just I can't quite see you . . . but hey, good for you!'

'Why aren't you supposed to mention it to anyone? Is Maddy embarrassed about it?'

She nodded. 'I told her it's nothing to be embarrassed about. Don't tell her I told you, okay?'

'Okay.' I frowned, thinking of the self-help book I was reading the night before. Apparently, taking up a new interest could boost your self-esteem and confidence, both of which were sadly lacking these days in the wake of Harry's affair. Tap dancing would fit the bill, wouldn't it? And it would take

my mind off everything. ‘Do you . . . do you think Maddy would mind if I joined her? At the class?’

Ellie’s eyebrows rose. ‘Well . . . I’m sure that would be fine. She’d probably like having a partner in crime.’

‘Isn’t she doing it with Jack, then?’

‘I don’t think so.’ She gives me an odd look.

I nod. ‘You’re right. I can’t imagine it being Jack’s thing.’

‘They’re called Dare to Dance. If you like, I can find out more when I see Maddy later.’

‘Great.’ I grinned. ‘But don’t tell her I’m planning to join the class. I’ll just turn up and surprise her.’

‘Okay, then.’ Ellie smiled and tapped the side of her nose. ‘Mum’s the word.’ She looked for Katja, indicating to her that the cappuccino was ready. Then she ushered me through to her office.

‘Why does Vivien always have to look so bloody stunning?’ I hissed, as soon as the door was closed.

‘Well, you do, too,’ Ellie replied kindly.

‘Um, I really appreciate the support, but I don’t think so.’ I glanced down at the slightly grubby dog-walking gear I was wearing. I didn’t even have the dog with me, so there was no excuse! ‘I wish I could trust Harry but the sad fact is, I just don’t.’

Ellie sighed in sympathy. ‘Look, he might have strayed once with the nauseatingly delectable Vivien. But he’s sworn to you that it’s all over,’ she says gently. ‘So I think you have to believe him?’

I looked at her as if she’d just told me the earth was made of Jammy Dodgers . . . like, how exactly was it possible to completely trust the man who claimed he’d love you forever but then broke your heart by having a fling with his old uni friend? It didn’t exactly bode well for the future.

I told her about spotting Harry’s car. ‘And Vivien turning up here in Sunnybrook at the exact same time isn’t a

coincidence,' I added. 'Mark my words.'

'Where does she live?'

'Guildford.'

'So where's Harry?'

'No idea. But his car's there and he's supposed to be on his way to Brighton.'

'There could be something wrong with the car. Have you phoned him?'

'Yes, but it just went to answerphone. And anyway, I don't want to look like I'm checking up on him.' I let out a long sigh. 'Oh, Ellie. I *hate* that Harry's stupid philandering has turned me into this pathetic, insecure woman . . . where I'm questioning everything he tells me, wondering if he's lying again.'

'It's only human, Jaz. But you and Harry will work it out. I'm sure of it.'

Only partly reassured, I changed the subject and asked her how Clara's friend, Jen, was getting on, helping Katja with the baking for the café.

'Oh, Jen's been brilliant. I'm so glad Clara suggested I take her on to help while Fen's on maternity leave. But . . .' Now it was Ellie's turn to sigh.

'But what?'

She shrugged. 'Business isn't exactly booming. I guess people can't afford to come into the café as often as they used to. Daily revenue is down quite a bit, and the online bakery business has slumped as well.'

I nodded. 'Everyone's income is squeezed so tightly these days. Before, you'd meet a friend for coffee without having to think about it. But now, with price rises, it has to be more of a planned treat.'

'Exactly.'

'You'll get through this. I know you will.'

She smiled wistfully. ‘Just ignore me. I’m having one of those days. And I’m worried about Mum.’

‘Is Rose okay?’

‘Yes. I mean, she has dementia, so it’s never going to get better. But she’s okay . . . for now. No, it’s more where she’s living that’s the worry.’

‘I thought she and Archie loved it there.’

‘They do. And it’s perfect for them. They’ve made so many friends and the staff there are brilliant. But . . . well, they’re putting their prices up, and it was already quite expensive . . .’

I frowned in sympathy.

‘Listen, I’d better get back out there. Do you want to wait back here, Jaz, until the delectable Vivien buggers off?’

‘Oh, no, no.’ I grinned ruefully. ‘I should go. I just popped in for a quick catch-up.’

She leaned over and gave me a hug. ‘Okay. Well, take care. And don’t worry about Harry. He totally adores you and Emma.’

I left the café with a forced ‘bye’ to Vivien.

But when I got outside, instead of going straight back to the house, I lingered for a while. It was a lovely sunny day in May, perfect for a saunter through the trees by the duck pond – and spying on Vivien!

Despite Ellie trying to reassure me, I knew deep down that Harry was still seeing Vivien. I had no real proof but my ‘cheat antenna’ was in permanent squeak mode these days. When Harry said he was off on a job taking shots of a new hotel nearby, I suspected it probably wasn’t the stunning décor he was planning to assess from all angles . . . especially when he happened to return flushed and smelling of perfume.

He swore they weren’t in touch any longer, but I knew that was a lie because I’d found a second phone in the pocket of his waterproof, and I wasn’t stupid. The phone was locked, of course, so I couldn’t see the messages. And I couldn’t ask him

about it because then he'd have known I'd been snooping around, looking for evidence that he was still being unfaithful.

I'd reached the stage where I just wanted all the lies to stop. I'd cried all my tears for our relationship in the weeks after I'd discovered his infidelity last summer. That was the most gut-wrenching, desperate time of my life – made even more heart-breaking when, soon after discovering that I was pregnant, I suffered a miscarriage at twelve weeks. But I'd forced myself to toughen up since then. I couldn't afford to be on the floor in bits, because Emma needed me. She was my priority.

Now, I just felt a dull ache where the pain once was.

I'd seen a side of Harry I really didn't like – the way he was taking me for a fool, trying to have his cake and eat it – and frankly, I'd fallen out of love with him. It was sad. But that was life. Not all relationships went the distance. And I knew that even if Harry were to come to me (again) begging for another chance, my heart was no longer beating for him in the same way as when we first met.

We'd come to the end of the road as far as I was concerned. The only reason we were still limping along, sharing a house, was because of Emma – but also because Harry was refusing to admit he was still in contact with Vivien.

But I'd made up my mind that I was going to prove it! Catch them in the act and present Harry with the irrefutable evidence. Then maybe there'd be a chance we could move on with our lives.

Now, I straighten up, flexing my legs a little. Then I crouch down again, behind the bush, my eyes trained on the café door. When Vivien emerges, I have a feeling she'll lead me straight to Harry.

This could be my chance to get the evidence I need.

I'm concentrating so hard on the café, I almost leap out of my skin when a voice behind me says, 'Are you okay?'

CHAPTER TWO

I spin around, my strained leg muscles yelping in protest.

A man with a mop of dark hair and a bemused expression is standing there.

Quickly straightening up, I paste on a smile. 'I'm fine, thank you. Just . . . er . . . waiting for someone.'

He nods. 'Behind the bush.'

'Yes.' I raise my chin defensively as colour whooshes into my cheeks.

His lips twitch in amusement. 'Interesting place to wait. Sorry for intruding but I was just walking by and you looked as though you were . . . in trouble. The way you were crouched down like that. Are you hiding from someone in the café? I wouldn't want to blow your cover.'

'Hiding?' My raucous burst of laughter sends a couple of crows squawking from a tree high into the air. 'Why on earth would I be *hiding from someone in the café?*'

He shrugs, looking a little startled. 'No idea.'

I peer across, alert for Vivien's exit, but there's still no movement.

'What's it like?' he asks.

'What's *what* like?'

'The café. I had a look through the window and it looks a bit dated.'

'Dated? No, it's not.' I look at him suspiciously, wishing he would just go away. How can I follow Vivien if *he's* watching my every move?

'It looks a bit pink and twee in there . . . full of chintzy cushions and knick-knacks from bygone days and little hearts on everything.'

Vivien is emerging!

My eyes swivel impatiently from Vivien to him, willing him to bugger off. But instead, he folds his arms, leans against the trunk of a tree and carries on talking.

‘Fashion always goes in cycles. I reckon “vintage” has had its day. It’s becoming a bit passé now, don’t you think?’

Vivien must have forgotten something because she’s gone back inside.

I glare at him. ‘Passé?’ My hackles rise at the criticism. ‘That *twee and dated* café, I’ll have you know, has made it onto the shortlist of the Best Regional Café competition,’ I tell him, somewhat defensively. (It’s true. Ellie entered a while back and she got the news a fortnight ago.)

‘Really?’ He laughs. ‘Crikey, was voting confined to the silver surfer brigade, then?’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Well, it tends to be the . . . older generation . . . who like cream teas and flowery prints and knick-knacks?’ He shrugs.

‘What a gross generalisation.’ I shake my head. ‘It’s quite clear you know absolutely nothing about running a café.’

To my surprise, he seems to find this very funny, although I’ve no idea why my criticism of him would warrant a full-on belly laugh.

Vivien’s coming out again!

‘Look, I need to go.’ He fully deserves the very hard stare I give him. How dare he criticise Ellie’s café! But to my annoyance, he just grins back.

‘Right, of course. On you go,’ he says with a shrug.

I walk quickly away, hot on Vivien’s trail, desperately hoping she won’t turn round and see me following her.

‘Sorry for holding you up,’ calls the Most Annoying Man in the World. ‘And by the way, you’ve got a twig and some leaves stuck to your back.’

Vivien half-turns her head and my heart lurches.

But to my relief, next second she spots someone ahead of her and waves, speeding up into a little run. And as I swipe at the foliage on my back, I suddenly see Harry coming out of that ultra-modern new café on the high street.

It's called Roastery. Not the Roastery *Café*. Or even *The Roastery*.

Just Roastery. In a tall, thin, uber-stylish script.

Even Harry commented that he didn't think there was room for another café in Sunnybrook – especially one with such a pretentious-sounding name.

So what was he doing in there?

I freeze right where I am, thinking he's sure to see me. But he clearly only has eyes for Vivien. He sprints across the road and meets her on the green, looking back at the high street as if he expects their cover to be blown at any second. Then the pair hurry in the direction of Harry's car.

My heart is beating fast as I fumble for my phone, just as Mr Most Annoying catches me up. Striding past me, he turns with a grin. 'Sorry if I sabotaged your plans. Whatever they were.' He's walking backwards now to talk to me, completely blocking my clear view of Harry and Vivien.

With a frustrated yelp, I dodge to the side, holding up my phone to snap the pair together. They're smiling at each other as they reach Harry's car.

Perfect!

The camera clicks, and a second later, Mr Most Annoying crosses my path, heading off in another direction across the green with a cheerful wave.

Good riddance!

As Vivien gets in and they drive away together, I sink down on the grass, my legs shaky, feeling quite exhausted after all the cloak-and-dagger stuff. At least I now have photographic evidence that Harry's still seeing Vivien. Could it have been a chance meeting? It didn't look like it.

What the hell was he doing in Roastery, though, while Vivien was in Ellie's place?

Probably part of their secret plan to meet without anyone knowing.

I wander over and peer inside Roastery, wondering if there's a chance Harry might have been meeting someone else in there . . . if maybe there was actually a genuine reason for him not going to Brighton.

But the cavernous space is practically empty. Peering through the muted glow of the uber-stylish lighting, I can see no sign of a likely business person finishing off their coffee and checking their phone. There's just a group of what look like female friends, several with children in pushchairs. They're perched on high stools around a huge metal table, and when one of the blue romper-suited babies starts grizzling and acting up, the mum has to practically abseil down from her stool to see to him.

The place is done out with lots of shiny high-tech counters, over which fashionable teardrop lamps hang from multitudinous cables, and there's so much chrome, you'd almost think you were in a bathroom showroom. I pat the pocket containing my phone and walk home. Harry has some tough questions to answer.

When he arrives home soon after three, I waste no time in tackling him.

He frowns at me. 'Of *course* I didn't meet up with Vivien.' He's staring at me as if I'm off my trolley for even suggesting it. 'I told you. I had a meeting in Brighton.'

I clench my teeth angrily. It's that look of pained innocence on Harry's face that really gets to me – especially now I know for certain he's been lying to me.

'The thing is, I saw you, Harry. I even have photographic evidence.'

He shoots me an uncertain look. 'You took a photo?'

Calmly, I nod. ‘It’s a photo of you and Vivien. You’re both all smiles and it’s fairly clear your meeting was no accident. So please don’t try and pretend that it was.’

Harry’s face falls. He obviously realises the game is up.

Good!

I reach for my phone, fingers trembling slightly as I locate the photo folder.

Clicking on the last photo taken, I brandish it at him with a feeling of triumph. ‘There! Caught red-handed. What have you got to say about *that?*’

He takes my phone and looks at the photo. He peers closer. Then, unbelievably, he starts to laugh. ‘Who the hell is *that?*’

‘What do you mean?’ I grab the phone back. ‘It’s obvious who it is. It’s you and Viv . . .’ My words trail off in dismay.

Filling the entire frame is the big beaming face of Mr Most Annoying.

I’ve managed to catch him grinning like a Cheshire cat and waving at me, blocking Harry and Vivien completely from view.

I stare at the photo. ‘I can’t believe this. He must have walked across at exactly the wrong second.’ I shake my head in frustration. I found him annoying earlier. But his score on the teeth-gnashing indicator has just soared by five thousand percent.

He’s only gone and photo-bombed my bloody evidence shot!

Ellie

CHAPTER THREE

I smile as I drive through the gates of Mum's retirement complex, feeling my shoulders relax.

Wonershly Hall always has that effect on me.

I owe them a lot, I know. The staff and the people . . . they make Mum happy, and I'm eternally grateful for that. It means I don't have to worry about her. Well, I *do* worry, of course, knowing Mum's living with dementia. But Wonershly Hall helps to ease my anxieties . . .

I pass two women – good friends of Mum and her lovely husband, Archie – walking arm-in-arm, chattering away, and when they spot me, they smile and wave.

I wind down the window to say hello. 'How are you both? Keeping busy?'

'Oh, always,' beams Dorothy. 'We're just off to our exercise class.' She points over the grass to where a small group of people in tracksuits and T-shirts are limbering up.

Agnes nods. 'We prefer it in the summer when the classes are outside in the fresh air.'

'Well, you certainly look healthy, the pair of you.' I smile. 'I hope Mum's behaving herself?'

'Actually, we haven't seen her this afternoon.' Dorothy looks at Agnes. 'She and Archie were catching the bus into Guildford this morning, so maybe they aren't back yet.'

'Yes, she usually joins us. She loves the classes,' says Agnes. 'Archie's great. He has the timetable stuck to the fridge and he always makes sure to deliver Rose to mine or Dorothy's door in time.'

'Archie's a gem,' I agree. 'Right, ladies, I'll go and see if they're back from their trip. Enjoy the class!'

I drive into the parking area and start walking over to Mum and Archie's flat, carrying the bag containing Mum's favourite

blueberry muffins. Baked earlier by Jen, they smell so delicious that my stomach gives an appreciative rumble.

I'm almost at the door when Archie emerges. It's a warm day in late May and he's looking smart, as he always does, in a striped blue shirt tucked into cream-coloured trousers. He spots me and starts walking over.

'Archie!' We hug. 'Did you have a good time in Guildford?'

'Oh, yes.' He smiles. 'Rose likes to go shopping, even though she never buys anything. But we do a lot of window-shopping and there's a particular café that she always remembers for some reason. So we popped in there for a bite to eat at lunchtime.'

I nod. 'The Copper Kettle?'

'That's the one!'

'She remembers it from the old days. She used to go there with Dad whenever they were shopping in Guildford. It's been there for years.' I glance at the windows of the flat. 'So where is she? Resting after your trip?'

'No, well, that's the thing. I was just on my way out to find her.'

'Oh.' A feeling of alarm pricks at my skin. 'She's disappeared?'

'No, no. Don't worry.' He pats my arm reassuringly. 'She won't have gone far. And I have a feeling I know where she'll be. Come on.'

I nod and we start walking around the side of the big country house, Archie explaining that they were both quite tired when they returned from Guildford so decided to take a nap. 'When I woke up, Rose had gone.'

I swallow, remembering the time a few months ago when she decided to get on a bus herself and got completely lost. We were frantic that day, trying to find her. 'So where do you think she is?'

To my surprise, Archie points over at the children's play area by a large horse chestnut tree. 'Sometimes, when she's

feeling sad, she likes to climb into the little treehouse and sit on a stool, looking out at the view.'

I nod. 'You think she might have been sad because of the Copper Kettle, remembering her old life?'

Archie smiles. 'I suppose recalling the past can stir up all sorts of emotions. Happy and sad. But Rose will have her quiet time and then she'll be right as rain tonight, back to her usual cheery self, joining in with the sing-song in the lounge and getting me up to dance.'

I attempt a smile but my heart is in my mouth as we approach the play area.

Oh, Archie, I really hope you're right. She'd better be there. Because if not, where on earth has she gone?

Then, to my overwhelming relief, I spot Mum.

She's sitting in the window of the treehouse, resting her chin on her hand and looking out over the fields. Suddenly realising it's us, she waves. And I quicken my pace, hurrying over and climbing the five shallow pink steps to join her on the bench.

Her face lights up and she draws me into a hug.

'What happened to you?' I laugh, hugging her back tightly. 'Archie woke up and you were gone.'

She frowns. 'Oh, I had things to do. I've got a job to go to, you know. I can't stay in bed all day.'

I chuckle. 'Quite right, Mum.'

She pats my cheek and smiles fondly. 'I've missed you. Where have you been?'

'I was here yesterday, Mum. I brought you that album with pictures of Maisie in it?'

'Ah, Maisie. Is she here?' She looks around for her.

'No, but I'll bring her for a visit on Saturday. I promise.'

'Good. Now, where's Archie? Has he made tea?'

'No, we came straight to find you.'

'I know why you did that.' Her eyes twinkle mischievously.

‘You do?’

She nods. ‘It’s because I make a much better cup of tea than him!’

‘Er, excuse me, young lady,’ laughs Archie, joining us. ‘My tea-making skills are legendary, I’ll have you know.’ He lays a hand lightly on her shoulder and Mum turns.

She makes a comical face at him. ‘In your dreams they are!’

I hoot with laughter and Archie grins. ‘Well, that’s me told. I’m completely delusional, apparently.’

‘Yes, you are.’ Beaming at Archie, Mum gets up and links her arm through his, then she looks round for me, and catches my arm, too.

Then we all walk back to their flat together as they continue their gentle squabbling about who makes the best cuppa . . .

Jaz

CHAPTER FOUR

I'm still simmering with resentment about that guy photo-bombing my perfect shot, and I can't seem to settle.

Harry wants to talk about it but I know what I saw and I'm just not interested.

'Look, Viv really is just a friend. I don't know what you *think* you saw, but you got it totally wrong.'

'Oh, really?' I smile sarcastically.

'Yes. Really.'

I grit my teeth. 'Right, well, it's pretty obvious what I need to do, then, isn't it, Harry?'

'What's that?' He peers at me worriedly.

'I'd better get along to Specsavers, hadn't I? Because clearly I can't see what's going on right in front of my very own nose!'

He sighs. 'Stop it, Jaz. I love you. You know that.'

'Yes. But you love Vivien more. And that's the problem.'

'That's just not true.' He shakes his head wearily.

'Isn't it? Well, why – if you love me as much as you say you do – is it necessary for you to keep on seeing her? Surely if she was *just a friend*, you'd sacrifice seeing her for a while, to put my mind at rest. But oh no. You have to keep sneaking around, keeping in constant contact with her.' I glare at him. 'Can't you see how bloody suspicious that looks? That's why I know you're lying. That and the photo . . .'

He sighs again. 'The photo that doesn't actually prove a thing?'

'To hell with the photo. I *know* what I *saw*! And I *know* what's going *on*!'

'There's nothing going on.' He's getting irritated now. 'Look, I'm *here*, aren't I? Living with you and Emma? After the affair, it was *you* I chose, remember?'

‘Yeah, but mainly because of Emma. And also because you probably thought *why not have my cake and eat it as well?*’

He laughs incredulously. ‘There’s nothing I can say to convince you, is there? But I’m glad you brought up Emma. My daughter means everything to me. Do you really think I’d risk splitting up our little family over . . . well, an old university friend?’

‘So Emma’s *your* daughter, is she?’

‘Don’t be petty.’

‘And you’re obviously implying it’s my fault she’ll end up with a weekend dad!’

‘A weekend dad?’ He shakes his head in disbelief. ‘You’re seriously nuts.’

‘Am I? Am I really? I think it’s you who’s the deluded one, Harry, imagining I’ll believe all the lies you keep feeding me.’

He rakes a hand through his hair. ‘Look, why don’t I call off tonight so that we can talk? Sort all this out once and for all? Terry won’t mind.’

‘No. Don’t cancel,’ I snap. ‘I’m shattered. I want an early night.’

He gives another of his long-suffering sighs. ‘Okay, Jaz. Have it your way.’

‘Thanks. But I think *you’re* the one who happens to be having it your way!’

He gets up, shrugging and gazing at me sadly, as if to say he’s tried his best but what else can he do when I’m being so unreasonable.

‘Ask Terry if he’s got a spare couch you can sleep on!’ I yell after him.

I stay in the study until he’s gone, pretending to be answering emails at the desk but just mindlessly playing Tetris, punching out my anger on the keyboard.

A thought occurs.

He's supposed to be meeting his friend, Terry, at the pub. I heard him organising it on the phone the other day, so I've no reason to doubt that it's happening. But after seeing him with Vivien today, I'm not so sure now.

What if it's an elaborate ploy so he can spend time with her?

My heart starts drumming faster in my chest.

I know where Vivien lives. I could go round there . . . maybe catch them in the act.

Am I being paranoid? Ought I to trust Harry, like Ellie said?

I shake my head. No, of course not! He just lied to me about meeting Vivien today. How can I trust a single thing he says?

But even if I wanted to go over to Vivien's, I can't leave Emma without a babysitter . . .

As if on cue, a car draws up outside and when I go to look, it's Fen. She's struggling a little, getting out of the driver's seat, and I notice with a little shock how much her baby bump has grown since I saw her last week (actually, *babies* bump – she's having twins!) Before, it wasn't terribly noticeable, but now I can really see it.

Auntie Jaz.

In spite of everything, this makes me smile. I only wish Fen was having a better time of her pregnancy. She's been really sick almost from the beginning, although now that she's in her fifth month, things seem to be gradually improving. She just feels exhausted all the time now.

'Sorry, Jaz.' She rushes in, looking tense and apologetic. 'Loo. I need the loo.'

'Go, go, go!' I steer her in the right direction.

Afterwards, she lowers herself gingerly onto the sofa, legs splayed awkwardly, both hands protecting her bump. 'Phew! What a relief! I've had to start wearing panty liners in case of accidents, although on the plus side, my hair has never been so thick and amazing.' She gives her cute, super-glossy brown bob a little shake. She grins ruefully. 'But there's so much stuff they never warn you about, isn't there?'

I nod with feeling. ‘Oh, yes. When I was pregnant with Emma, Harry booked me a massage, which was a really nice thought. It was supposed to relax me, but on the day of the treatment, I was suffering a really bad case of trapped wind. I’ve never clenched my butt muscles so hard in my life as I did, lying on that treatment couch. She must have got things moving with the massage because when she finished and left me to get dressed, it all came out in a long series of giant trumpets. Honestly, it sounded like the brass section of an orchestra all tuning up at once.’

Fen, who’d been giggling, now bursts out laughing. ‘It could only happen to you, Jaz.’

‘That’s not the worst of it, though.’ I grin, remembering. ‘When I left the room, feeling so much better because I’d trumped out every last breath of wind, guess who was standing right outside the door waiting for me?’

‘The therapist? No!’ Fen’s wiping tears from her eyes now.

‘Oh, yes. And she didn’t betray even a hint of what she’d just heard. She just advised me to drink lots of water and hoped I’d enjoy the rest of my day.’

We’re both in tears of laughter now. And it feels good. I haven’t laughed like this in a really long time.

Then Fen asks how things are with Harry, and my mood changes abruptly and I tell her what happened earlier . . . seeing him with Vivien, although he tried to deny it.

Fen looks horrified. ‘Oh, Jaz. But I thought he said it was all over with her?’

‘He did, although I never quite believed him. And now I know for certain they’re still seeing each other.’ I frown, thinking. ‘Fen, could you do me a favour?’

‘Of course.’

‘Could you stay with Emma for an hour or so while I nip out?’

‘Yes. No problem. But where are you going?’

‘To Vivien’s place.’

Peering in the kitchen window of Vivien's large, ground-floor flat in Guildford – part of an elegantly restored Georgian townhouse – I'm hoping that the evening shadows will conceal the fact that I'm lurking with intent. (I seem to be doing a lot of that these days, although at least I don't have branches poking in my bum tonight.)

The kitchen is enormous, with the kind of genuine marble worktops you'd need a second mortgage to buy and install. There's a posh island with a sink and one of those new-fangled taps that mean you don't have to boil a kettle. And she's got all the modern kitchen aids, including a proper Italian coffee machine (coffee bean grinder included).

She's clearly doing well for herself. Either that or she was in receipt of a very generous divorce settlement from her businessman ex-husband.

Heart in my mouth, I cross to the other window. The curtains are open, revealing an elegant sitting room. But what immediately strikes me is the candles.

There are candles glowing everywhere . . . on the coffee table, on the stylish mantelpiece and on the windowsill. I swallow hard. It's painfully clear that what I'm looking at is a setting for romance. And there's no prizes for guessing that Harry is likely to be the lucky recipient . . .

Anger and emotion surge up inside me. I find Vivien's buzzer and press it with trembling fingers.

The wait seems endless, but at last, her voice rings out into the night. 'Hey, you! Why on earth didn't you use your key?'

My insides turn over. 'It's Jaz, actually. Can I come in?'

There's a pause and for a moment, I think she's going to refuse. But seconds later, I hear the electronic sound of the door opening.

I walk in, my heart drumming fast, and Vivien opens her door with a stiff little smile. 'Hi, Jaz. What brings *you* here?'

Hurt and humiliated, I cut right through the small talk. ‘Having a power cut?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Staging a re-enactment of Victorian times?’

‘Er, no.’ She looks bemused. ‘What are you talking about, Jaz?’

‘Right. So the candles are completely normal, are they?’

‘Oh.’ She swallows, darting a look behind her.

‘I think we need to talk, don’t you? About who you’re expecting to share that touching candlelit scene with? No one lights that many candles just for themselves.’ I beam at her. ‘So can I come in and wait for him?’

She frowns, looking as if she’s going to refuse me entry.

I shrug. ‘If you don’t let me in, I’m just going to stand outside and “welcome” Harry first with a few choice words. I don’t think your neighbours would appreciate a slanging match going on right outside their windows, do you?’

With a resigned sigh, she stands back and I walk in.

I’m trembling from head to toe. I knew before I came here that the news wouldn’t be good. But still, I feel the killer blow of final realisation, like a punch to my stomach. I want to just turn around and run, but I can’t. I have to stay and see this through to the end . . .

Taking a deep breath, I follow her into the sitting room, and I almost laugh out loud when I spot the pink scarf draped over a lamp. Could this scene *be* any more cheesy?

A car is drawing up outside. Vivien hasn’t noticed, even though she’s standing right by the window. She’s staring at me with fear in her eyes, clearly wondering how this encounter is going to pan out. And when I stride over to the window to check if it’s Harry’s car, she gasps and takes a step back, clutching the curtain, as if she thinks I’m going to strike her.

‘Don’t worry, Viv, I’m not going to kill you,’ I tell her, cheerfully. ‘It’s actually Harry I’d like to murder. I’m just

checking to see if it's lover boy arriving – and guess what? We're in luck. It's him!' I glance round at the candles. 'Do you always give Harry such a lovely welcome? No wonder he prefers you. The most he ever gets from me is a request to empty the dishwasher or read Emma a story.'

Vivien is just standing there, speechless.

I sweep from the room and go out to face Harry, pulling open the main door just as he's raising his key to the lock.

I beam at him. 'Harry. *Surprise!*'

CHAPTER FIVE

Harry's face is a picture. 'Jaz? What . . . what the hell are you doing here?' He frowns, looking beyond me, into the hall. 'Where's Viv?'

'Oh, don't worry. She's fine.'

Vivien emerges at that moment, her expression bleak and resigned, as if the world has just caved in onto her shoulders. 'Harry . . . she just turned up.'

I round on her. 'She just turned up. *She* just turned up! I am here, you know. And I think we need to talk, don't you?' I glare at them both, in control of the situation for once. 'Come on. Let's go inside. As we discussed earlier, Viv, you won't want the neighbours hearing all about your dirty little secret affair, now, will you?'

They glance at each other and troop inside, and I follow them into the kitchen. Vivien hovers by the door, as if she's planning to make a speedy getaway should circumstances demand it, while Harry slumps down on a stool at the island. Running his hands agitatedly through his hair, he looks shell-shocked.

I take a deep breath. Now that we're here and they're a captive audience, I actually don't know where to start. And something is distracting me as I'm glaring at Harry's bent head. There's an acrid smell coming from somewhere. Is it something burning? I glance at the hob but it's not on and neither is the oven. Sniffing, I follow my nose into the sitting room, Vivien following close behind me.

Her gasp echoes mine. Over by the window, one of the floor-length curtains is ablaze.

I freeze for a second, staring at the horrifying spectacle as the fire spreads to the other curtain and catches a framed print on the wall nearby. When Vivien stepped back against the windowsill, she must have knocked over one of the candles.

United in panic, we look at each other.

‘What do we do?’ Vivien screeches, finding her voice.

‘Water! We need water!’ I race for the door, running right into Harry.

‘What the hell?’ He grabs onto me and takes in the scene. ‘Right, out! Both of you. Call the fire brigade and I’ll try and extinguish the flames.’

He releases me and dashes forward to take hold of Vivien’s hand. Pulling her away, he deposits her in the hall, urging her to make the call. And I follow them, running with Harry into the kitchen.

We grab buckets from a cupboard and in the end, we manage to douse the flames, while Vivien looks on in the doorway, hands pressed to her mouth in horror.

The place is a mess.

At last, soaked through and exhausted, I shrug at Harry and make my way out into the hall, and he follows me.

‘Thank you, Jaz,’ he mumbles.

‘You’re welcome. And thank *you* for making things perfectly clear to me.’

He frowns. ‘What do you mean?’

I give a bitter laugh. ‘You saved Vivien from the fire first. Pure instinct, I guess. What more is there to say?’

‘What?’ He stares at me, uncomprehending for a second. Then the penny drops. ‘But Viv was nearest to me. That’s the only reason I grabbed her first.’

‘Oh, stop it, Harry,’ I snap. ‘Just stop lying. You’re pathetic. Don’t even think of coming home. I’ll be in touch about when you can collect your things.’

And I turn and walk away.

Driving home, I feel hollow inside.

I guess it’s the human condition to keep hope alive against all the odds . . . to keep deceiving yourself that things will be

fine . . . even when deep down you know the truth. I suppose I never really believed that Harry could betray me. Our love was strong. I told myself it would survive anything. Even on the way over to Vivien's house, I was still telling myself that Harry wouldn't be there and I was just being paranoid . . . that maybe I was just being hyper-sensitive over Harry's continued contact with Vivien. Okay, he'd lied that they were still in contact, but maybe he just wanted to hold onto her friendship . . .

But now there's no room left for any lingering doubts. His instinct to save Vivien first has killed the last remnants of hope stone dead.

Harry and I are well and truly over.

When I arrive home, Emma is cuddled up with Fen on the sofa, having a story read to her. She can barely keep her eyes open.

Fen sees my expression and my wet clothes, and her smile turns to alarm. 'What on earth happened?'

'Ugh, don't ask.' I smile wearily, then I look at Emma. 'Right, you lucky young lady. Two bedtime stories in one night! Come on. Time to get you tucked up in bed.'

I go over and lift her up and she snuggles her head on my shoulder, her soft hair tickling my face as I carry her to bed.

'What's that noise?' I ask, going back through to Fen, aware of a steady thump-thump-thump coming from the house next door.

Fen shrugs. 'No idea. But it's been going on for ages and I think it woke Emma up.'

I slump down on the other end of the sofa. 'New neighbours,' I say gloomily. 'My old ones moved out the other day. They were lovely.'

'So what happened?'

'With the neighbours?'

‘No. I mean, at Vivien’s? You look utterly exhausted.’

I explain what went on, and Fen is so angry at Harry and so protectively in my corner that I feel the tears I’ve been trying to hold back start to well up. Thank goodness for fabulous friends like Fen to rely on in times like this . . .

I manage to reassure her I’ll be fine . . . that I did my mourning for my failed relationship last summer, when Harry’s affair first came to light. I’m not sure she quite believes me. But we talk for a while about how miserable I’ve been feeling, knowing that things weren’t right, and that actually, it’s a real relief to know the truth at last.

I shrug. ‘I’ve known for a while that I’d be a single mother. And actually, I don’t mind at all. I want to put all this sadness behind me and make a fresh start.’

Fen nods. ‘And you will. You’re so strong, Jaz. Much stronger than I am.’

I smile ruefully. ‘Doesn’t feel like it right now.’

‘Of course not. But you and Emma are going to be just fine.’

‘Thanks, Fen.’ I sigh. ‘Actually, I don’t think I’m the only with woes right now.’

She frowns. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m a bit worried about Ellie.’ I shrug. ‘She just doesn’t seem her usual happy, positive self these days.’

She nods thoughtfully. ‘Now you mention it, I thought she seemed quite down when I saw her yesterday.’

‘I think she’s worried about her mum. The fees at Wonershly Hall are a bit eye-watering by the sounds of things.’

‘Oh, hell. And Rose and Archie are so happy there, too.’ She delves into her bag. ‘Maybe winning the regional café competition will cheer Ellie up, once it sinks in.’ She hands me a letter with a smile. ‘The Little Duck Pond Café has actually made it into the *final three*.’

‘Really? There were hundreds of entries. That’s absolutely brilliant!’ I take the letter and scan it. ‘Ellie must be over the moon.’

Fen frowns. ‘Well, that’s the strange thing. The postman came when I was chatting to her in the café yesterday. She opened the letter, read it and handed it to me without a word. I was so excited when I saw what it was, but she just smiled and shrugged and went off to serve someone, like it was nothing at all.’

‘That’s so weird,’ I murmur. ‘She didn’t even mention it to me when I saw her this morning. And yet the café means everything to her. We all know that.’

Fen nods. ‘Normally, she’d be absolutely buzzing about making the last three in such a prestigious competition. She asked me if I’d take the letter and have a think about it. As it says, the winner will be the café that produces “the most deliciously different cheesecake”.’

My eyebrows rise. ‘Wow. We’ll need to get our thinking caps on.’ Then I sigh, handing the letter back to her. ‘Maybe Ellie was just having an off day?’

‘Perhaps. I’m sure once she’s had a chance to take it in, she’ll be really happy about this success.’ Fen tries to sit forward but collapses back again with an exhausted grin. ‘Everything takes twice the time these days. And I have a feeling tying my own laces will soon be a luxury of the past.’

Laughing, I spring to my feet and help her to get up off the sofa.

‘Phone me any time of the day or night if you need to talk,’ she murmurs, as we hug at the door. ‘Although it might take me longer to get to my phone!’ She smiles ruefully. ‘Take care, Jaz. We’re all here for you and Emma, okay?’

I wave her off at the window, feeling drained with the emotion of the evening, and I’m just in time to see a wheelbarrow disappearing round the side of the house next door. It looks as if a large pile of top soil has been dumped just inside their gate, and the new neighbours are obviously in the

process of carting it round to the back garden, hence the bump-bump-bump sound.

I sigh, wishing they could have left it till the morning because my sore head is now thumping in time to the bloody wheelbarrow! It's only eight o'clock but I'm exhausted after my confrontation with Harry and Vivien, and I just want an early night and the oblivion of sleep.

In bed, I lie there listening to the activity next door with increasing impatience. When are they going to finish? The final straw is when I suddenly hear a drill starting up!

Exasperated, I leap out of bed and go in search of earplugs. I'm sure I have some somewhere but I can't find them. So in despair I shove wedges of loo roll in my ears, which is quite scratchy but does the trick.

Then I get back into bed and bury my face in the pillow, longing for sleep and an escape from one of the most horrible days of my life . . .

Ellie

CHAPTER SIX

I'm watching TV in the flat, curled on the sofa with Zak having just finished dinner, when the door buzzer sounds.

Zak glances at his watch and murmurs, 'Eight-thirty. Are you expecting anyone?'

I shake my head as he gets up to answer the door.

'It's Archie,' he calls, and I turn off the TV and leap up, my heart beating faster.

'What is it?' I ask Zak worriedly, as he opens the flat door and we listen to Archie making his way slowly up the stairs.

Zak shakes his head. 'Not sure. He said he needed to speak to you.'

'Archie, hello!' I greet him with a hug. 'Is everything okay? Is Mum all right? She hasn't gone walkabout again, has she?'

His kind eyes twinkle with good humour. 'No, no. Nothing like that. She was having a lovely time in the communal lounge when I left, singing along with all the old Frank Sinatra songs.'

'She's always loved a bit of Frank.' I smile fondly. 'She's got a good voice as well.'

'She'll be watching the soaps now with Agnes and Dorothy, and eating far too much cake.' He grins. 'Not my scene. I'm more of a Western and crisp kind of a man.'

I laugh. 'So you're escaping for a while? Come in and I'll make some tea.'

'I'll put the kettle on,' Zak offers and heads for the kitchen.

Settled in the sitting room, Archie pulls a letter out of his pocket. 'Actually, the real reason I came over while Rose was happily occupied was to show you this.' He frowns. 'It's not great news, I'm afraid. It's about Rose's private pension.'

'Oh.' I take the letter, my heart sinking already, even before I've read the contents.

‘As you know, we thought the final sum might have taken a dive over the past year, but I never expected the value would have crashed as drastically as this.’

I nod, staring at the figure in horror. I’ve been dreading this moment, wondering how Mum’s future will be affected. I’ve hardly been able to concentrate on anything else, I’ve been so worried.

But Archie’s right. It’s even worse than we feared. Mum’s private pension – the result of investments in stocks and shares – is now worth about a third of what she’d originally hoped for.

‘Mum was relying on the lump sum to carry on living at Wonershly Hall,’ I murmur, my head spinning. ‘But this will barely cover the costs for twelve months. And that’s if they don’t raise their prices again in the meantime.’ I stare at Archie in despair.

He sighs. ‘Rose doesn’t really understand the financial side. She just keeps saying she’s staying there until they cart her out in a box!’

‘That sounds like Mum.’ We exchange a feeble smile and I rub my forehead. ‘I’m sorry, Archie. I can’t seem to think straight at the moment.’

He nods, patting my hand. ‘I know what you mean. It’s a worry. You know I’d happily pay for your mum as well, but . . .’

‘I know you would, Archie.’

He shrugs. ‘My pension just about covers my share, nothing more.’

‘Oh, hell. What are we going to do?’

He sighs. ‘I don’t think we have a choice. Rose will absolutely hate it. But I think it might be time to move out of Wonershly Hall.’

Later, lying sleepless in bed, my mind is whirling trying to come up with a solution.

When Mum first moved to the retirement complex, she cashed in her occupational pension which resulted in a substantial lump sum – along with a small monthly pension – that meant she could live quite comfortably at Wonershly Hall. I knew it was expensive but it was so close to Sunnybrook, it seemed perfect – all the more so when Archie moved into the flat upstairs and they got together. Mum could afford it, and we always knew that in time, she'd have her private pension to rely on.

What we hadn't anticipated, though, was the huge rise in the cost of living, which meant a hike in costs across the board, topped off now by the news Archie brought tonight, of this alarming depreciation in the lump sum she'd receive.

What on earth are we going to do?

I'm trying to think logically – but the problem is, I'm swamped by my memories of the past. I keep thinking about my lovely gran and what happened to her after she was forced to move from her home. It turned into a horror story that no one could ever have predicted . . .

Granny Lily was in excellent health – hardly a day's illness in her whole life apart from the occasional migraine – but then, at the age of seventy-two, she had to move out of the cottage where she'd lived happily all her married life. My grandad worked at the nearby racecourse and the job came with the lovely little tied cottage on the edge of a wood.

As a child growing up, I'd loved visiting them at their cottage. I spent loads of time playing in their huge garden, which was full of flowers and vegetables (my grandad had green fingers) and 'helping' my gran with her baking in the tiny cottage kitchen.

It was part of the fabric of my youth, that cottage, and I adored it.

So did Gran. And when, soon after my grandad died, she was forced to move out, that was when her problems began.

Packing up a lifetime of possessions would be hard enough for anyone, let alone someone newly bereaved and past her seventieth birthday. We all helped as much as we could, but it still proved too much for her, and within months she was diagnosed with anxiety and angina. Six months after that, a shadow of her former vibrant self, she suffered a fatal heart attack and died in hospital with Mum and me at her bedside.

Of course, we'll never know for certain if it was the traumatic effect of leaving her beloved home that led to Gran's dramatic decline in health. All we knew was that the happy, energetic, full-of-life woman she was before the move had vanished. And deep down, we both knew why.

A single tear rolls down my cheek as I stare into the darkness.

It's different for Mum, I know. She's only spent a few years at Wonershly Hall. But in that time, she's made so many lovely, supportive friends, it's as if she's lived there a whole lot longer. She and Archie have found the perfect home there and losing it would be a terrible blow.

As Archie said, Mum wouldn't understand why she was being forced to leave the place she loves. She has moments of lucidity, but they're becoming less frequent as the months pass, and I desperately want her to live out her days feeling safe and secure and happy in a familiar place.

For me, that means making sure she and Archie can stay right where they are, in their cosy flat, surrounded by all their friends and cared for by the wonderful staff there, who all love Mum and Archie.

Thankfully, she seems to be on a plateau at the moment, as regards the dementia. But what if they leave Wonershly Hall and the disruption of the move hastens her descent into the bewilderment of her illness? I'd truly never forgive myself . . .

A sob escapes and I turn to Zak, frightened and alone in the darkness but not wanting to wake him.

Right then and there, I vow to do whatever it takes to keep Mum in her home. *I'll rob a bank if I have to!* My lovely gran

had her life and her happiness cut short by cruel circumstances.

I will *not* let the same thing happen to Mum . . .

Jaz

CHAPTER SEVEN

It's the following weekend and I'm out with some of the girls having dinner at the Starlight Café in the Swan Hotel and chatting about – of all things – love and romance.

It all started when Madison pointed out that Jen had that flushed, sparkly-eyed loved-up look about her, now that she was seeing Harlyn.

‘Remember how it felt being newly in love and feeling you could leap over the moon if he asked you to?’ Maddy sighed, staring dreamily into space. Then she made a comical face. ‘Actually, no, I can't. Jack snores for Britain and he cuts his toenails in the living room when I'm not there. He swears he doesn't, but I keep finding little half-moons on the sofa arms and digging into my bare feet.’

‘Oh, yuk!’ Katja makes a retching sound. ‘At least Richard doesn't do that.’

Fen grins at her. ‘My delightful brother might not cut his toenails on the sofa. But he used to be terrible about leaving his wet towels on the bathroom floor.’

Katja nods. ‘Nothing changes, then. I keep thinking I should just leave them where he's dropped them, but my tolerance to mess is so much lower than his, so I always relent and pick them up.’

Maddy catches my eye and her face falls. ‘Sorry, Jaz. I'm being insensitive again, aren't I?’

‘What? No, of course you're not.’

‘But you haven't *got* a love life at the moment. Not even a bad one.’

I laugh. ‘Well, thanks for reminding me, Maddy.’

Katja shakes her head at her friend with a despairing grin.

‘What?’ demands Maddy. ‘I mean, there's nothing *wrong* with being single. In fact, there must be loads of advantages.’

‘Are there?’ I grin at her as she squirms. ‘Name some, then.’

She shrugs. ‘There’s no one around to snaffle all your chocolate on Valentine’s Day?’ She frowns. ‘Mind you, if you’re single, you probably won’t *get* any chocolate, so that buggers up that theory.’

Everyone chuckles and Katja says, ‘Ah, the meaning of life according to Madison. I think I’m desperately in need of a refill.’ She holds out her wineglass.

Madison looks at me guiltily.

‘It’s fine. I’m okay,’ I reassure her. ‘Who needs a sex life, anyway?’

‘Well, not Jack, apparently.’ She sighs. ‘I’m even thinking of suggesting a bit of kinky role play to liven up our evenings.’

Clara laughs. ‘I’d hardly call role play kinky. Nipple clamps, now. That’s something I can *never* get my head around.’

Madison snorts. ‘Although I bet Rory wouldn’t mind . . . getting his head around them . . . sort of thing.’ She blushes. ‘Sorry. Sorry.’

‘What’s with all the apologies? We’re among friends here,’ laughs Clara.

‘I know. But . . . well, you might not believe this. But . . . I’m a bit rubbish when it comes to . . . um . . . sex play.’

‘Well, that I do *not* believe,’ teases Primrose.

‘I am, though,’ she protests, red-faced. ‘I think it’s because I haven’t got a romantic bone in my body. So if a man talks dirty to me, I just find it funny and I start guffawing all over the place. Which kind of ruins the whole sexy-sexy vibe thing. I’m just so awkward. And Jack doesn’t help by being the least romantic man in the universe.’

I smile. ‘Jack’s lovely.’

‘He is. I totally agree, Jaz. But the other night, I got down on my knees in front of him, skimpy T-shirt and everything . . .

arched my back and smiled up at him provocatively. At which point he frowned and said, ‘You could injure your spine doing that, Mads. Is it a new yoga pose?’

Everyone starts laughing, and I think how lucky I am to have such a lovely, supportive bunch of friends. I’m not sure how I’d have coped these past months if I hadn’t had the likes of Ellie and Fen watching over me like mother hens . . . and Katja, Primrose and Madison on the end of the phone when I’m having a bad night . . .

Even Clara and Jen, who I’ve just got to know fairly recently, have been brilliant. They’re both totally loved up but I can tell they tone down their obvious joy when I’m around. Clara’s away at dance teaching college this year, but she’s forever coming back at weekends to see Rory.

I glance at Clara’s best friend, Jen. She’s chatting and laughing with the others, but she keeps glancing at the door expectantly. Her lovely new man, Harlyn, who organises the local food bank charity, is collecting her after the meal and whisking her off to his place for the night – leaving her son, Luke, in Clara’s capable hands – and Jen’s happiness is written all over her face. so much so that my heart aches a little observing it.

It reminds me of the first flush of romance when Harry and I got together.

Everything was a bright, sparkly adventure because we were doing it together – even something as technically boring as a trip to the supermarket. I still don’t really understand what happened to us. I guess daily life got in the way, we lost our closeness and we weren’t strong enough to survive Harry’s affair.

‘Penny for them.’ Primrose nudges me. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Not yet. But I think I’m getting there. Harry and I have worked out a routine with Emma that suits us both, and I’ve decided I quite like living on my own. I’ve also stopped wanting to kill him every time I’m in his presence.’

She grins. ‘That’s a good start.’

It's not strictly true – I'd still like to kill him – but after all the drama of the past months, it's a relief to have some peace at last. Harry's moved into a little cottage on the outskirts of Guildford and he has Luna, our dog, with him for now.

'I hope you didn't think I was being patronising when I loaned you that self-help book?' Primrose is saying.

'No, of course I didn't.' I grin at her. 'I was quite surprised, I must admit. I've never read a self-help book in my life. But I'm reading a chapter every night, and honestly, I think it's helping a lot. I'm focusing on the future instead of dwelling on the past. I'm taking up tap dancing!' I glance quickly at Madison, but she's chatting to Fen and didn't hear me.

Primrose's eyes widen in surprise. 'Hey, good for you!' She reaches over and squeezes my hand. 'You're doing brilliantly, Jaz. Honestly, you are.'

'Thank you. That means a lot.' My eyes are filling up. Laughing, I brush away the tears. 'I just wish Ellie was more herself.'

'I know.' Primrose glances at the door then looks at her watch. 'When she said she'd be a bit late, I didn't think it would be *this* late. She's even missed dessert, which is not like Ellie at all.'

'I think she's worried about her mum.'

'Yes. She was saying that Wonershly Hall have put up their prices and she's not sure how they're going to afford to keep Rose there?'

I nod. But then we're distracted by Fen hooting with laughter at the other end of the table. She catches my eye and shrugs. 'We were talking about baby names and Maddy just told me a twin joke I hadn't heard.'

'Ooh, do share,' I urge.

Maddy grins. 'What did the drummer name his twin girls?'

'I don't know, Maddy. What *did* the drummer name his twin girls?'

She mimes the drumming action. 'Anna One. Anna Two.'

A chorus of groans follows this, just as the door opens and Harlyn appears. He comes over and chats to us all for a while, and I think how handsome he looks. Maybe it's because of his new, clean-shaven look – no more ponytail – or perhaps it's just because he's in love. It's certainly mutual, I think, as I watch him and Jen go off together.

Clara smiles, her hands over her heart, watching as he loops his arm around Jen in the doorway and they kiss. 'It's lovely to see her so happy, after everything she's been through, splitting with Jake. She and Luke are loving taking care of Gran's cottage while she's away in New York with Freda. And Luke just adores Harlyn's dog.'

'Rolo,' murmurs Fen. 'Lovely name. They're like a little family already.'

'Cute,' agrees Katja. 'Listen, shouldn't we be talking about cheesecake for this competition? I mean, obviously we've been waiting for Ellie to arrive. But there's no reason why we can't throw a few ideas around?'

'Cheesecake?' Primrose looks at Katja, puzzled.

'Yes. The café has made it to the final three . . .'

Primrose nods. 'Of the regional café competition. Yes, I know that. But what's this about cheesecake?'

'Right, well, apparently the winner will be the café that comes up with – and I quote – “the most deliciously different cheesecake”.'

'Oh, right. Ooh, lovely.' Primrose grins. 'My personal favourite is strawberry, but I guess that won't cut it.'

'It's hardly *different*,' points out Maddy. 'I was thinking about maybe mixing sweet and sour. You know, like chocolate and chilli?'

'Ugh. Not sure about that,' says Fen. 'But mind you, lots of things taste funny to me these days.' She pats her bump fondly and gives a huge yawn. 'Crikey, I'm exhausted. I think I'm going to have to leave you folks. Rob's just texted me to say he's got the milk in the pan ready for my Horlicks and the jar of Branston pickle at the ready.'

There's a burst of laughter and a range of disgusted noises at the very thought.

Grinning, Fen gets up to go. 'There you are. That's my contribution to the cheesecake challenge. Horlicks and Branston pickle flavour. Sounds like a winner to me!' She waves and heads for the door, weaving her way between the tables.

At last, as we're finishing our coffee, Ellie arrives. She's out of breath, as if she's been running, and full of apologies for being so late.

'I hardly slept last night so I was really tired today.' She sinks into her seat with a sigh and stares wearily into the distance. 'I thought I'd have a quick forty winks after work but I fell into a really deep sleep. Zak's out tonight so he wasn't there to wake me up. And Maisie's having a sleep-over at her friend's house, so she wasn't there either.'

'Hey, don't worry. It gave us a chance to talk about you,' I joke, hoping to put a smile on her face.

'Have some dessert, at least,' Katja urges her.

'I honestly couldn't eat a thing.' She grins. 'Never thought I'd say that when there's dessert at stake!'

'Is it Rose?' asks Primrose gently. 'Is that why you couldn't sleep?'

Ellie nods. 'I just can't bear the thought of Mum having to leave the place when she's settled there with so many lovely friends around her. She wouldn't understand why she was having to pack up. And Archie loves it there as well.' She swallows hard. 'Honestly, I've thought about it from every possible angle, trying to work out a way that we could afford to keep Mum there. But there's really only one solution that I can see. I keep coming back to it. There's no other way.'

She sighs, her shoulders slumping miserably.

'I'm going to have to sell the café.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

There's a stunned silence. Everyone is staring at Ellie, dumbfounded.

Then Katja blurts out, 'But you can't sell up, Ellie! You love that café.'

'I can see your dilemma, though,' Primrose sighs. 'Rose has to be your number one priority.'

'Of course she does,' says Katja. 'But surely there must be another way to find the funds to keep Rose at Wonershly Hall. There has to be.'

'What about our jobs?' demands Madison, looking appalled. 'I love working for you, Ellie. And it's not like I'm qualified to do anything else.'

'I know, I know. And that makes it a thousand times worse.' Ellie pushes her hands through her hair, looking more distraught than anyone as she looks around the table. 'You can't imagine how sorry I am to be putting this on all of you. My best hope is that I can sell the café as a going concern, and the new owners will decide to keep you all on.'

I swallow, hardly able to believe this is happening. Katja is glaring at Madison after her insensitive remark about jobs, and I really can't blame her. Much as I love Maddy, I wish she could be a little more diplomatic at times.

'That's not something you should be worrying about, Ellie,' Katja says. 'We'll all be fine. You just need to concentrate on finding the right solution for your mum and yourself.'

Primrose nods. 'I totally get where you're coming from, Ellie. If Gran was in danger of losing her home, I'd sell everything I owned if I had to, to keep her and Mick there. But I also know that café is a labour of love for you. Plus, there's an awful lot of people around here who would be really sad if the Little Duck Pond Café changed hands – or even worse, if it had to close altogether.'

‘I agree,’ murmurs Clara. ‘There’s so much affection for the café, and that’s all down to you, Ellie. As Katja says, maybe there’s another way?’

Ellie rubs her hands wearily over her face and gives a heavy sigh. ‘I wish there was, Clara. I really do. But I lay awake most of the night, trying to come up with a solution. Zak has said he’ll help, if I want to try and hold onto the café, but his self-employed income as an author is different every month and not something we can rely on like a steady wage. I’ve also thought about remortgaging the café to release some equity, but in this economic climate, I doubt any bank would be interested – plus, the interest on the new loan would be so much higher than our current fixed rate, and that alone might be enough to tip us over the edge financially.’

She shrugs and we all fall into a gloomy silence.

Then Ellie rallies herself, placing her hands on the table and pasting on a smile. ‘Hey, cheer up, everyone. Maybe there’s someone more qualified than me, just waiting for a golden opportunity like this. And if so, they’d be mad not to keep all you amazing people on their staff.’ She laughs. ‘Maybe they’ll even give *me* a job! But whatever happens, it won’t be the end of the Little Duck Pond Café. I’m certain of that.’

She draws in a deep breath and breathes it out slowly. ‘My mum’s happiness is way more important than any attachment I might have to that café. It’s just bricks and mortar at the end of the day. And the flat above it is really too small for the three of us, plus a dog. Just think, we’ll be able to move to a little house or a cottage instead, which would be lovely.’

We all nod, and I try to look on the bright side along with Ellie . . . but I can tell that beneath their smiles, everyone gathered around this table is still in a state of absolute shock at her announcement . . .

Later, as we’re all leaving the restaurant and standing around chatting on the pavement outside, I manage to catch Ellie on her own.

‘Are you really serious? About selling the café and the flat?’

I’m expecting her to prevaricate a bit and say she’s not sure yet . . . maybe tell me she’s still weighing up her options.

But she doesn’t.

‘I have to, Jaz,’ she says bluntly. ‘There’s no other way to keep Mum where she is.’

‘So would you be selling the bakery as well?’

‘Yes. I’ll try and keep the on-line business going, though, and definitely the baking school.’ She frowns. ‘The baking school’s the only thing bringing in decent money right now.’

‘Wouldn’t it be best to wait a bit . . . explore other possibilities?’

‘But there are none.’ She shrugs. ‘It’s no use, Jaz. I’ve put the café, the bakery and the flat on the market already, and the estate agent thinks they’re likely to be snapped up.’

I stare at her, stunned.

Delving in her bag, she brings out a slip of paper and passes it to me. It’s the details of the tap-dancing class. Then she gives me a hug and walks quickly away.

CHAPTER NINE

A couple of days later, I'm walking along the high street in a daze, trying to remember the vital thing at the top of my list (since the final split with Harry, my head is all over the place), when I bump into Sylvia and Bertha.

They tell me they're off to their life drawing class.

'What? Really?' I frown, not sure whether they're pulling my leg or not.

Bertha's eyes sparkle with mischief. 'You can keep your knitting and your slippers. We'd much rather get out there and admire a half-naked man.'

'Olga doesn't approve, of course,' says Sylvia. 'She thinks we're on a slippery slope to total degeneracy.'

Bertha nods. 'Next step, affairs with toy boys apparently.'

I smile, thinking fondly of Katja's straight-talking gran. I can well imagine her pithy comments on the subject. Olga sometimes holds court in the café alongside Sylvia, the pair of them manning the counter, and the banter is top drawer.

'Not that our life model is just out of nappies,' smiles Sylvia. 'He's fifty-five, if he's a day, but that's young to us.'

Chuckling, I ask, 'And what do Ron and Mick think about the life-drawing classes?'

'Oh, Ron loves it,' says Bertha at once. 'It means he's got a whole evening, uninterrupted, working on his beloved train set in the garage. Planning another branch line . . . painting a station master, or whatever.'

Sylvia nods. 'Mick claims he misses me but I caught him drinking whisky and watching an old episode of *Dallas* when I got back last time, and there was a distinct whiff of cigar smoke in the air.' She leans closer, murmuring, 'I think he had a crush on Pam Ewing, back in the day.'

'Didn't we all,' snorts Bertha.

‘Oh, I was more a Sue Ellen supporter myself. What that woman went through at the hands of that dastardly J.R.’

I stare at them, baffled. ‘I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about.’

They both start to laugh.

‘I wouldn’t worry, Jaz,’ says Sylvia. ‘Neither do we half the time.’

‘Actually, speaking of new interests.’ I shrug. ‘I’m actually thinking of taking tap-dancing lessons.’

‘Gosh, really?’ Bertha’s eyes widen. ‘You know, just last night, Ron and I were watching one of those old Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films.’

‘They were dancers, weren’t they?’

‘They were dancers all right.’ Sylvia has a far-off look in her eyes. ‘Fred Astaire. What a performer! Greatest dancer in film history.’

‘His tap dancing took your breath away,’ agrees Bertha. ‘So light on his feet, it looked almost impossible.’

I smile. ‘I must watch one of those movies . . . get some tips before I go to a class. I guess they’re all in black and white?’

‘Nothing wrong with black and white,’ says Bertha. ‘They knew how to make films in those days.’

‘They certainly did,’ agrees Sylvia. ‘I’ve got a stack of Fred Astaire DVDs. You can borrow them any time you like, Jaz.’

‘Really? Oh, thanks.’

‘Even better,’ says Bertha. ‘Why don’t we have a Fred Astaire *night* some time? We could watch the movies and drink elegant cocktails like they did back then.’

Sylvia nods. ‘I’m up for that. What do you think, Jaz?’

I smile at them. ‘Sounds great,’ I say truthfully. ‘Let’s do it over at my house, though. Then your menfolk can enjoy their trains and their cigars in peace.’

‘Great. I’ll bring the gin and the Martini,’ says Sylvia.

‘And I’ll bring some mixers and a main course?’ offers Bertha.

‘Right.’ I laugh, swept along by their enthusiasm. ‘Well, I guess I’ll think up an elegant starter, then. And I’ll make a gorgeous dessert worthy of a 1930s dinner party.’

‘Lovely.’ Bertha smiles. ‘Maybe an evening next week?’

I nod. ‘Suits me.’

‘And how are you, anyway, Jaz?’ asks Sylvia, laying her hand on my arm. ‘I know things haven’t been . . . great recently.’

She’s talking about Harry’s affair, and for a moment, my heart plunges into my shoes. But I paste on a smile and tell them I’m doing okay. I don’t want to spoil the upbeat mood by telling them about Harry and me splitting up for good. They’ll find out soon enough, anyway.

When we part, I walk away smiling at the prospect of an evening with the pair. It’s all so unexpected, which makes it even better somehow. I probably wouldn’t have done any of this – the movie night or the tap dancing – when I was with Harry. When you’re in a couple, I guess you can get a bit lazy and unadventurous.

It feels good. Despite being rocked by Ellie’s news about the café, there’s a definite spring in my step that’s been missing of late, after talking to Sylvia and Bertha.

This could be a whole new start for me, in more ways than one . . .

CHAPTER TEN

My new neighbours are such a noisy, inconsiderate bunch. They've been in for a week, although I still haven't managed to catch sight of them. But there must be at least two of them, because one person couldn't possibly make *all* that commotion themselves.

As the days go by, I can feel myself growing more and more irritated.

It's lunchtime and I'm sitting at the kitchen table, trying to apply for a job I really want, but I keep being distracted. The tap in the kitchen has been dripping for a while and Harry kept saying he'd fix it, but he never got round to it. Which means I'm stuck with finding a solution. And the drip-drip-drip is getting worse.

With a sigh, I leave the kitchen, closing the door, and retreat to the living room.

But no sooner have I got myself comfy on the sofa, laptop on my knee, when a loud hammering starts up next door, intruding into my thoughts and making it impossible to concentrate.

Fen told me yesterday that her mum was advertising for another tour guide at Brambleberry Manor and knowing I'm keen to get more regular work – on top of my occasional Zumba and yoga classes – now that Emma is at nursery, she suggested I get my application in straight away. I know I've got a good chance as I worked there before Emma was born, but the deadline is tomorrow, so I really need to get this done. But the hammering is winding me up like an old-fashioned watch spring.

I suppose I could go next door and introduce myself, and casually ask how long their refurbishments are going to last. But I'm really not in the right head space at the moment to be appearing on their doorstep with a casserole and a smile and purring, 'Welcome to the neighbourhood'. Not that I'd ever do the whole casserole thing. But if I saw them, I'd definitely

make a point of saying hello and having a little chat about bin days and suchlike.

But so far our paths haven't crossed. So the only evidence that they even exist is the thumping and scraping at all hours (last night, it sounded as if they were trying to lug a piano up the stairs) and the eternal noise of that blasted drill which sets my teeth on edge and always sounds like it's going to burst through my wall at any second. (When I hear it, I picture a dentist, wielding his drill with a manic smile after tying down unfortunate people to practice on.)

To be fair, when you move house it does usually entail a bit of upheaval and noise. And I'm doing my best not to storm round there and demand that they shut the frog up. But it's hard when you're still licking your wounds after a bad break-up and feeling you just want some peace to sort things out in your head. (Including this bloody job application!)

In the end, I give up and make a sandwich for lunch, taking it through to the sitting room and switching on the news.

But I've only just started on my cup of camomile tea (tastes vile but it's supposed to be relaxing and any port in a storm), when there's the most almighty crash that propels me right out of my chair and has me racing through to the kitchen in a panic, thinking the ceiling must have caved in, at least.

Thankfully, the kitchen is intact, but as I stand in the doorway, my heart still beating frantically, my pent-up annoyance soars to the surface in a huge explosion. Hot tears burn my eyes but I blink them away.

They've crossed the line now. This is too much.

Trembling and full of righteous anger, I march out of the house and down my driveway, slamming the gate behind me, before wrenching open next door's gate and marching to the front door.

I'm primed for a fight, but just as I'm raising my fist to bang on the door with all the force I can muster, the bloody thing opens. Knocked off balance, I'm unable to stop myself from stumbling over the threshold.

The man who opened the door is staring at me as I stand there, panting and grasping at my chest. His startled expression probably mirrors mine, except I can't really see him properly because he's wearing these weird protective eye goggles.

I register the dark hair and the hint of a smile that looks oddly familiar.

Do I know him?

And then he removes the goggles and I realise. Last time I saw him he was grinning inanely into the lens of my mobile phone.

Photo-bombing my perfect shot of Harry and Vivien!

'What the hell was that noise?' I gasp. 'I honestly thought my ceiling had collapsed.'

Covered in dust and wielding a sledgehammer, he grimaces. 'I thought you were out. Your car's not there.'

'That's because my *car* is at the *garage* being *MOT'd*.'

'Right. Sorry. My mistake.' He shrugs, indicating the pile of rubble in the hallway. 'I'm extending the kitchen by knocking down an internal wall.'

'Well, how nice for you!' I snap. 'Judging by the racket you've been making, I was starting to suspect you were trying to smash your way through the dividing wall, into my house next door.'

'It's that bad?' He looks concerned.

'Yes. It's that bad.'

He doesn't appear to have recognised me as the deranged woman who was hiding in a bush on the village green. That's a relief, at least!

'I make it a rule not to work after eight,' he says.

'And I make it a rule to be a considerate neighbour. Call me over-fussy but I happen to think people should give notice

when they're about to scare the living daylights out of the people living next door, rampaging all over the place with their drills and sledgehammers.'

He seems taken aback by my passionately delivered speech. But all he says is, 'Sorry. How about a coffee?' He puts down the sledgehammer, leaning it against the wall. 'I'm due a break anyway.'

I stare at him. Is he joking?

'I can't offer you a seat as well, unfortunately . . . well, not one that isn't covered in dust. The sitting room might be the best bet.' He opens a door and peers inside. Then he grins. 'Yup. Not a total disaster zone. Not yet, anyway.'

I grit my teeth. 'So the work will be carrying on?'

He gives an apologetic wince. 'For a while yet, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, well, that's just great.' My shoulders slump in defeat.

'The main stuff is done, though, if that's any help? No more walls to come down.'

'Well, that's a relief.'

'It's a "no" to the apology coffee, then?' He indicates the open door to the living room.

I snort. 'Do I really look like I'm in the mood for a hot drink laced with cement dust?'

He grins. 'To be fair, no. But if you give me a minute to get changed, I could get you an Americano over at Roastery?'

'What?' I stare at him. 'You mean that awful, characterless place with the sort of atmosphere that's only notable because there *is* no atmosphere? The café with enough "stylish" chrome to make taps for the entire population of Sunnybrook? Thanks for the offer, but no thanks.' I turn to leave, still fizzing with anger.

'I'm sure the owner of the café would appreciate your advice,' he says.

'I'm sure they would. And if I ever meet them, I'll make sure to give it.'

‘You already did.’

‘Sorry?’ I swing round.

‘That “awful, characterless place” happens to be one of three micro-roastery cafés owned by . . . (he grins, doing a pretend drum-roll) . . . well, me.’

I feel myself redden. ‘You *own* that place?’

He nods. ‘I do. We roast our own coffee on the premises for a better flavour.’

I stare at him as something slots into place. That explains why he was so interested in my opinion of Ellie’s café. ‘So the Little Duck Pond Café is your main competition, then.’

‘Our *main competition*?’ He laughs. ‘I hardly think so. It’s like your granny’s front room in there. All those pink hearts and cutesy framed signs. “This Café Runs On Love, Laughter & Coffee”. I mean, *really*? Also, I’ve tried the coffee and it happens to be as lacklustre and uninspiring as the faded rose wallpaper.’

‘Lacklustre and uninspiring?’ I glare at him. ‘What a load of rubbish. I can only assume you have even less taste than I originally thought.’

‘I stand by my assessment,’ he says firmly, but with a slight twitch of his lips. ‘I do know a bit about coffee.’

‘Oh, really?’ My tone is rich with sarcasm. ‘Well, let me tell you something. That café just happens to be the hub of the community here. The villagers love it and there’s no way your *swanky establishment* could ever match up. Not in a million years.’

He makes a noise in his throat as if to say, *I wouldn’t be too sure about that*. ‘Our customers are very discerning. They appreciate quality, which is why we take so much care sourcing the coffee and blending until the flavour is perfect. And actually, footfall has been really excellent at my *swanky establishment* since we opened a month ago.’

‘Yes, because people are curious. But once they’ve sampled your wares, I doubt they’ll be desperate to return for more.’

‘Story of my life,’ he remarks drily.

I glare at him. I can’t believe how angry I feel, hearing him criticising Ellie’s café like that, and I’d dearly like to wipe that smug smile off his face.

‘The thing is, you seem to have a different special offer on every week, so it’s no wonder you’ve been pulling in the customers. But offering two-for-one deals on coffee and cake is hardly going to make you a millionaire by next week, is it? In fact, I suspect you’re barely breaking even at the moment.’

His composure falters a little at that.

Ha! I’ve hit on a grain of truth there, then.

But next second, the irritating smile is back in place. Looking slightly perplexed, he leans against the wall, studying me. His arms are folded, the faded T-shirt he’s wearing showing off his biceps to good effect – a fact of which he’s no doubt well aware!

‘I take it you’re the Little Duck Pond Café’s biggest supporter, then?’ he says.

I shrug. ‘Ellie’s one of my best friends. It’s her café.’

‘Ah.’ He has the decency to look sheepish, glancing down at his feet and nodding slowly.

‘Embarrassed?’ I snap. ‘Realising you’ve put your size nines in it?’

He looks up. ‘Size elevens. And actually, I was just realising why you’re so passionate in the café’s defence. I really admire your loyalty to your friend. I’m Milo, by the way. Milo Masterson.’

He smiles. It’s the first full-on, genuine smile he’s given me, and it has the effect of totally transforming his face. He could even pass for handsome in the right light. Wrong-footed by his compliment and *that smile*, I appear to have run out of banter, witty or otherwise, so I just glare at him instead.

‘And you are?’ His dark brows merge quizzically.

‘Sorry?’

He grins and flattens a large hand against his chest. ‘Me, Milo. You?’

‘Oh. Right. Jasmine. Well, *Jaz*.’

‘Nice to meet you, Jaz. Although I’m not sure the feeling is entirely mutual.’

I raise sarcastic eyebrows. ‘Gosh, whatever makes you say that?’

‘A spooky ability to read people’s minds, perhaps?’ Grinning, he bends to pick up what looks like a yellow tennis ball lying nearby. He throws it up in the air and catches it.

‘Amazing. I’m living next door to a psychic,’ I say drolly. ‘Could my day get any better?’

He laughs, squeezing the ball in his hand several times. ‘Well, it *could* – when you hear that I won’t be living next door to you forever.’

‘You won’t?’ I can’t help my hopeful raise of the eyebrows.

‘Nope.’ He throws the anti-stress ball up in the air again and catches it deftly. ‘I’m renovating this place to sell on. But there’s still a bit to do, so I’m afraid you won’t be getting rid of me as a neighbour in the very immediate future.’

‘Right.’ I grit my teeth.

‘But don’t lose hope.’ His brown eyes flash wickedly. ‘I’ve got my eye on another property – which could well turn out to be my permanent home in Sunnybrook. As soon as it’s fixed, I’ll be off.’

I nod. ‘Excellent. Well, good luck with your house hunt. Let’s hope it reaches a very speedy conclusion.’

He laughs. ‘Thank you, Jaz. I hope so, too. So I really can’t tempt you to sample a decent coffee for a change?’

‘No, thank you.’

‘You probably wouldn’t appreciate the subtleties of it, anyway. After drinking your friend’s dishwater “coffee”, I’d imagine your tastebuds have probably run off in terror, never to return.’ He grins. ‘Joke.’

I throw him a mock smile. ‘That’s very funny. Look, could you please keep the noise and disturbance to a minimum in future. That’s all I wanted to say. And by the way, I know you think you’re hilarious but frankly, I find you about as funny as a wet lettuce.’

‘Ow!’ He clutches his heart with his free hand. ‘Jaz, I’m wounded.’

I purse my lips and walk away, wondering how on earth I managed to resist the urge to snatch that annoying squeezey anti-stress ball from his hand and aim it at his head!

‘Oh, Jaz?’ he calls after me.

‘What?’ I demand, without turning around.

‘Hidden in any good bushes lately?’

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Next morning when I wake, my mind immediately drifts to my encounter with Milo Masterson. I've never met such an infuriating man in my life. Just because he owns a few 'micro-roastery' cafés (I mean, seriously, how pretentious can you get?), he thinks he's the coffee expert around here – and a comedian into the bargain.

Well, I definitely wasn't laughing yesterday. Especially when he was having a go at Ellie's café and rubbishing her coffee. Thank goodness he'll be moving out soon. Then I might get some nice, friendly, *considerate* neighbours instead . . .

I manage to get my application in for the tour guide job at Brambleberry Manor, but when I scan the job sites on my laptop, I can't find anything else that would dovetail with Emma's nursery hours. It's a worry because I really want to be working again. Harry's being very generous with the allowance he's giving me for Emma, and he's going to carry on paying the mortgage so we can stay here. But I want to be independent. I don't want to have to rely on my ex for everything.

Leaving the house to collect my car from the garage and do a supermarket shop, I glance across at next door, but there's no sign of Milo the Magnificent or his car, thank goodness.

Driving back later, the boot full of bags, I'm crossing my fingers that I manage to land the tour guide job. It's only part-time, mostly during the week through the peak tourist season, but it'll be a start. Primrose and Katja have both offered to have Emma if I'm asked to do the occasional weekend shift.

My heart sinks as I pull onto the drive. Milo's car is back.

I avoid glancing at his windows as I carry in the bags of shopping, just in case he looks out and I'm required to wave. It feels so awkward and I'm silently fuming. I hate the fact that his presence next door is making me feel uncomfortable in my own home. A person should be able to relax in their own

space. They shouldn't have to be going out of their way to avoid having to talk to their neighbour!

I'm so preoccupied being grumpy that I almost trip over an abandoned scooter that's been left lying beside my gate. I drop one of the bags, wincing because it's got eggs in it, and only just manage to catch hold of the fence to steady myself and stop me falling headlong.

The scooter must belong to little Isla, who lives three houses along from me.

I glance next door to check I wasn't seen and my heart sinks. Milo the Magnificent has popped up at his kitchen window, hair slicked back from the shower, and when he sees me looking over, he grins and gives me a cheerful wave.

So embarrassing.

Trying to muster a little dignity, I give him a stiff wave back and head for the front door. Has he got some sort of antenna that picks up on when I'm making a fool of myself? He certainly seems to enjoy having a laugh at my expense.

Since we had our little 'chat' yesterday, there's been very little noise from next door, though, so that's one good thing. No manic drilling or mysterious thumps. Maybe he's got the message.

I walk into the kitchen, feeling a little brighter. It's possible to live next door to someone and hardly ever see them, isn't it? I should stop allowing Milo Masterson to stress me out, and I should just relax about the whole situation. He'll be moving out soon, anyway. So from now on, I'll smile and pass the time of day if our paths happen to cross but nothing more than that.

But as I unpack the shopping, stacking tins into cupboards and filling the fridge, the doorbell rings, and when I glance out, he's actually standing there on the doorstep. And what's worse, he's seen me looking so I can't pretend I'm otherwise engaged.

When I open the door, he whips a bunch of flowers from behind his back and holds them out. 'To say sorry for all the recent disruption and noise.'

‘Oh.’ I take the rather droopy-looking flowers, which look suspiciously as if he’s picked them from his own back garden. ‘How nice. Thank you.’ *Is that actually a dandelion in there?*

He shrugs, looking pleased with himself. ‘You’re very welcome. We got off on the wrong foot, so I thought . . . peace offering.’

‘Right. Well, that’s very generous of you.’

‘I’m painting today.’ He grins. ‘A silent job so you won’t be disturbed.’

‘Oh, well. That’s great news.’

‘But tomorrow I’ve got a kitchen arriving, so there might be a bit of banging.’ He shrugs apologetically.

‘Right, well, forewarned is forearmed.’ I paste on a smile. ‘That gives me time to invest in some industrial strength earplugs.’

He laughs like I’m joking. (I’m not joking.)

‘I think you’ve left a tap on,’ he points out.

‘I beg your pardon?’

He leans in, cocking his head to one side and listening. ‘My instinct for jobs needing doing is razor sharp these days. It sounds like you’ve either left a tap on or you’ve got a problem with it.’

‘Oh, right.’ I tune in to the steady drum of water against the bowl. ‘Yes, it drips. But it’s fine. I’ll get a plumber in.’

‘A plumber?’ He laughs. ‘Are you rich? A plumber will charge you a fortune when all that’s probably needed is a new washer.’

‘Right.’ *How do I get this annoying man off my doorstep?* ‘Actually, that’s just what I was going to do. Change the washer.’

‘Were you?’ He looks surprised.

‘Yes. I . . . went on YouTube and found out how to do it.’

‘Very enterprising. But have you got the tools for the job? Flat-headed screwdriver, spanner – and a washer, of course?’

I hesitate. (Big mistake.)

Milo nods. ‘Didn’t think so. I’ll just nip back and get my toolkit. I’ll have it fixed in a jiffy.’ And he sprints off down the drive.

Sighing, I leave the door open, dropping the wildflowers on a bench in the kitchen as I carry on putting the groceries away. It would be churlish to refuse his help. But really, I’m not sure which Milo I dislike the most. The noisy, smug-faced comedian. Or the newly helpful Milo, who’s obviously trying to assuage his guilt at being the renovating neighbour-from-hell by being overly nice to me . . .

He’s back a minute later, and he’s whistling now. Tunelessly. ‘Right. I’ll just be a tick. Then I’ll be out of your hair.’ I follow him through to the kitchen and stand in the doorway, watching, as he hunkers down to turn off the water under the sink.

He grins up at me. ‘Wouldn’t say no to a cuppa while I’m working.’

I give a faint snort as I cross to fill the kettle. ‘But not instant coffee presumably?’

He shrugs. ‘Don’t mind.’

‘Oh, right. I thought that since you own several “micro-roastery cafés”, a cup of granules with hot water might insult your delicate palate?’

‘Not at all. I use instant myself. I suppose it’s a bit like being a chef. When you’re serving up *haute cuisine* all day, the last thing you want to do is start making complicated food when you get home.’

‘Right. Well, instant coffee it is, then.’

‘Actually, tea, please.’

Flicking my eyes to the ceiling, I manage to hold my tongue as I replace the coffee jar and drop a teabag into a mug.

He's not getting it made in a teapot. Hopefully he likes it with lots of milk then it'll cool faster and he'll be gone sooner.

'Tea black, no sugar,' he says.

I make myself scarce while he's working, but I can't concentrate on anything properly while he's in the house so I mainly stand and stare out of the window.

I'm quite surprised to hear him call my name just a short while later. 'All done! I'll leave you in peace.' When I go through to the kitchen, he's throwing tools into a box and he demonstrates that the tap is no longer dripping.

I nod. 'That's great. Thank you.' I'm genuinely grateful to him. The tap had been driving me mad. 'Erm . . . how did you get to be so handy?' I ask, feeling that a little pleasant small talk is probably in order, since he's done me a good turn.

'Oh, my dad's a builder. He used to do everything that needed fixing around the house so I learned from the best. Whenever anything goes wrong in one of the cafés, I can generally sort it myself, and it's come in really handy lately with this business of renovating houses. I like getting my hands dirty.' He nods next door. 'That's the first renovation I've done on my own, but I'm really enjoying it. Very satisfying seeing the finished result.'

'I'm sure. Well, thanks again. I owe you.'

He grins. 'No problem. If you really want to thank me, next time you're making those, you can bake a few for me as well.' He nods at the iced lemon cupcakes on the counter under a glass dome.

'Oh. I should have offered you one with your tea. Would you like one now?'

He shakes his head. 'It's fine. But for future reference, I'd prefer chocolate cake?' he says, as he heads away.

'Right, well, I'll make sure to remember that,' I say drily, as I follow him to the front door.

The cheeky bugger!

I make sure my hint of a smile has vanished by the time he turns around.

‘More cake, less icing. I don’t like a sickly cupcake.’ He’s grinning openly now, deliberately winding me up.

I laugh and shake my head. ‘Right. Noted.’

‘Excellent.’ He lingers on the doorstep. ‘So what do you do, Jaz?’

‘Oh, well, I’ve got a two-year-old. Emma.’

He nods. ‘I noticed. At nursery, is she?’

‘She is. Her dad’s picking her up from there today . . .’

We exchange a look and I just know he’s going to ask if we’re together. So I pre-empt him, saying waspishly, ‘We split a week ago. Just in case you were wondering.’

‘Oh.’ He looks taken aback. ‘I’m sorry. No, I was actually going to say two-year-olds are wonderful things. But they’re also more work than a full-time job.’

‘Yes.’ I smile. ‘In a nutshell. But I really want to start working again. I used to be a tour guide at Brambleberry Manor and I’ve applied to go back there.’

‘Interesting.’ He nods. ‘You’ll have to give me the tour some time.’

‘If I get the job.’

He smiles. ‘Well, good luck. Better get back to the painting.’

‘Of course. Have you bought the house of your dreams yet?’

‘Erm . . . well, not yet.’ He hesitates, looking down. ‘But I’ve put in an offer on a place.’

‘Oh. Brilliant.’ *That means he’ll be moving out soon.* ‘Is the house in Sunnybrook?’

He nods, looking oddly sheepish. ‘It’ll be quite a big renovation project – if my offer is accepted, of course.’

‘Looks like we’re both on tenterhooks, then, waiting for replies.’

He nods.

‘So where is it exactly? This big renovation project? I’ve lived in Sunnybrook a good few years now. I’ll probably know the property you’re talking about.’

He gives me an odd look. ‘Actually, you do know it. Very well, in fact.’

‘Do I?’

He nods. ‘It’s not actually a house at the moment. It’s . . . a café.’

I stare at him, a feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach. ‘A café?’ My head is spinning. ‘You surely can’t mean . . .?’

He nods.

My heart is banging furiously. ‘But the Little Duck Pond Café is a *café*, not a house. You can’t seriously be thinking of buying it and changing it back into a dwelling?’

He shrugs apologetically. ‘Actually, that’s exactly what I’m thinking. It’s the perfect location for a house . . . in the heart of the village . . . lovely views over the fields at the back and across the village green at the front. It’s a no-brainer, really. Your friend has decided to sell up, for whatever reason, and I’d be very happy to be her buyer.’

‘So is that why you were asking me about the café when I first met you, then?’ I demand. ‘I thought it was a bit strange. But all along, you had your eye on it as a possible future *project*?’

He doesn’t reply, just shrugs again, awkwardly.

‘So basically, Ellie’s being pressurised into selling the café to you?’ I shake my head, feeling sick at the whole idea of it being turned back into a house. ‘I can’t believe it. I really can’t.’

‘Well, I’m hardly *pressurising* her,’ he corrects me. ‘It’s obviously Ellie’s decision to sell. You’re talking as if I’ve sent the heavies in and threatened her! All I’ve done is put in an offer. It hasn’t even been accepted yet.’

I glare at him, a mix of emotions rushing through me. ‘You do realise you’re going to be tearing the heart out of the community if you wipe the Little Duck Pond Café off the face of the earth. Although I can’t imagine that will bother you in the slightest. Not as long as you get what you want. Oh, and by the way, speaking of cafés, when the villagers find out what you’re planning, I really wouldn’t want to be in your shoes because they’re *not* going to be happy. In fact, I wouldn’t mind betting that ‘Roastery’ (I do the speech marks in the air) will lose business as a result. *I* certainly won’t be setting foot in there from now on, and that’s a promise!’

He shakes his head, smiling sadly as if to say it’s my loss.

Trembling with anger, I close the door on him. Then I retreat to the living room, sinking down on the sofa in a daze.

Does Ellie know her potential buyer has plans to finish the Little Duck Pond Café altogether?

Ellie

CHAPTER TWELVE

‘Mum?’ says Maisie.

‘Yes, love?’

‘Maisie-Moo will be really sad to leave the café and her home.’

I feel my heart clench with emotion. But I paste on a smile. ‘She’ll have a big garden to run around, though, and so will you.’

‘We’ve got a garden at home.’

‘We do,’ I concede. ‘But this is better. We’ve always wanted to have a proper strawberry patch, haven’t we? Just think, if we moved here, we could! And there’s so much more space for our things here. This could be yours.’ I usher her into a lovely bedroom overlooking the back garden.

Zak is waiting outside in the car with Maisie-Moo, our daughter’s little Border Collie dog. Zak’s already inspected the house, which is up for rent. He’s given it his seal of approval, but Maisie asked to come and see it as well.

She looks around the room. ‘It’s bigger than my bedroom at home.’

‘It is. We could buy you a desk and some special bookshelves? And you could have some of those beanbag seats in here, for when your friends come round. It’s definitely big enough.’

Maisie nods, thinking about this, and I feel as if I’m holding my breath, waiting for her verdict. I hate that she’s sad at the thought of leaving. I’m sad, too, although moving out of the flat doesn’t worry me. It’s fine for the three of us, plus a dog, but when anyone comes to stay, it’s such a tight squeeze. I can’t deny it would be lovely having the space afforded us by this modern three-bedroom semi on the outskirts of Sunnybrook. It’s perfect, really.

But the thought of selling the café and the bakery is dragging me so low these days that there are mornings I can’t

face getting out of bed. I do, though – ironically because I’ll have customers and I need to open up . . .

My life truly started when I moved to Sunnybrook and met Zak and Maisie, and took over the café from Sylvia. But now I’m going to be leaving an important part of my recent past behind me. All I’ll have is the wonderful memories of running the café, all the laughs and sometimes the tears, and meeting so many amazing people along the way.

Yes, selling up will mean Mum will be safe and happy where she is for the rest of her life, and that will be such a huge relief to me.

But leaving the café behind me? It hardly seems real.

‘Why do we have to move here?’ Maisie asks, as we walk back downstairs.

I swallow hard. ‘Well, it means your granny can keep living in her lovely home, doesn’t it? And when she comes to stay with us, there’ll be a special guest room for her to sleep in.’

‘She could go and live somewhere else with Archie.’

‘She could. You’re right, my love. But . . . well, sometimes when you get older it’s not so easy changing things in your life. It can make you sad and then you might get ill.’

Maisie frowns, thinking this over. Then her face lights up. ‘I know! Granny could come and live with us. She could sleep in my bed and I could sleep on the floor.’

I smile down at her, my heart squeezing painfully at the hope shining in her eyes. ‘What about Archie?’

‘Could he sleep with you and Dad?’

‘Hm. That might be a *bit* of a tight squeeze. I don’t think it would work. On the whole.’

Despite everything, laughter is bubbling up inside me at the thought. I’m so lucky to have my gorgeous stepdaughter in my life. She makes everything brighter. It’s people that matter. Not a business or bricks and mortar.

I put my arm around her as we reach the bottom of the stairs, kissing the top of her head and murmuring, ‘We’re going to be fine. I promise you.’

Then we go out to the car together.

I can’t wait to tell Zak about the idea of Archie bunking in with us . . .

Jaz

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I can't believe I missed Katja's message last night!

I'm out of breath, literally racing to the meeting she's called to discuss the cheesecake competition. We've been talking about it and we decided that even though Ellie has lost interest – now that she's made up her mind to sell the café – we should still make sure her 'deliciously different cheesecake' is a winning one. Just in case she changes her mind about selling, which we're all hopeful about.

But somehow, I missed Katja's WhatsApp message rallying the troops to this meeting this morning. Which means I've had no chance at all to warn Katja that the café she suggested for the meeting is actually the worst venue imaginable . . .

I'm hoping I can get to Roastery first, before anyone else arrives, then I can divert them elsewhere. Because that's the very *last* place I want to show my face, having told Milo in no uncertain terms that I was intending to boycott his café from now on!

And quite apart from that, while the girls know someone has made Ellie an offer for the café, they have no idea who that person is. When they find out that it's actually the owner of Roastery, and he's attempting to purchase the Little Duck Pond Café so he can wipe it out of existence, they'll no doubt be as shocked as I was.

I couldn't stop thinking last night about Milo's plans to turn the café back into a house. It just seemed so *wrong*. And I knew I wouldn't be the only one in the village to think that.

Hurrying along the high street, dodging passers-by, I finally arrive panting at the door to the café. But when I peer inside, my heart sinks. Katja is already there, sitting at a table in the window with Fen, Madison and Primrose. And then someone calls my name and when I look over, Jen is waving and walking to meet me from the opposite direction.

She smiles. 'Hi, Jaz! I'm actually working today but I thought I'd nip over for ten minutes during my break. I didn't

mention to Ellie where I was going, though.'

I nod. 'Good. Fen's not sure how Ellie would feel about us discussing the competition entry on her behalf. She might want to withdraw from it altogether. So it's probably best she doesn't know about our meeting.'

The girls spot us at that moment and start waving madly and gesturing for us to come in. Jen smiles and pushes open the door, so I have no option but to follow her in. (If I cause a fuss at the door, Milo is more likely to notice me entering his café, despite my protestations that I never, ever would!)

A quick glance around and I can breathe again. Thank goodness. Milo is nowhere in sight.

Jen nips to the café counter to add our coffees to their order, and I make a beeline for a chair that's facing the window, away from the counter, so that if Milo appears, he's less likely to see me.

'Right. This meeting is called to order,' smiles Katja, once Jen returns to the table.

I clear my throat. 'Um . . . before we start, there's something you should all know.'

In hushed tones, in case walls have ears, I tell them about meeting Milo, my next-door neighbour, and about how he revealed himself to be the potential buyer of Ellie's café. 'The man's an idiot with the emotions of a robot. He's planning to get rid of the café altogether and turn it back into a house.'

They look at each other, stunned, and Maddy murmurs, 'But I never thought the café would close. I thought that someone would see what a great business it is and want to carry on Ellie's good work.'

'Me, too,' agrees Katja. 'This is even worse than we thought. Does Ellie know?'

'I don't think so,' says Jen. 'She was joking about applying for a job there once the new owner took over. Although I could tell she was just putting on a brave face.'

‘Are you sure about all this, Jaz?’ asks Fen. ‘That this Milo person is the one who’s made the offer?’

‘Oh, yes. He was very clear.’ I purse my lips. ‘He has great plans for it. He thinks he might want to live there himself.’

There’s a brief silence, then Katja smiles and says, ‘Well, that just makes me even more determined to win that competition for Ellie. If our cheesecake recipe succeeds, just think of all the publicity the café would get. And maybe . . .’ She shrugs, looking hopeful.

Fen nods. ‘Maybe Ellie will change her mind if more business starts to flow in as a result.’

‘Exactly.’ Katja brings a notebook and pen from her bag. ‘Right, girls, let’s have all your mouth-watering, lip-smacking ideas, please.’

‘We could try to get this Milo to withdraw his offer,’ says Maddy.

Primrose frowns. ‘And how on earth would we do that?’

‘Send the heavies round to put pressure on him? Threaten to kidnap his budgie if he doesn’t see sense? Joking. Obviously. No, I was just thinking we could somehow make him think that the café has . . . issues?’

‘What sort of issues?’ I ask.

Maddy turns to me. ‘You live next door to him, Jaz. You could drop a few hints in his shell-like, couldn’t you? About the recent fire that damaged the property and how it might possibly lead to problems in the future?’

I shake my head. ‘No, no. We can’t do that to Ellie. She wants to sell so I’m not going to stand in her way. It has to be *her* decision to change her mind.’

Madison looks disappointed. ‘Not even a tiny bit of rising damp after that awful flood a few years back, and a couple of rats?’

‘No!’ Everyone replies at once, and several customers turn to look. But luckily, there’s still no sign of Milo. And the talk then turns to the delicious subject of cheesecake.

‘Okay. I’m going to get the ball rolling,’ says Katja. ‘Can you think of anything more delicious than making a traditional strawberry cheesecake, but instead of using crushed biscuits, making a lovely big fudgy chocolate brownie for the base? Maybe with some melted white chocolate drizzled over the top?’

There’s a ripple of approval round the table.

‘Dark chocolate might be even more delicious,’ suggests Jen.

‘Love the sound of that. What do you think, Pinky and Perky?’ Fen asks, addressing her belly. She grins sheepishly. ‘That’s what Rob calls the twins. Pinky and Perky. No idea why. But it’s quite cute.’

I look fondly at Fen. ‘I bet Rob’s really excited. He’ll be a brilliant dad.’

Fen blushes. ‘I think he will. Mind you, you’d really think it was him going through the pregnancy, not me. He was complaining the other day that his stomach’s getting mysteriously bigger. He said he couldn’t understand it and did I think his body was changing shape in sympathy with me?’

Everyone chuckles.

‘So I told him it wasn’t mysterious at all. It was the quantity of cake he was eating these days, just to keep me company. I mean, I’ve got an excuse for pigging out on far too much death-by-chocolate-cake, but he actually doesn’t.’ She smiles fondly. ‘Goodness knows what he’ll be like when the big day finally arrives. I’ve asked Mum to be there as well when I’m giving birth because she’ll be so much calmer and full of practical advice.’

‘Ooh, what about a death-by-chocolate-cheesecake?’ suggests Maddy suddenly.

I nod. ‘Sounds good. Or maybe . . . a lemon drizzle cheesecake with a crumbly shortbread base?’

‘Yum.’ Fen grins. ‘Actually, did you know that *savoury* cheesecakes are becoming more popular?’

Maddy shakes her head. 'I'm sorry but I'm not having that. The whole notion of a savoury cheesecake is just plain *wrong!*'

There are a few other murmurs of dissent and Fen laughs. 'It's just I was experimenting with a savoury version and I actually came up with two that were really nice. And different. And we need to stand out from our competitors, don't we?'

'Come on, then. Let's have it.' I grin at her, starting to feel much more relaxed because Milo hasn't appeared.

'Well . . . I did a mushroom, walnut and thyme cheesecake, which Rob really liked, although he said it tasted exactly like a quiche.'

Katja nods. 'That sounds lovely, actually. What else, Fen?'

'Avocado and lime?' Fen looks around doubtfully. 'It was okay.'

'Well, "okay" just won't cut it, I'm afraid,' says Maddy firmly. 'I vote we leave the avocado for salads or squashed on toast with a squeeze of lemon.'

'Hear, hear,' laughs Jen. 'I have to say, I can't stand avocado myself.'

Fen grins. 'Okay, fair enough. So . . . I'm assuming the pickle cheesecake I made yesterday probably won't get your votes, either?' She slides down in her chair with a grin, anticipating a strong reaction.

'*Pickle cheesecake?*' Primrose's face is a picture. 'You're making it up, Fen. That's the most revolting suggestion ever.'

'No, honestly, it's a thing. I promise you. I actually researched it . . . being totally obsessed with pickles right now. And yes, you add pickle juice to the cream cheese mix and decorate it with all sorts of different types of pickle.' She sighs, a faraway look on her face. 'Cornichons, capers, dill pickles, lime pickles, spicy pickles . . .'

'Okay, stop right now,' Maddy interrupts her. 'Or I'm likely to throw up in my handbag.'

Everyone starts laughing. And at that moment, the café door opens and in walks a glamorous-looking woman in a pale blue suit and heels. Her blonde hair is swept up in an elegant bun and she walks to the counter with an air of confidence, attracting admiring glances from all around.

In a clear, commanding voice, she asks if Milo's about.

I feel my insides flutter nervously. I didn't think he was here, but it seems I was wrong because next second, he appears from the back, greeting the elegant woman with a smile. After a quick word with the staff behind the counter, the pair walk swiftly out of the café, laughing and talking animatedly.

I breathe a sigh of relief that he didn't notice me.

'Ooh, was that the owner of the café, do you think?' says Fen. 'He's rather handsome, isn't he?'

'Fen, you're pregnant,' jokes Maddy. 'You're not supposed to be thinking thoughts like that.'

She laughs. 'I can still appreciate a strong jawline and a firmly muscled body, can't I?'

'Looks like he's spoken for,' murmurs Primrose. 'They looked very cosy together. Don't you think, Jaz?'

'What?' I feel myself flush. 'Oh, I didn't really see him.'

I'm feeling weirdly awkward – mainly because something stopped me telling them straight away that Milo, who's put in an offer for the cafe, is also the owner of Roastery. I suppose I didn't want to risk the possibility of the girls' outraged reactions drawing attention to our group, and give Milo the satisfaction of spotting me in his café, after I insulted his business and swore I would never darken its doors . . .

I steal a glance through the window, watching the pair walk away along the high street. They do indeed look very cosy together. So . . . it appears Milo the Magnificent has other interests apart from renovating houses and running cafés . . .

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When I get home, I glance at next door's windows. There's no sign of life. But when I go upstairs and glance out, I catch a glimpse of Milo sitting on a recliner in his back garden, chatting to someone. I can't see who it is because an apple tree is partly obscuring the occupant of the other recliner. It must be the blonde woman from the café.

Emma is with Harry for the next two nights and the house feels weirdly empty.

I boil the kettle and make some tea. I'd been planning to read in the garden for a while, but knowing Milo and his visitor are out there has put me off the idea. I'd hate him to think I was trying to eavesdrop on their conversation!

So I curl up on the sofa with my tea and my laptop, intending to do some more job-searching, and my mind drifts to my conversation with the girls. When I told them about Milo, they were all of the opinion that Ellie needs to know about his plans to turn the café back into a house – if she doesn't already.

I guess we're all hoping that if Ellie discovers what the sad fate of the café might be, she might have a change of heart about selling up. I can't help feeling that's unlikely, though. She seemed so certain about it the other night, at the Starlight Café, when she announced her intention to sell.

Next morning, early, I hear voices outside, and when I go to the window, Milo is at his garden gate, chatting to a young woman. At first, I assume it's the blonde woman from yesterday. But when I look closer, I realise it's not her at all. This woman has a mop of reddish curly hair. As I watch, filled with curiosity, they embrace warmly before she turns to go with a cheery smile.

Milo stands at the gate for a moment, then he turns and walks back into the house – and I duck swiftly behind the

curtain. But I leave it a fraction too late, and Milo glances up and waves.

Not that I'm in the slightest bit interested in Milo Masterson's private life.

He can do whatever he likes as far as I'm concerned – well, everything except buy the café and turn it into a posh man cave, no doubt with the intention of entertaining whichever female happens to catch his eye that day!

Do his women know about each other's existence? Maybe I'm jumping to conclusions and they're all the best of friends, but somehow I don't think so. I know I'm cynical about men these days, but it's hardly surprising after what I've been through with Harry . . .

I spend the next few days trying to avoid Milo. Ever since I complained about his noisy renovations, the disturbance from next door has been nowhere near as disruptive. But the man has the power to irritate me intensely for some mysterious reason – and that's aside from his plans for the Little Duck Pond Café – so I'd really rather not run into him.

But then one afternoon the following week, I've just dropped Emma off at nursery when, arriving home, I realise his front door is open and he's sitting on the step in the sun, absorbed in a paperback, a bottle of beer at his side.

My heart sinks and I paste on a smile.

He smiles and stands up, wandering over with his beer, all chatty and friendly, telling me he's fed up with camping in a house that's full of chaos. 'I decided I needed a break. And a drink!' He raises the bottle with a grin. 'Would you like a beer?'

'No, thank you. Nearly finished doing the place up?' I ask pointedly.

'I reckon a couple of weeks and it'll be on the market. And then I can start working on my permanent place.'

'Ellie's café, you mean?' I snap.

He looks sheepish. ‘Maybe. My offer hasn’t been accepted yet.’

‘Well, good. Maybe it’s a sign and you should start looking elsewhere.’

He smiles. ‘But it’s the perfect property, so why would I?’ He says it with an air of patience, like he’s talking to someone nice but rather dim, and I feel my hackles rise.

‘You really think it’s perfect?’

He laughs. ‘What do you mean by that?’ Then he grins. ‘Oh, I see what you’re trying to do.’

‘What?’

‘You want to put me off buying it, obviously, by putting doubts in my mind.’ He shrugs. ‘Sorry, but it won’t work.’

‘Look, I’m not trying to put you off.’ My tone is tart. But that mocking grin of his is so super-irritating. ‘I’m just saying it’s not the flawless property you imagine it to be.’

‘Come on, then. Tell me the worst.’ He shrugs amiably. ‘It’s got a leaky roof? Dry rot? An infestation of rats? Surely anything like that would have come up in the survey report.’

I glare at him, wishing I could wipe that smug, self-satisfied smile off his face. ‘Okay, so you’re determined to believe that I’m lying. But I’m not. The fact is . . . well, there was a nasty flood there a year or so ago.’ I shrug.

There’s a tense silence. We lock eyes and, startled, I watch all the colour drain from his face.

‘A flood?’ he repeats.

I nod. ‘It was a while back, but yes. The place flooded.’

‘Why would you say that?’ he demands.

‘Er, because it’s true?’

He doesn’t reply. He just stares at me, dark brows knitted together, but I get the oddest feeling that he’s looking right through me, thinking about something else. I’ve obviously shocked him a lot more than I imagined.

He raises his bottle and drains it in one, then he stares moodily into the distance.

I watch him in mild alarm, beginning to feel the tiniest bit guilty for ruining his day. ‘I just think the flood might have affected the structure of the place, although obviously I’m not a builder so I don’t really know,’ I say, backtracking. ‘Worth looking into, though? Before you buy?’

Returning from wherever he’s been in his head, he fixes me with a glare. ‘Your loyalty to your friend is exemplary,’ he growls, ‘but why did you choose to mention a flood?’

‘What?’ I stare at him, puzzled. ‘I mentioned it because it’s true.’

‘Really?’

‘Of course. I’m not lying about it! You’re just miffed because I’ve burst your bubble and potentially ruined all your plans.’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ he snaps.

‘Well, it’s so obvious the reason you want to get your hands on the café is so that you can wipe out the competition. You know Ellie’s place is at the heart of this community and that it will always take business away from your own soulless café, and the great Milo the Magnificent can’t possibly have that, can he? I just find it really sad that getting rich seems to be your main motivation in life.’

He gives a derisive laugh. ‘You don’t even know me. That’s total crap!’

‘No, it’s not. By your own admission, you never stop working. And in my experience, workaholics tend to be obsessed with material wealth.’

He shakes his head. ‘You haven’t a clue what you’re talking about,’ he says flatly. ‘Yes, my work is important to me. But what the hell’s wrong with that? I’m determined to make a success of our chain of roastery cafés. Someone whose opinion I trusted above anyone else’s believed that they’re the future of the café industry, so yes, I’m going to do whatever it takes to achieve our goal. And if that includes eliminating your

friend's café from the choice here in Sunnybrook, then so be it.'

I'm vaguely aware of him talking about 'our goal' and 'our chain of roastery cafés', but I'm too incensed right now to mention it. 'You know what? I just really *hate* that you're taking advantage of Ellie's vulnerability in order to get what you want.' Even as I'm speaking, I realise that what's coming out of my mouth isn't entirely rational – but I can't seem to help it. Milo infuriates me beyond belief.

He's looking at me as if I'm mad. 'Ellie's vulnerability is nothing to do with me. I don't even *know* her, for God's sake.' He sighs, running his free hand through his hair. 'Look, I realise she's built up a very loyal customer base. But nothing lasts forever. People will find a stylish, high-end alternative in Roastery. And believe me, once they've sampled the quality of our coffee, you can bet they won't want to go back to their old ways.'

'But that's rubbish. A café isn't just about the quality of the coffee, although I have to say, Ellie's is always very good. What about the ambience? The décor? And the friendliness of the staff? The fact that all the cakes are baked right there in the café kitchen so they're perfectly fresh every day? I bet you don't do that!'

He shrugs. 'Ours is a chain of cafés. All the products are baked in a central location and delivered daily, but they're still freshly-baked. Just not on the premises.'

'You called your cakes and biscuits "products".'

'Yes? And your point is?'

'Products are designed to produce cold, hard profits.' I shrug. 'It just sounds to me as if your main aim is to make money, rather than listening to what your customers really want, providing them with their little slice of heaven, and making sure they receive a warm, personal welcome every single time. That's Ellie's mission at the Little Duck Pond Café, and I happen to think she's created something to be really proud of. Ellie knows the names of most of her customers. Can you say the same? I don't think so!'

He shakes his head, blowing out his breath. ‘It sounds to me as if Ellie has a rather overly romantic view of what it takes to be a café owner. Which is quite ironic when you realise that she’s having to sell up – presumably because she needs the money?’ He shrugs. ‘Your suggestion that the financials of a café business don’t matter as much as a warm welcome is absolutely ridiculous. Because of course they do. If you want to *stay* in business, that is.’

I lift my chin, attempting to square up to him, even though he’s so much taller than me. I’m so angry at him, I’m actually trembling.

Our eyes lock, and the fury I see in the glinting, turbulent depths of his glare matches exactly my own smouldering anger. The world seems to slide away from us. There’s only him and me, and I find myself suddenly struggling with feelings that are so conflicted, I really don’t know what to make of them.

I dislike this man intensely. I really do. Right from the start, he’s rubbed me up the wrong way with his laid-back, casual attitude to life. But this new, angry Milo seems to have stirred something deep inside me. I want to escape from him – and run for the hills – but I can’t seem to drag my eyes away from his.

As if in a dream, I feel myself drawn towards him, and he moves in sync with me, bridging the gap between us. He’s gazing intently at my mouth and a feeling of deep desire is taking over my whole body.

In a dream, I tip my face up and he bends to place his lips on mine. Then he pulls me against him and kisses me hard, and suddenly I’m responding with a passion that shocks me. The kiss deepens, becoming almost angry, as if we’re taking out our frustration on each other. And I give myself up to the feelings that are coursing through me like an electrical current, sparking so much desire, I feel completely helpless to resist.

Then suddenly, he pulls away from me, leaving me panting and breathless.

‘Sorry.’ He pushes a hand roughly through his hair, breathing hard himself. He looks at me and I can see my own turmoil reflected in the dark depths of his eyes.

Then he turns and walks slowly inside, closing the door softly behind him.

I stare after him, slowly coming back to earth and wondering what the hell just happened. How did our anger at each other suddenly explode into an altogether different kind of passion? Even now, my heart is pounding like a drum.

I make my way indoors, my legs feeling as if they don’t belong to me.

My head is still reeling with bewilderment. But there’s one thing I know for certain.

I will never, *ever* be one of Milo Masterson’s women!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It's the night of the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers film extravaganza, and I've made smoked salmon appetisers and a pineapple-upside-down-pudding for dessert. (I Googled food in the 1930s and Bertha said she'd make a Beef Wellington for the main course, while Sylvia is in charge of the pre-dinner cocktails, including non-alcoholic as Sylvia has volunteered to drive.)

We have a truly lovely night.

Our sumptuous dinner leaves us all 'TTT', according to Sylvia (Tummy Touching Table, apparently – a saying I'd never heard of, but one to which I could relate completely).

'At our age, Sylvia, the first 'T' is more likely to be another body part,' says Bertha drily. 'If you know what I mean.'

They both look down at their chests and we all burst out laughing.

We watch two classic movies after dinner: *Top Hat*, which has the most amazing tap-dancing routines. And then *Holiday Inn*, which has the added bonus of being set partly at Christmas time and is so sweetly romantic, we're all wiping our eyes at the end of it.

'Ah, they don't make movies like that anymore,' sighs Sylvia.

'They really don't,' agrees Bertha. She turns to me. 'So, I'm really in the mood to learn tap-dancing now. Why don't we come with you to your class?'

'Yes, why not?' I search in my bag for Ellie's slip of paper with the details of the time, date and venue. 'It's a brand-new class, apparently, so the teacher is keen to welcome as many people as possible, apparently.'

'Right, well, we're definitely in,' says Sylvia. 'And I'm going to try and persuade Olga to come along as well.'

'Good luck with that,' laughs Bertha. 'That woman is as stubborn as a mule if she doesn't fancy doing something.'

‘She could come along and just watch if she doesn’t want to join in,’ I suggest, and Sylvia nods.

We make a date to go along to the next class and spend some time discussing shoes before Sylvia says, ‘Well, probably time we were off. What a lovely evening it was, Jaz. Thank you so much.’

Bertha nods. ‘You can come to mine next time, ladies. I’ll banish Ron to his train set and we can have the place to ourselves. There’s plenty more Fred Astaire movies still to watch.’

‘I love it!’ I smile.

‘What a time to be alive.’ Sylvia stifles a happy yawn as they make their way to the door.

‘Oh, by the way, I almost forgot,’ says Bertha as they’re about to leave. ‘Me and my memory!’ She brings out two sheets of paper, folded together, and hands them to me. ‘We mentioned the café competition at our latest WI meeting and we spent a good half-hour brain-storming cheesecake ideas. I jotted them all down for you.’

‘Oh, wow! Thank you so much.’

‘Perhaps you could pass them on to Ellie for us?’

I wave them off and sink onto the sofa, ignoring the clearing up in order to examine Bertha’s list of ‘deliciously different cheesecake’ recipes, most of which look utterly mouth-watering. I can’t believe they devoted time at their meeting to support the café. I didn’t mention that Ellie’s selling up because I knew they’d both be really sad, and I didn’t want to spoil our evening.

I guess they’ll hear about it soon enough.

Unless . . . unless one of these delicious recipes can win Ellie the café competition. Because then she might not have to sell up at all . . .

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The following weekend, I take Emma over to spend Saturday night and Sunday with Harry at his cottage. I'm feeling quite down as I arrive back home – the house always seems so empty without her – and I'm really not in the mood for that darned scooter blocking my gate and almost sending me flying for the second time in as many weeks!

Annoyed, I scoop it up, planning to deliver it back to the family along the road.

'Jaz? Where are you taking that?'

I turn and there's Milo, walking out of his house to the front gate.

'It's my fault,' he says. 'I should have brought it in.'

Looking at him and remembering the heat of our kiss the other day, I feel my complexion catch fire. But I hide my awkwardness as best I can. 'What?' I laugh in disbelief. 'So you're saying this scooter is actually *yours*?'

Next second, I hear a child's voice. 'No, it's mine!' And a little girl of about eight comes running down the drive. Her dark hair has been plaited and adorned with red tartan bows and she's staring at me intently. 'Dad, why is that lady taking my scooter away?' She reaches for his hand and Milo's face softens as he takes it and looks down at her with a smile.

'She isn't taking it away, love. She thought it belonged to someone else. Didn't you, Jaz?'

'Er . . . yes, I did.' Hurriedly, I wheel the scooter back and return it with a smile to its owner, still feeling the aftershocks of my sudden realisation.

Milo is a *dad*?

'Thank you.' The little girl frowns. 'You've got a funny name.'

'Don't be so rude!' admonishes Milo. He turns to me. 'This is Mabel.'

I laugh. ‘No, it’s fine. She’s right. Jaz is quite an unusual name. That’s all she meant. Wasn’t it, Mabel?’

Mabel nods a little shyly. ‘It’s the same as the music Dad likes.’

I turn to Milo. ‘You listen to jazz?’

‘I do. Ever since . . . well, I find it soothes me. Takes me away from everything I don’t want to think about.’ He shrugs, looking suddenly vulnerable.

Mabel looks up at her dad. ‘Can I play on my scooter now?’

He smiles. ‘Yes. But stay in the garden where I can see you, okay?’

‘I always stay in the garden.’

Milo purses his lips. ‘If that’s the case, how on earth did your scooter manage to end up *outside* the garden gate?’

‘Sorry, Dad. I just wanted to talk to Alice. She lives up there.’ Mabel points along the street. ‘Alice is my best friend at school.’

‘You’ve got a best friend already? Wow, that’s great. Why don’t you ask Alice if she’d like to come for tea one day after school? Then you can both play in the garden.’

Mabel nods enthusiastically.

‘Does she have a scooter?’ Milo asks.

‘Yes. And it’s much better than mine,’ she says matter-of-factly, before scooting away up the drive.

Milo pulls a comical face at me. ‘It would be, wouldn’t it?’

I laugh, still pretty gobsmacked by this weird turn of events.

‘Dad?’

‘Yes, love?’

‘Alice’s mum takes her along the river path with her scooter. Can *we* go there?’

He nods. ‘Maybe. We’ll have to see.’

‘That means no.’

‘She’s too wise, that one,’ he murmurs to me, his smile full of pride. Then he calls over to Mabel. ‘Of course it doesn’t mean no. We’ll go scooting as soon as I have some free time and you’re not at your auntie’s, okay?’

‘Okay. Dad?’

‘Yes?’

‘Can I get a new scooter for my birthday?’

‘Maybe. We’ll have to . . .’ He stops and grins. ‘I promise I’ll think about it.’

‘Does that mean no as well?’ Mabel gives her dad a cheeky grin, and he growls at her, runs over and starts tickling her until she squeals for mercy.

I watch them together, my heart melting in spite of everything.

‘You didn’t tell me you had a daughter,’ I say, as we watch Mabel scooting through the gate into the back garden.

‘You didn’t ask.’

‘So . . . separated? Divorced?’

He looks down. ‘Actually, she died. Linny.’ He smiles sadly. ‘My partner. Mabel’s mum.’

My heart lurches. ‘Oh, my God. I’m so sorry, Milo.’

‘Thanks. We lost her three years ago. We’d just moved into an old basement flat and we were planning to do it up. But we came back from a weekend away and the place was flooded. It turned out the electrics were dodgier than we thought. Linny ran in ahead of me . . .’ He stops, clearly unable to continue, and I stare at him in horror. There’s nothing I can say, except, ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘Thanks,’ he says briskly, forcing a smile. ‘The roastery café idea was her baby and she was growing the business so quickly. Linny was a high achiever and full of passion. She was determined to make it work.’ He shrugs. ‘After she died, it was work that got me through the pain of losing her. I just

plunged myself into it, and I vowed to make Roastery a success. For Linny.’

His heart-breaking words jog a sudden memory. I’m recalling how his face darkened when I mentioned the flood at Ellie’s café. His mood changed completely . . .

I swallow hard, feeling the need to explain. ‘That flood in the café I told you about? It did actually happen. I wasn’t making it up.’

He smiles sadly. ‘I must admit, my knee-jerk reaction was to think you said it deliberately . . . that you’d heard what had happened to Linny and were turning the knife.’

‘Oh, God, no!’ I gaze at him, horrified he should think that. ‘I would never . . .’

He shakes his head. ‘Of course you wouldn’t. I realise that now . . . now that I know you a bit better.’ He smiles. ‘I think we both got the wrong idea about each other.’

I nod. ‘I think we probably did. Was that . . . Mabel’s auntie I saw the other day, talking to you at the gate?’

‘Joanne? Yes, that’s my sister. She and Mabel have formed quite a bond since Linny died, and Mabel’s been staying at Joanne’s a lot since we moved here . . . just while I get the place ship-shape. Joanne brought Mabel back the other night, we had pizza and it got late so Jo stayed over.’

I nod, thinking of the other woman – the blonde who collected him from Roastery that time.

Who was she, then?

Milo gives me a sheepish look. ‘I’m really sorry we got off on the wrong foot, Jaz. And for all the noise and chaos you’ve been living next door to! I’d like to make it up to you.’

‘Oh.’ I feel myself blushing. ‘There’s really no need.’

‘But I want to. I’m okay with herbs and a spatula. How about I cook you a meal sometime?’

‘Oh. Right. Well, thank you.’

He smiles. 'I'll need to get the place sorted first, but I'll let you know the moment I have a fully-functioning kitchen-diner, okay?'

'Okay. And in the meantime, pop round for a coffee any time you like.' I shrug, hardly able to believe I'm saying this. 'I know how empty the house can feel when you're rattling around it on your own. I miss Emma like mad when she's at her dad's.'

'Thanks. I might just do that.' He smiles, lingering there for a moment. 'Anyway, better go and see what madam's getting up to.'

'Of course. Sorry I nearly carted away her scooter.'

'No harm done.' Grinning, he raises his hand and sprints off through the side gate.

I watch him go, feeling confused. I really don't like Milo Masterson. I don't like him at all.

So why has his invitation to dinner got my head all of a whirl?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I'm at the park with Emma the following day, pushing her on a bucket swing and laughing at her delight when we go higher, when my attention is caught by a game of football being played on the grass nearby.

When I look more closely, I realise it's Milo and Mabel.

Instantly, I'm feeling embarrassed and self-conscious, which is annoying because there's really no reason to feel awkward. Our kiss is in the past – and that's exactly where it's staying! And as for Milo inviting me round for dinner, that was quite a vague suggestion. He's probably forgotten about it already . . .

'Okay, Emma, time to go,' I murmur, lifting her out of the swing, but she instantly starts protesting, kicking her legs.

'No, Mummy. Want to swing again!'

'It's lunchtime, love. We can come back to the swings tomorrow, okay?'

She hovers on the verge of tears as I pop her in her pushchair for the walk home. But then Mabel spots us and calls hello, diverting Emma's attention. My heart sinks. I was hoping we could sneak away but apparently, we've been spotted, and sure enough, both Mabel and Milo are now walking over to join us, Milo throwing the ball up and catching it. So I'm forced to wait there with a slightly forced smile on my face.

'Hi, how are you?' Milo asks, looking a little awkward himself. 'It seems odd seeing you here, away from the house . . . if you know what I mean.'

'Yes. In a different setting . . .'

'I've got Mabel with me for a few days.'

'That's nice.' I smile at her. 'Mabel, this is Emma.'

'Hi, Emma. I like your dress.' Mabel hunkers down. 'How old are you?'

Emma is overcome with shyness and turns her face away, and I laugh softly. ‘She’s two. But she sometimes gets a bit shy with strangers.’

‘Would she like to play with us?’ Mabel wants to know, straightening up and taking the ball from Milo.

‘Oh, well . . . we were just heading home for lunch, actually.’

‘Ball.’ Emma holds out her arms and Mabel smiles and hands it to her. Emma takes it and pushes it back at Mabel in a funny little jerky movement, then she laughs in delight.

‘Hey, that was a good throw, Emma.’ Mabel looks up at me. ‘Can she get out of her pushchair, Jaz? I could take her on the swings.’

‘Jaz and Emma are going home for lunch,’ Milo reminds her.

I nod regretfully. ‘We are. But how about another time? We live right next door to each other, so I’m sure we’ll see you soon.’

‘I’ve got lots of baby toys at home,’ Mabel says. ‘I’m big now so I don’t play with them any more.’ She looks up at her dad. ‘Can I give them to Emma?’

Milo ruffles her hair. ‘I think that’s a really good idea. Why don’t we have a look when we get back home? See what Emma might like?’

Mabel nods and I smile at her. ‘That’s so kind of you. Isn’t it, Emma? Mabel’s going to see if she can find some toys for you.’

Emma nods, amusingly star-struck by the older girl, and we say our goodbyes. She twists in her chair to watch Mabel as I wheel her over to the park gates, only turning back when we round a corner and lose sight of them.

I feel bad about rushing away when Mabel was being so lovely, but it was such an awkward moment, standing there not quite knowing what to say to Milo. I just had to get away.

But I'm annoyed at myself for not handling it better. Emma would have loved having Mabel pushing her on the swing. But that would have felt just a bit too close for comfort – almost as if we were a family!

No, I definitely did the right thing, leaving when I did. I feel awkward around Milo – especially after our kiss – and my life is complicated enough right now, without having to start examining *why* he makes me feel like that.

We're next-door neighbours. So we will be polite and friendly when we run into each other. But that's all . . .

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It's the night of the tap-dancing class and as I'm getting ready, there's a ring at the doorbell.

To my surprise, it's Milo, and he's carrying a box of games and toys. 'Mabel's back at Joanne's for the rest of the week and the house seems so empty without her. She wanted me to give you these for Emma.'

'Oh. That's so lovely of her. Please thank her for us and tell her she's welcome to come round and see us any time.'

His dark eyes twinkle in a smile. 'I think she'd like that.'

There's a pause, after which we both start speaking at once, then start to laugh.

'I'm just on my way out,' I tell him apologetically.

He raises his eyebrows. 'Going on a date?'

'Oh, no. You'll probably laugh when you hear what I'm doing.'

'Go on?'

'I'm going to learn how to tap dance.'

'Really? Wow. Can I come?'

'Yes, of course.' I chuckle, assuming he's joking. 'I can just see you tapping your way around the stage in the style of the great Fred himself.'

'Fred?'

'Fred Astaire?'

'Oh, yes. Do you need special shoes?'

'Not really. I'm just wearing these.' I show him the black Mary Janes I found in a box in the attic. 'They'll have to do. If I like it, I might invest in the proper gear.'

He lifts a trainer. 'I guess these won't do, then. I'll just go back and find some suitable shoes.'

My heart gives a little leap of surprise. ‘Hang on. Are you actually serious? You really want to come along?’

He shrugs. ‘If you don’t mind.’

I shake my head. ‘No, of course I don’t mind. The more the merrier, then maybe I can get lost in the crowd and no one will see how bad I am at dancing.’ I glance at my watch. ‘Sylvia and Bertha are coming as well. Friends of mine. I’m picking them up from Sylvia’s house in ten minutes.’

‘Okay. I’ll be back in a mo.’

‘Actually, Olga might be coming as well – another friend,’ I call after Milo. ‘So there might not be room in my car for you as well.’

‘Let’s take my car, then,’ he offers. ‘It’s more roomy.’

‘Oh. Okay.’

I’m not a great passenger, but Milo is a good driver so I’m able to relax and chat about Mabel and Emma on the way over to Sylvia’s. When we arrive, Milo gets out with me and we walk up Sylvia’s garden path together. It actually feels good being in his company, now that we’re starting to understand each other better. I quite like the idea of having a friend living next door – and I definitely couldn’t have described Milo as *that* a few weeks ago!

‘I hope you don’t mind, Jaz,’ says Sylvia, answering the door to us. ‘But a few of the girls from the WI fancied coming along when we mentioned we were going to try our hand at tap dancing. They all remember the golden days of Mr Twinkle-Toes very fondly indeed.’

‘That’s fine.’ I smile. ‘This is my next-door neighbour, Milo, by the way. He’s coming as well. We’re in his car.’

‘Great!’ Sylvia nods, ushering us in. ‘We persuaded Olga, by the way. Although we’ve told her she can just stand and watch if she gets there and doesn’t fancy joining in. That’ll be okay, won’t it?’

‘Oh, I should think so. Apparently, the class has only been going for a few weeks, so the teacher’s trying to boost

numbers.’

‘She’ll be delighted when we all pitch up, then.’ Sylvia opens the living room door to quite a gathering. ‘Okay, girls, ready to get those feet a-tapping? This is Milo. He’s kindly taken on the role of chauffeur.’

Milo grins at ‘the girls’ – average age seventy – and shakes his keys. ‘Nice to meet you, ladies. Who’s coming with me?’

In the end, we manage to squeeze into two cars. And as Milo parks outside the venue, I spot Madison hurrying along the street.

‘Jaz?’ She stares at me in amazement when I get out of Milo’s car. ‘Are you going to the class as well?’

‘Yup.’ I grin at her, enjoying her surprise. ‘Ellie said you’d started classes but that you didn’t want anyone to know.’

She chuckles. ‘Can you blame me? It all feels a bit . . . well, daring, really.’ She nods at the sign on the door: *Dare to Dance. Everyone welcome.*

She glances sharply at Milo, who’s getting out of the car, along with the rest of our party. ‘Don’t I recognise him?’ she murmurs.

She saw him that day when we were all gathered in Roastery, but she obviously can’t place him.

‘Oh, he’s just our taxi for the evening,’ I say, vaguely. If she realises he’s the one who’s trying to buy Ellie’s café, she’ll no doubt have something to say to him and I’m not sure I can cope with more drama this evening . . .

She frowns at me. ‘Hang on. Is he coming as well? To the class?’

I shrug. ‘Yes. Why are you looking so surprised?’

‘Well, no reason, really. Just that it tends to be mostly women? Well, *all* women, actually.’ She frowns. ‘Jaz, why is the entire Sunnybrook Women’s Institute walking towards us?’

‘Oh, yes. Sylvia and Bertha wanted to come along, and when the word got out, apparently a few of the others decided

they wanted to try tap dancing as well.’

Maddy throws me a look of alarm.

I laugh at her astonished expression. ‘Hey, give them a chance. They might be really good. You never know.’

Maddy is just staring at me, apparently speechless for the first time in her life. Then, as the rest of the party gather around us, chatting eagerly, she grabs my arm and pulls me away. ‘Jaz,’ she hisses, close to my ear. ‘Please don’t tell me they think they’re here to learn how to tap dance?’

I frown. ‘Why else would they be here?’

‘Oh, my God.’ She shakes her head slowly. ‘Jaz, you absolute *plank!*’

‘What do you mean?’

She’s gazing at me in horror but grinning at the same time. ‘Jaz, this isn’t a *tap*-dancing class.’

‘It’s not?’ I gaze at her, bewildered. ‘But that’s what Ellie told me. I’m *sure* that’s what she said.’

‘No. She didn’t. Jaz, I think you might need to make an appointment with a hearing specialist.’

‘What?’

She snorts with laughter. ‘Exactly.’

‘Maddy, what *are* you going on about? I mean, I was there in the café when Ellie told me. I distinctly remember it because she was making a cappuccino at the time. And she said . . . *oh!*’ I trail off. Was it possible the noise from the coffee machine drowned out what she actually said?

Maddy apparently can’t speak. She’s laughing silently, her shoulders moving up and down. Every time she glances over my shoulder at the enthusiastic gathering behind me, she corpses all over again and has to hang onto a nearby drainpipe for support.

‘So if it’s not tap dancing, what the hell *are* we here for?’ I glance around at the expectant faces of the WI members, all

waiting to tap in the footsteps of the great Fred Astaire himself.

‘It’s *lap dancing*, you idiot. That’s why I told Ellie not to tell anyone because it’s all a bit embarrassing.’

‘*Lap dancing?*’ I repeat in horror. Then I whip round anxiously because in my state of extreme alarm, I almost shouted it.

Sylvia and Bertha are grinning away, looking thoroughly delighted with the situation. But some of the members still haven’t caught on and are eagerly comparing footwear.

‘Isn’t this *exciting?*’ Hilda is saying to Margaret. ‘When my Reggie sees what I can do, his eyes are going to pop out of his head.’

Margaret nods. ‘My Eric doesn’t know what I’m up to tonight. He thinks it’s another WI meeting.’ She beams. ‘I’m going to surprise him with a quick flash of my new skills in the kitchen when he’s stacking the dishwasher!’

‘Ooh, yes,’ Glenda pipes up. ‘Tiled floor. Great surface for doing it, I’d imagine. The harder the better.’

Maddy gives a loud snort. ‘Well, that’s always been my motto.’ She’s wiping her eyes, practically on the ground with helpless laughter by this time.

‘Are we going in, then?’ asks Hilda cheerfully.

‘Can’t wait to start practising,’ says Glenda. ‘Getting the action just right. I’ve been reading up on it. Ball changes and everything.’

‘Yes, me too.’ Hilda nods eagerly. ‘It’s absolutely all about the balls, apparently.’

Margaret snorts. ‘You’re making it sound a bit dodgy, Hilda, if you don’t mind me saying. Exactly what sort of balls are we talking about here?’

There’s a ripple of laughter, and I can’t even look at Maddy.

‘Well, the balls of your *feet*, obviously.’ Hilda frowns.

‘Get your mind out of the gutter, Margaret,’ booms Olga. ‘We’re here to tap dance. Nothing more exotic than that.’

I glance at Milo and he gives an almost imperceptible shrug, as if to say, *Don’t ask me!*

We’re distracted by movement from within, and a tall, slim woman in a slinky scarlet dress and perilously high heels appears. She smiles brightly, looking rather surprised at the same time. ‘Hello. I’m Irina. Well, we have quite a crowd here! Are you all coming to the class?’

‘Yes, and we can’t wait,’ says Hilda. ‘But I have a question.’

‘Yes?’

‘Are these shoes fit for purpose? I thought something fairly flat but with a bit of a heel?’ She holds up her foot.

Irina looks at the sensible brown brogue and I can see her mind ticking over as she wonders what to say. To be fair, I can’t imagine when she set out tonight that she was expecting to find a crowd of mature women – most in their sixties and seventies and one in her eighties (Olga) – all overly excited to learn the secrets of seduction.

‘Actually . . . there’s been a teeny bit of a misunderstanding.’ I glance apologetically at Irina. ‘You see, we were under the impression this was a tap-dancing class?’

‘So isn’t it?’ asks Margaret looking around, to be greeted by bemused looks and shrugs from everyone else.

I grin apologetically. ‘Erm, it’s actually *lap* dancing? I got the wrong end of the stick, apparently.’

Irina’s looking as puzzled as everyone. Then she gets the joke and starts to laugh. ‘Well . . . my, my . . . I have to say I did wonder . . . I mean, not that you ladies wouldn’t be *excellent* at exotic dancing, I’m sure. Would you like to try it?’

Sylvia grins. ‘Nice idea. But we’ve got five replacement hips between us, so it might be a stretch too far.’

‘Well, my hips are working just fine, thank you very much,’ says Bertha. ‘I quite fancy letting it all hang out for a change.’

Just because we're not as young as we used to be doesn't mean we can't have fun.' She puts her hands on her hips and starts gyrating. 'If you know what I mean.'

Olga's rumbling laughter starts everyone else off. All except Hilda, who looks as if she's sucked on a lemon. 'Well, speak for yourself, Bertha. I myself would rather grow old gracefully.'

'Older, you mean,' teases Bertha. 'Oh, come on, Hilda. Let your hair down for once. You don't stop laughing when you get old – you grow old when you stop laughing!'

'Nice.' Sylvia nods approvingly.

Bertha grins. 'I can't take the credit. It's George Bernard Shaw. But I always remember it when I'm thinking I'm probably too old to do something.'

'Well, anyway, *I'm* going in.' Maddy smiles at Irina. The she turns to me. 'Coming, Jaz?'

'Oh.' For some reason, I glance at Milo and feel myself reddening. 'Well, no, I'd better not.'

'Why not?' Maddy demands.

I shrug. 'Well, I . . . I wasn't prepared for it.'

Maddy laughs. 'Crikey, what sort of preparations were you planning to do? The mind actually boggles. Come on. You'll have fun. And I won't feel like such a plank if you're there making an arse of yourself as well.' She takes my arm, clearly hopeful of dragging me in.

'No, Maddy. You're on your own, I'm afraid.' I smile at Irina. 'But it does sound interesting.'

'Another time, maybe?' she asks, and I find myself nodding, although it's all a little bit awkward somehow, with Milo standing there, grinning.

'Okay. Maddy, is it?' Irina turns. 'Shall we join the rest of the class?'

Madison looks back at me with a fake look of panic as Irina guides her in.

I laugh. 'Enjoy yourself!'

'And take some photos,' calls Sylvia.

I turn and start apologising for getting everyone there under false pretences. But then Milo saves the day by saying, 'Never mind. I'm thirsty. Anyone fancy joining me in the pub for a . . . glass of lemonade?'

'A pint of cider and I might consider it,' snorts Bertha.

'So common.' Hilda shakes her head, but she's smiling at the same time. 'Go on, then. I haven't had a drink since my dry sherry on Christmas Day. Maybe I'll have a Martini.'

There's a ripple of 'oohs' and I nod. 'Let's go, then. Swan Hotel bar?'

'Excellent.' Milo throws me a warm, eye-twinkling smile, and I think what lovely white, even teeth he has. And when I feel his hand briefly at my back, guiding me away, my heart does an odd little flutter.

For a while, as we all set off walking, I'm silent, thinking about my reaction to Milo's touch.

Then it occurs to me what it was.

Gratitude.

I'd got us into a bit of a tricky situation, and Milo stepped in and rescued me. And as relief took the place of tension, naturally I was going to feel grateful to him . . .

I feel instantly better after getting that straight in my mind. I'm even relaxed enough to grab him when I almost trip on the kerb, and for a few seconds, we laugh and walk along, arms linked companionably.

In the bar, Milo takes everyone's order and I go and help him carry the drinks back.

He grins as he picks up his pint and Hilda's Martini. 'How funny was that back there? *Lap* dancing! You crazy woman.'

I grin. 'So embarrassing. Not the lap dancing. Hearing it wrongly, I mean.'

‘So you’d do it? With Madison?’ He looks at me challengingly.

‘Erm.’ I think about this as I pick up a lime and soda and a glass of white wine. ‘You know what? Yes. I wouldn’t mind giving it a go.’

He nods, weighing up my reply. ‘Didn’t think you had it in you,’ he remarks with a mischievous look.

‘What do you mean by that?’ I demand, laughing.

‘Nothing. Just I’m beginning to see a whole new side to you.’ He grins. ‘I was a bit scared of you when we first met.’

‘I thought you were an idiot.’

He laughs. ‘And now?’

‘I think you’re . . . nice.’

‘Nice?’ He adopts a comical expression. ‘Wow. I guess that’s quite a compliment from you, Jaz.’

I chuckle. ‘You’d better believe it.’

A woman I recognise enters the bar and waves at a man sitting over on the far side. On her way over to join him, she spots Milo and they exchange a smile and a wave. It’s the elegant blonde woman who collected him from Roastery that time.

‘Louise is great,’ Milo says, by way of explanation. ‘She manages one of my other cafés. Great member of the team. That’s her husband over there.’

‘Ah, right.’ I smile at him. *Another mystery solved . . .*

We end up having a lovely time. The main subject of conversation is the Cheesecake Challenge, and everyone has a different opinion on what the entry should be.

Then Hilda leans forward and murmurs, ‘Actually, speaking of Ellie, I heard something strange the other day. I don’t actually believe it. At least, I don’t *think* I do. But if it’s true . . .’ She shakes her head in dismay.

‘Well, come on, Hilda,’ chides Bertha. ‘I’m in suspenders here. What’s this mysterious rumour?’

‘Well.’ Hilda takes a dramatic breath. ‘A woman I sat next to on the number nineteen bus said she’d heard that the Little Duck Pond Café is up for sale.’ She sits back, looking around her, as everyone reacts in horror to the news.

‘This is not true,’ booms Olga with a frown. ‘Ellie . . . she would have told us if she was selling the café.’ She shakes her head at Hilda. ‘You are having your barbed wires crossing.’

‘You mean she has her wires crossed,’ smiles Sylvia, looking a little sad.

‘Ah, yes. Thank you, Sylvia. I have lived in this country for fifty years and I still do not understand your strange sayings!’

Hilda is looking at me. ‘Jaz, you’re Ellie’s good friend. Maybe you know something about this?’

My mouth goes dry. I really don’t know what to say. Ellie asked us all to keep it under our hats for now, although she knew that once the café was being advertised for sale, it wouldn’t be long before the news got round the village . . .

‘It’s true, then,’ murmurs Sylvia, seeing my expression. ‘Zak told me they were talking about it, but I didn’t realise it was actually happening.’ She sighs. ‘I have such amazing memories of that place.’ She looks at Milo. ‘The café was mine originally, but I handed it over to Ellie because I knew she’d do such a brilliant job with it, and she really has. I’m so proud of her.’

Bertha nods. ‘I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that the Little Duck Pond Café is right at the heart of the community. You know, in some places, it’s the pub or the village hall. But in Sunnybrook, that café is a landmark. It’s the place people choose for their get-togethers.’

Hilda nods. ‘My daughter and I meet there all the time. It’s halfway between her house and mine, and she always brings Millie.’ Her eyes glint with tears. ‘We’ve had such happy times there and my granddaughter loves it because the girls who work there always make a fuss of her. She ends up with

chocolate all round her mouth. And of course they have that little soft play corner with books and games . . .’ Laughing, she gets out a tissue and dabs her eyes. ‘Gosh, just ignore me. I’m getting all weepy here. I didn’t realise I felt so emotional about the place.’

My throat feels choked, seeing Hilda upset. ‘It . . . might not happen, you know,’ I murmur, with a quick glance at Milo. ‘The girls and I . . . we’re all hoping that if Ellie wins the Cheesecake Challenge, she might change her mind about selling. Winning that competition would be the best publicity ever for the café and it would be a huge boost for the business.’ I shrug. ‘Maybe Ellie wouldn’t have to sell up, after all.’

Sylvia nods. ‘I told Zak that Mick and I would be more than happy to help them out financially if they were going through a tough time. But of course they’re too proud and they don’t want to feel as if they’re depriving us of our lifestyle in retirement. I told Zak that was ridiculous. I mean, our tastes are very simple. And the café means so much to me.’ She shrugs. ‘But what can I do?’

Margaret sighs. ‘Well, let’s hope that if Ellie is forced to sell up, at least it remains as it is. A café with the same charm and appeal it has right now.’

Bertha shakes her head. ‘It wouldn’t be the same without Ellie, though. And all her lovely staff.’

‘Well, that’s true.’ Margaret nods sadly. ‘D’you know, I feel quite sick at this news. I almost wish you hadn’t told us, Hilda.’

The mood of the gathering has changed completely. Everyone looks so gloomy. Even Milo, when I glance at him, is just gazing silently into space, eyebrows gathered in a frown. I watch him, wondering if this great outpouring of affection for the café is getting to him . . . making him realise what a loss to the community the café would be . . .

Sylvia turns to me. ‘I think we need to make sure that Ellie wins this competition, Jaz,’ she says firmly.

I nod, smiling. ‘We do. And we need everyone’s help, okay?’

‘Of course.’ Hilda revives, sitting up in her seat. ‘When is the deadline?’

‘Next Friday. So if anyone has any more brilliant ideas, make sure you let us know, okay?’

Everyone nods with renewed enthusiasm, but when I glance around, I realise that Milo has vanished.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I excuse myself and head for the Ladies, but on the way, I see Milo standing in the corridor, talking on his phone.

He's facing slightly away, so he hasn't noticed me. But I pause when I hear my name mentioned.

'Yes, Jo. Next-door neighbour,' he's saying. 'I've invited her over for a meal so I'm having to get the place ship-shape in double quick time.'

I smile, about to walk on. But his next words stop me right there in my tracks.

'The next project will be the real challenge, though. The café and bakery will have to be gutted. I'm actually thinking it might be too big for me and I would be better demolishing the whole thing and starting again.'

I bite my lip as I listen. 'Gutted' couldn't be more appropriate. It's exactly the way I'm feeling, hearing him chatting so casually about demolishing it.

'Even if I don't end up living there, it's still a great investment . . . with planning permission I could build a superb country residence on the site.'

So he isn't even sure he's going to be living there?

I could understand if he was buying the café because he appreciated the location of the place and the views across the village green and wanted to turn it into a lovely home for himself. But it sounds like it's the 'good investment' that's warming his cold heart. He's knocking the café down to make money, pure and simple. He couldn't care less about the community, as long as his investments are on the rise!

Forgetting about the Ladies, I walk back to the table and make my excuses to go, saying I need to take some clean clothes over to Harry's for Emma to wear at nursery the next day.

'But how will you get back? Where's Milo? He'll be worried about you.' Sylvia looks around for him.

I force a smile. ‘Oh, I have a feeling Milo has other things on his mind. No, I’ll be fine, Sylvia. I’ll walk back. It’s such a lovely evening.’

Leaving the bar, I’m at the main hotel entrance, stepping out onto the high street, when I hear Milo calling my name.

But I pretend I didn’t hear him and hurry on my way . . .

I feel horribly unsettled when I get home.

I can’t believe I was actually starting to think I’d misjudged Milo. Everyone was so shocked and sad tonight at the thought of losing the café. And I suppose I imagined their horrified reaction to the news might make Milo at least stop and think about what he was planning to do.

But it’s clear the ladies’ emotional conversation didn’t touch his stone-cold heart in the slightest. Because there he was, moments later, talking to his sister so casually and matter-of-factly about how he was going to just demolish the café and build something else in its place.

Tonight has reaffirmed that to Milo, the café is just a slightly creaky old building that needs to be put out of its misery and razed to the ground. And to hell with what the Sunnybrook community might think.

Well, he can stuff his invitation to dinner!

After Harry, I was determined I wouldn’t be fooled again by any man. But I’d been starting to weaken a little as far as Milo was concerned. After tonight, though, I know that his heart is as hard as Harry’s, and I want nothing more to do with him.

From now on, I will be giving Milo a very wide berth indeed . . .

Ellie

CHAPTER TWENTY

I get a little nervous at nights in the flat on my own. So when someone rings the bell at approaching eleven, I almost jump out of my skin.

Who on earth can it be at this time of night?

Zak and Maisie are away for a few days, spending some time with Zak's mum, while I'm staying here to look after the café.

I go to the door and pick up the intercom phone – and I hear Mum's voice, sounding quite anxious.

'Ellie? Is that you? Ellie?'

'Yes, Mum. It's me. Are you okay?' Alarm is sweeping through me. 'Is Archie there?'

'Yes, I'm here,' he calls. 'Sorry to land on you so late, Ellie, but your mum insisted this couldn't wait until tomorrow.'

'Oh. Well, come on up.' My heart is beating twenty to the dozen, wondering what on earth could be on her mind.

When I open the door, Mum is hurrying up the last few stairs, a look of wild urgency on her face. 'You can't sell it, Ellie!' Gasping for breath, she stops at the top, her hand over her heart. She grasps my arm. 'They were talking about it, but I told them they were wrong. You mustn't sell the café, Ellie. You mustn't sell it.'

'Oh, Mum.' I take her arms and pull her gently inside, and Archie follows with a crestfallen look of apology.

'Your mum heard them discussing the rumour in the residents' communal lounge,' he murmurs, as we guide her along to the living room and get her settled on the sofa. 'She got so agitated, I had to bring her out of there and try to calm her down. And then she demanded we come straight over to see you.'

'I am here, you know,' she says crossly. 'And I'm not deaf.'

I smile. ‘Of course you’re not. We’re just worried about you, that’s all. Can I make you a cup of tea?’

‘Whisky. A whisky always does the trick.’

‘Well, I’d agree with that,’ says Archie with a grin. ‘But not for me, obviously. I’m driving.’

I sit down next to Mum and take her hands. ‘Whisky, eh?’ I smile.

‘Yes! I’m all shaky.’ She snatches a hand away and makes it tremble. ‘Look! A whisky always does the trick.’

Archie and I laugh. ‘Well, I’m sure Zak has a bottle of it somewhere. Hang on a sec.’ Getting up, I go into the kitchen and pour Mum a glass, adding water the way Dad always drank it. I’ve never known Mum ask for a whisky in her life. She must be thinking of Dad, who was fond of saying that a whisky always did the trick! For the millionth time, I think how strange it is that Mum can recall the past far better than things that happened only the day before.

Hopefully, the whisky will be a diversion and she’ll forget her alarm over the café news. I hate to see her so distressed.

But as soon as I walk back in, she stands up and says, ‘You have to promise, Ellie. You mustn’t sell the café.’

I sigh, handing her the whisky. ‘Mum, we might have to. Wonershly Hall is expensive and you wouldn’t want to leave all your friends. So I think it’s the only option.’

She shakes her head. ‘But as long as I’m with Archie, I don’t *care* where we live.’ She grips my hand tightly. ‘Don’t sell the café.’

‘Okay, Mum. I won’t. Now, come on and sit down and drink your whisky.’

She perches on the edge of the sofa, takes a large glug of her drink and then sinks back with a sigh. Archie’s eyes, I notice, are looking suspiciously shiny as he sits down next to her, and I realise Mum’s remark has really touched him . . . when she said she didn’t care where she lived as long as she and Archie were together . . .

I'm feeling quite teary myself, to be honest.

Mum starts talking about Frank Sinatra, apparently having forgotten her anxiety over the café already. She strokes my cheek with a fond smile, tells me I'm ever so beautiful and then she asks me if I know what her favourite song is. I smile and shake my head, knowing full well what it is, and Mum says, 'Ah, well, you're in for a treat!'

She starts singing 'Fly Me to the Moon', in her lovely voice, and at one point, she leans close to Archie, smiling at him and taking his hand, and suddenly, I'm fighting to hold back the tears.

How I make it through that whole song without crumbling into a sodden, emotional heap, I've no idea. I love hearing Mum sing. Her face lights up, she looks years younger, and in a scary world that doesn't always make sense to her these days, she's relaxed and totally in her happy place . . .

After they've gone, I sink down on the sofa, feeling a little stunned. Seeing Mum like that, so sure and lucid in her determination to stop me selling the café, was amazing. Even though her understanding of daily life is not what it used to be, at some level, she knew exactly what was going on and that she needed to let me know her view on it.

I shake my head, chuckling softly. Her view on it was very clear indeed.

Then my heart sinks, because I know that by tomorrow, Mum will have forgotten what she heard in the residents' lounge tonight. It will have been wiped from her mind, along with all the other recent memories.

She might not want me to sell the café, but really, I have no choice.

I wanted to confide in Jaz last night, with Zak and Maisie away. I've got this awful weight dragging me down all the time these days. Selling the café makes me scared because I'll be losing something that means the world to me. I keep telling myself that as long as I have Zak and Maisie, I'll be fine. But

somehow, that doesn't seem to help. The café is in my blood . . .

I thought Jaz might give me a no-nonsense pep talk, about having to do the right thing for Mum. I know she'd agree with me, even though she hates the thought of the café being sold.

But when I called it went straight to voicemail and I never got round to trying again later. The problem is, I'm starting to feel detached from the café already – and not just the café, but distant from the girls as well.

Primrose let slip that she was meeting them in that new café, Roastery, recently, and I felt really hurt that they hadn't included me. But then I realised. They might all lose their jobs when I sell the café. So why would they want me there if they were discussing their uncertain future, knowing I was the one who was the cause of it . . .

Jaz

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Having vowed to avoid my next-door neighbour in future, I can't quite believe it when I'm woken early a few mornings after the lap-dancing mix-up by someone ringing the bell repeatedly – and it's Milo at the door!

'Oh.' I pull my dressing gown tightly around me and fold my arms. 'What on earth are you doing, pitching up here at this hour on a Saturday?' I mumble testily.

'Sorry.' He looks strained, his expression full of urgency. 'I just need to know if you've seen Mabel?'

'Mabel?'

'Yes, she's not in her room and I thought she might have come here, to see Emma?'

'Emma?' I'm still half-asleep, in a bleary-eyed daze. 'No.' I glance up the stairs. Emma was up during the night but we finally got to sleep at around three. 'She's asleep in bed.' A second later, I hear her call out for me and I shrug. 'She *was* asleep in bed.'

Milo nods. 'Right. Well, if you see Mabel, hold onto her until I get back here?'

'Of course.'

He dashes away and I step outside in my bare feet and watch him as he disappears through the side gate of his house.

Fully awake now, my brain is quickly joining the dots. It's eight-thirty, later than usual for me because of our disturbed night.

And little Mabel has gone missing?

I feel my insides turn over. I can't imagine how I'd feel if I woke up and Emma was nowhere to be found. Milo must be absolutely frantic.

Even as I'm standing there, frozen in a panic, wondering what I can do, Milo comes sprinting round from the back

garden. ‘No sign,’ he calls, before diving into the house and emerging a few seconds later with his car keys.

‘Are you going to look for her?’

He nods. ‘I’ll drive round the streets. She can’t have gone far. She was in a mood with me last night because I said it was too late to go out and spend her pocket money. So I’m thinking she might have walked to the village store.’

‘Shall I come with you?’

‘No, it’s fine.’

‘Is there anything I can do?’

‘Just watch out for her and if you see her, call me?’

He gives me his number, jumps in his car and speeds off, leaving his front door wide open.

I pull on some clothes and hurry next door with Emma, still in her pyjamas, worried about the security of Milo’s place.

I don’t want to shut his front door, just in case – in his haste – he hasn’t taken his front door keys with him. But there’s a bunch lying on the newly-installed kitchen worktop, and when I try them in the door, thankfully, I find one that fits.

Pocketing the keys, I leave the house, closing the door behind me and returning home. I text Milo to tell him I’ve locked up the house and left his keys under the plant pot by his door, then I make Emma breakfast. All the time, my mind is racing, thinking about Mabel.

Where could she have gone?

I receive a brief text back from Milo thanking me and saying he’s had no luck at the village shop. They haven’t seen Mabel. He’s reported her missing to the police and they’re sending someone round . . .

I keep imagining how distraught I’d feel if it was Emma who was missing, and I know I have to do something to try and help. The more people who are on the lookout for her, the better, so I get Emma dressed and into her pushchair. She

protests, of course, wanting to walk, but time is of the essence and I need to get to my destination as soon as I can.

The café is just opening up when we arrive, and Ellie quickly understands the urgency of the situation. Her stepdaughter, Maisie, is around Mabel's age, so she's doubly anxious on Milo's behalf. I tell her I'm keen to go out looking for her myself because Milo will have to return home to be there when the police arrive.

She nods, thinking quickly. 'Look, why don't you leave Emma with me and get straight out there? I'll put a notice on the café door saying we're closed because of an emergency and I'll bring Emma and help you look, okay?'

'Okay. That's great.'

I set off, hurrying over the green, scanning the wooded area by the duck pond – no sign of her. So I head for the high street and pop my head round all the shop doors, asking people to spread the word and giving them a description of Mabel.

Bumping into Sylvia coming out of the village store, I quickly tell her what's happened and she looks alarmed.

'Poor Milo must be absolutely beside himself with worry! Such a lovely man, too . . .' She squeezes my arm. 'I'll let people know. She can't have gone far, surely.'

'Absolutely. She'll turn up soon, I'm sure.'

We exchange a tense look, neither of us wanting to even think about the alternative.

Sylvia is already on her phone to Bertha, so I murmur, 'Keep in touch,' and she gives me a thumbs-up as I hurry off to search for Mabel, up and down all the little side streets.

After a while, it occurs to me that I told Milo I'd look out for Mabel arriving home. Is he there himself now? What if Mabel arrives back and he's out looking for her?

To my relief, I suddenly see Ellie hurrying along the street to meet me, with Emma in the pushchair.

'No luck?' she asks.

I shake my head. ‘I really should head back home, just in case she comes back and Milo’s not there.’

‘He will be. The police will have told him to stay at home, won’t they?’

‘I guess so. But I don’t know. He’s bound to feel like he wants to be out there, looking himself.’

‘Well, maybe you should go back.’ She nods. ‘Yes, that’s probably the best idea. Take Emma and I’ll go back and open up the café. We’re really busy on a Saturday morning, so I’ll ask around – see if anyone’s spotted little Mabel on their travels.’

I nod gratefully. ‘If everyone’s on the lookout, she can’t fail to be found.’ I take the pushchair. ‘Come on, Emma. Let’s go home.’

Milo is there when we arrive back. He sees me through the kitchen window and comes out immediately, looking a shadow of his usual self. He seems to have aged ten years since I last saw him, and my heart goes out to him.

His complexion is ashen with worry. Gone is the laid-back, relaxed air. He’s like a tightly-wound spring and I can see in his face – in his every movement – that he’s terrified he’ll never see his daughter alive again. This truly is every parent’s worst nightmare, and instinctively, I step forward to give him a hug. ‘It’ll be fine, Milo. We’ll find her,’ I murmur. He clings tightly to me for a long moment and my throat closes up, feeling his desperation.

A police car arrives, parking in the street, and two officers get out and make their way towards us, and my heart lurches, wondering if they’ve come with news.

What if it’s the worst news of all?

Milo must be fearing that, too. I can tell by his tense expression as he meets them in the driveway. But the weary smile he gives me, just before they all disappear into the house, tells me that there’s no news yet of Mabel. And even

though that's terrible in itself, it's still not as bad as the nightmare Milo had been dreading . . .

I can't settle in my own house, wondering how it's going next door. And when the police finally leave, I take Emma's hand and we go round there.

Milo opens the door, a flare of hope in his eyes dying when he sees it's only us, and my heart aches for him.

'Come in,' he says, and leads us into the living room, which has a faint smell of sawdust and a stronger aroma of paint. He indicates the sofa and Emma and I sit down, while Milo himself sinks onto a ladder-back chair, his head in his hands. Even Emma seems to sense the gravity of the situation. She shuffles along and cuddles into me, sucking her thumb and staring at Milo.

He looks up at me. 'They've got police out looking for her, but I'm supposed to stay here.'

I nod, forcing a smile. 'Of course. They'll want you to be here for when Mabel comes back.'

'Her scooter's gone.' He shakes his head wearily. 'I didn't even notice.'

'You were stressed. You weren't thinking.' I shrug. 'That's good though. Isn't it?'

We exchange a look and he nods. If Mabel went off on her scooter, it means she left willingly . . .

My mobile phone rings and it's Sylvia, so I quickly answer it.

'Jaz? We've found her. We've found Mabel.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

‘What? Oh, my God! Where is she?’ I gaze at Milo and he springs to his feet, his face full of desperate hope.

‘We’re bringing her back now. The postman, Robbie Gordon, was driving past in his van and spotted a young girl down by the river on a scooter, and when he was delivering a parcel to Hilda he mentioned it, and she put two and two together and realised it must be Mabel. So she called me straight away.’

I cover the phone and gasp, ‘Sylvia and Hilda are bringing her back! She was on her scooter on the river path.’

‘Why didn’t *I* think of that? She was begging me to take her down there, wasn’t she?’ The transformation in him is wonderful to see. ‘I can’t believe it. The little minx must have decided she’d go down to the river by herself, instead of waiting for me to get round to it.’ He shakes his head, looking as if he doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. But laughter wins. ‘Just wait till I get hold of her!’

We hurry outside, and sure enough, we immediately spot Sylvia and Hilda in the distance, walking either side of Mabel, who’s wheeling her scooter along.

Milo strides to the gate. Mabel sees him and breaks away from the two women, and starts scooting fast towards her dad. And as I watch, she abandons her scooter and starts running instead, straight into Milo’s arms. He hugs her tightly, as if he’ll never let her go, and my throat chokes up with emotion watching them.

Sylvia explains how they found her, and Milo keeps saying ‘thank you’ over and over again, his face still buried in his daughter’s hair.

‘I need to phone the police. Let them know she’s been found,’ he says, finally letting go of her.

‘I’m really sorry, Dad.’ Mabel looks tearful. ‘I went out very early because I wanted to be back before you woke up. So you wouldn’t be worried.’

Milo sighs. ‘Well, I *was* worried. Just promise me you will *never* do anything like that again.’

‘I won’t.’ Mabel looks genuinely sorry. ‘I promise.’

‘Okay. Come on, then.’ He takes her hand and tells Sylvia and Hilda he’ll never be able to thank them enough.

‘We were just glad to help.’ Sylvia brushes off his thanks with a warm smile. ‘Weren’t we, Hilda?’

‘Of course.’ Hilda smiles at Mabel. ‘Just you make sure you look after your dad, now. He loves you so very much.’

‘I will,’ says Mabel in a small voice, looking up at him with a sheepish smile.

‘Right, let’s get you inside.’ Milo turns. ‘I don’t know how I can ever thank you ladies enough,’ he repeats.

Sylvia smiles. ‘We’re just glad we could help. You see to Mabel.’

We say our goodbyes and Emma and I are about to go back inside, when Milo turns and calls, ‘Thank you, Jaz. You’ve been great.’

I smile at him and they disappear inside, the front door closing behind them . . .

During the following week, I often think of Milo and Mabel, but they seem to be keeping a low profile, and I really can’t blame Milo for wanting to keep his daughter close after a shock like that.

Meanwhile, the (unofficial) Cheesecake Challenge Committee schedules another meeting – this time at Maddy’s house – to make a decision on the competition entry. We all agree that however lukewarm Ellie is about the competition, she needs to make the final choice, so I offer to go and speak to her about it.

Fen says she’d like to do it but she’s worried that ‘double baby hormones’ will make her far too emotional to be able to speak rationally on such a heart-breaking subject.

‘I’ll just be in floods of tears at the thought of Ellie losing the café, after she’s poured her whole heart and soul into it,’ Fen says on the phone to me. ‘I get teary about everything these days, Jaz. I had this terrible craving for white chocolate Maltesers the other day and Rob went to get me a supply, but he returned empty-handed because they’d stopped making them. And I got so emotional . . . honestly, I know it’s ridiculous, but it felt like the end of my world as I knew it! So can you imagine Ellie and me together, talking about the café? We’d both be soaked through before I got three words out!’

Chuckling, I reassure her. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll talk to her.’

Not that it’s any less of an emotional a chat for me, as it turns out.

Before I even have a chance to mention the cheesecake competition, Ellie starts talking about how she hates that she’s putting all the girls’ jobs in jeopardy by selling the café. ‘I completely understand why you don’t invite me to your get-togethers these days,’ she adds with a miserable shrug.

I stare at her in astonishment. ‘What do you mean? Of course we don’t feel that way. Even Maddy’s really sorry for pointing out to you that she’ll be losing her job.’

Looking utterly defeated, Ellie says she knows we met up the other week in Roastery and didn’t invite her along, but she understood why.

So then, of course, I tell her our plan. ‘We were meeting to discuss the cheesecake competition. We all agreed that if you were to win, the publicity would give your whole business a gigantic boost. And if that happened . . .’ I tail off with an encouraging shrug.

‘Really?’ Ellie cheers up a bit at this. ‘So they don’t all hate me, then?’

‘No! Of course they don’t. They just want the best for you, like I do. Hence all the drumming up of cheesecake ideas. Even the WI are involved now and they came up with some fabulous ideas.’

Ellie gives a disbelieving laugh. ‘And all this has been going on without me knowing?’

I smile ruefully. ‘We didn’t know how you’d take our . . . well, our interference.’

‘Oh, Jaz.’ She gives a heavy sigh. ‘You don’t know how much better that makes me feel, thinking that people are rooting for me and not thinking I’m just a complete loser for wanting to sell up.’

‘They’re not thinking that at all.’ I hesitate. ‘They all just want you to win the competition.’

She smiles sadly. ‘But what’s the point if I’m selling up?’ She swallows. ‘I’ve actually had a firm offer from someone called Masterson, but I’ve been putting off accepting because my solicitor thinks I should wait and see if I get other offers. Zak showed Mr Masterson around when I was visiting Mum, soon after I put it on the market. He said from the way he was talking, it sounded like he wasn’t even planning to keep it as a café.’

I pause. Then I say miserably, ‘Milo Masterson is actually my next-door neighbour.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ellie stares at me. ‘He’s your next-door neighbour? So did you know what he was planning?’

I nod. ‘Sorry. We just didn’t know whether to tell you. To be honest, we were kind of hoping he might change his mind and nothing would come of it.’

‘Well, he hasn’t and I’m thinking really seriously about it.’ She shrugs sadly. ‘I have to, Jaz. I can’t see any other way to keep Mum where she is.’ She looks at me in despair, tears sparkling in her eyes.

‘Oh, Ellie. I’m so sorry.’ I draw her into a hug and finally, she lets go and sobs on my shoulder as if her heart will break.

The following evening, I’m meeting up with the girls to make cheesecake.

We’ve whittled all the suggestions down to our top six, and we’re planning to try out all the recipes and then decide on our winner. Ellie will make the final decision, of course.

But as I make my way over to the True Loaf Baking School – the venue for the baking session – I’m worried that after she broke down in tears the day before, Ellie might not even turn up tonight . . .

When I arrive, Anita – who runs the baking school – welcomes me with a tense smile. ‘Hi, Jaz. Katja, Maddy, Fen and Primrose are already here. They’re getting all the equipment out.’

‘Great. Are you okay, Anita?’ I peer at the dark shadows under her eyes.

She sighs. ‘Actually, no, I’m not. To be honest, I’ve felt really down ever since Ellie told me she was selling the café. I can’t really believe it. I mean, it’s the end of an era, isn’t it?’

I nod gloomily. ‘You’re telling me it is. But she has to put Rose first.’

‘She . . . assured me she wasn’t selling this place. But I suppose you never know . . . things can change.’

‘Of course. But if that’s what Ellie said, I think you can rest assured she meant it,’ I murmur, laying my hand on her arm. ‘She would never tell you something that wasn’t true, Anita – especially where it involves your future. I know she’s absolutely gutted that the others are likely to lose their jobs when the café is sold.’

Anita nods. ‘It’s all so awful. Not that it’s Ellie’s fault. She’s more devastated than anyone that it’s had to come to this.’ She draws in a breath. ‘Anyway, come along in and we’ll get to work.’

‘Great.’ I rub my hands together. ‘Let’s concentrate on smashing this cheesecake challenge. Then maybe we can put a smile on Ellie’s face. I take it she’s not here?’

Anita shakes her head and we go through to join the others.

‘Ah, hello!’ Maddy greets me, already in her apron, along with the others. ‘Right, Jaz . . . we’ve all decided which cheesecake we’re making, so I’m afraid you don’t have a choice. The only one left is . . .’ She glances down the list. ‘Japanese cheesecake with Irish whisky liqueur and white chocolate ganache.’

‘Japanese cheesecake? Oh, that was Summer’s idea. Lovely.’ My step-daughter, Summer, lives with her dad, Grant, but she’s looking forward to us spending time together during the forthcoming school holidays.

‘What’s Japanese cheesecake?’ asks Anita.

‘You might have heard it called cotton cheesecake?’ I explain. ‘It’s a lot fluffier than the sort of cheesecake we’re used to. It’s basically a combination of a rich custard and a light, airy sponge.’

‘Sounds gorgeous.’ She smiles. ‘I’m doing the lemon meringue cheesecake.’

‘And I’m making the rocky road cheesecake pudding,’ says Maddy.

Katja sticks up her hand. ‘Strawberry cheesecake with a chocolate brownie base.’

‘And I’ve decided to do the chocolate and hazelnut ice-cream cheesecake,’ adds Fen.

‘So that only leaves the lemon drizzle cheesecake, which is me,’ smiles Primrose.

‘Anyway, let’s get going,’ says Maddy bossily. ‘I want to get to the taste-testing as soon as possible.’

We all laugh and Fen says, ‘There’s still time to switch one out for the pickle cheesecake.’

A chorus of groans greets this suggestion and she chuckles. ‘Don’t worry. I’ve brought my supply.’

‘You haven’t!’ laughs Primrose.

‘Oh, yes, I have.’ Fen reaches for her handbag and reveals the small jar tucked alongside her purse. ‘Ready for all eventualities.’

‘Not *all* eventualities, hopefully,’ frowns Maddy. ‘We don’t want you rushing off to give birth in the middle of creating your masterpiece.’

Fen laughs. ‘Don’t worry. I’ve got a while to go yet. The cheesecake’s safe.’

We all choose a bench and get started, but while this should be a really fun thing to do, the mood in the place is actually rather sober, without a great deal of chat. And I wonder if, like me, the girls are all anxious about Ellie, and pondering a future without the Little Duck Pond Café in it . . .

At last, we’re all finished, and six spectacular cheesecake creations are lined up along a bench, with six plates and six pastry forks waiting to be used by the six eager testers.

The taste-test itself is performed in almost complete silence – aside from lots of orgasmic murmurs, of course, and people pointing at their plates while in mid-chew and nodding their earnest approval.

‘How on earth do we choose?’ demands Fen at last, rubbing her tummy at the end of our eating marathon and looking a little queasy.

Katja shrugs. ‘It’s a tough one. They’re all fabulous.’

‘Well, it’s definitely the rocky road cheesecake pudding for me,’ says Maddy. ‘And it’s honestly not because I made that one myself. I just think it ticks all the boxes. It has chocolate, it has marshmallows, it’s smooth, it’s crunchy – plus it tastes divine and it looks absolutely amazing.’

‘I agree,’ murmurs Primrose. ‘That beautiful glossy chocolate dome is just crying out for a cake sparkler to be lit on top of it!’

There’s the sound of someone coming in . . . Ellie’s voice . . . and we all turn.

‘Oh, wow!’ Ellie’s eyes are practically out on stalks as she gazes at the cheesecake line-up. ‘Good work, girls. Is there a spare plate and fork for me?’

‘Of course!’ I dive into a cupboard for a plate and fetch her a pastry fork, and she proceeds to try every creation.

She samples them silently, reserving her judgement until the end. And when she finally sets down her plate and fork and turns, there are tears in her eyes.

‘I can’t believe you did all this . . . getting the local community involved as well! Honestly, if it had been up to me, I probably wouldn’t have bothered. I’ve got no motivation to do anything at the moment. But seeing all of these – and even better, *tasting* them – makes me actually quite excited for the competition. We can win, I know we can! Especially with this gorgeous chocolatey dome thing, which I think would probably have to be my top choice.’

‘I made that one,’ says Maddy proudly. ‘And I think we’re mostly in agreement with you, Ellie.’

‘Really?’ Ellie glances around and we all nod. ‘Well, that’s brilliant. Let’s get our entry in tonight, shall we?’

‘I’ll do it, if you like,’ volunteers Fen. ‘I’ve got all the info. And a copy of the recipe. Perhaps you could go through it with me, Maddy, since you actually made it? Then we can get the ingredients and the method exactly right?’

Maddy nods. ‘Of course. Although I think I need a large mug of tea first. I’m parched after all that sugar!’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It's been an anxious wait to hear news of my job application to be a tour guide again at Brambleberry Manor – but the following week I receive an official letter from Marjery, Fen's mum, telling me that the job is mine, no interview necessary.

As a result, when the doorbell rings a few minutes later, I answer it with a big smile on my face.

'Oh, you look happy!' It's Fen. 'Did you get Mum's letter?'

I nod. 'Just arrived. Best news I've had in a long time.'

'Good. And there's more.'

'More?'

'More good news. Guess what? Ellie has only just gone and won the title of Best Regional Café!' She beams at me.

'Wow, really? Oh, that's amazing. Do you want to come in?'

'Thanks, but I'm due at the hospital for a regular check-up in half an hour. I just thought I'd call in on my way and let you know.'

'Is Ellie happy about it?'

She frowns. 'I think so. But she seemed really busy when I phoned, so we didn't talk for long.'

'This could make all the difference to her business,' I murmur. 'Maybe I'll pop over and see her.'

'Good idea. Try and persuade her that she won that competition for a reason.' She smiles. 'Right, better go. Good luck talking to Ellie!'

I wave Fen off and decide to walk straight over there. It's an incredibly big deal being judged the best café in the region. Even Ellie, unmotivated as she is these days, must surely realise that . . .

When I arrive, Ellie's wiping tables and I go straight over. 'Hey, congratulations, you! How does it feel to be the best?'

‘Jaz!’ She smiles. ‘Thanks. It feels great, actually. Do you want to come through?’ She indicates the kitchen and I follow her in, and when she turns, I see that her eyes are glittery with tears.

‘I’m so happy for you, Ellie.’ I step forward to hug her.

‘Thank you.’ She breaks away and grabs some kitchen roll to blow her nose. ‘It all seems so unreal, to be honest. When the woman phoned to tell me, at first I thought it was Maddy having me on! And I still can’t quite believe it.’

‘Well, you *should* believe it. You deserve it so much after all the hard work you’ve put in. Ooh, hang on, who’s this?’ I peer out of the window at a car that’s just drawn up outside. It has a familiar logo on the side. ‘I think it’s the local news.’

‘What?’ Ellie looks at me, aghast, and rushes to see for herself.

‘I recognise him!’ I say excitedly, as a man emerges. ‘He does the news reports sometimes. He must be coming to speak to you about your award-winning café!’

‘Well, I’m not sure *I* want to speak to *him*,’ says Ellie, looking worried. ‘They phoned earlier to ask if they could interview me about the café and I tried to put them off. Why would I want to be on TV?’

‘Oh, but you should talk to him, Ellie,’ I murmur. ‘Tell him your story. It’ll do wonders for the business if people see you on the ITV news.’

She looks at me then, and her eyes are so sad. ‘But what’s the use, Jaz? It’s too late.’

‘What do you mean?’ I stare at her, alarmed. ‘Of course it’s not too late.’

‘But it is.’ Her shoulders slump in sorrowful resignation. ‘You don’t understand. I signed the contract yesterday. The café’s no longer mine.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It's the following Monday and we're all gathered in the Little Duck Pond Café at the end of the working day, wanting desperately to support Ellie but feeling pretty useless.

'She's putting on a brave face but goodness knows how she's feeling inside,' I murmur, as we watch her chatting to the delivery man outside.

Fen nods. 'I can't believe that in less than a fortnight, she'll be locking the café door for the last time. It's the end of an era and it's breaking *my* heart, never mind Ellie's.'

'Shh! She's coming. We've got to look on the bright side,' says Katja. 'For her sake.'

Maddy frowns. '*What* bright side?'

Ellie comes back into the café and slumps down on her chair.

'That's the very last order done, then. Jim, the driver, has been an important part of my working week for a long time now, but I just said a last goodbye to him.' She shakes her head and a tear rolls down her cheek. 'What have I done?' she gasps.

'Oh, Ellie,' breathes Fen, grasping her hand, and we all lean forward, wanting to be supportive. Maddy, who's nearest, leans over and gives her a hug.

'You'll own a café again one day,' says Primrose.

'Of course you will. You're too good at what you do, Ellie, for this to be the end,' agrees Katja.

'The Little Duck Pond Café will rise again!' adds Maddy firmly.

Ellie gives a shaky sigh. 'I don't know. Maybe. But it won't be here, will it? In this amazing place with all its wonderful memories.' She casts a fond glance around her, then she gets up and walks to the window, staring out at the view across the green.

We exchange anxious looks. Then I say, ‘I think we need to look to the future, Ellie. Get in some booze, kick back and plan your next adventure. What do you say?’

She turns with a wistful smile. ‘A sort of last hurrah, you mean? While I still have the keys?’

I frown. ‘Well, maybe. Although I’d rather think of it as the end of an era and the start of a shiny new one for you.’

Ellie plops down on her chair and smiles at us all. Then she shrugs. ‘Okay, Jaz. Give me the send-off to end all send-offs. But I promise you, I’m planning to drink so much gin, I won’t be able to lift my sore head off the pillow for the whole of the next day.’

Ellie

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It's Saturday night and I'm in the café kitchen with Jen and Clara, trying to be upbeat about my special 'send-off' this evening. Both girls stayed behind after the café closed to help me set up, turning the counter into a mini bar with white wine chilling (and various flavours of gin) and now we're heating up sausage rolls and quiche, and making bowls of coleslaw and salad to soak up the alcohol.

As the others start arriving, we carry the food through, and soon, bolstered by a lemon drizzle gin and tonic, and the chatter and laughter of my best friends, I'm starting to think maybe tonight won't be so bad, after all. We'll have a nice evening and they'll endeavour to make me feel optimistic about the future (they'll fail in that, but I won't let on), and then I'll wind up the evening and retreat upstairs to Zak, where I know I'll probably give in to my tears.

But I don't have to worry about Mum. And that's why I'm doing this. (I keep having to remind myself of that, every time I find myself questioning if I've done the right thing, signing that contract.)

I'm so thankful I have such good friends. They're doing their best to buoy me up tonight and make me look on the bright side (what bright side?), and I keep intercepting little secret winks and nods passing between them, as if they've got something up their sleeve. But the idea of this just fills me with dread. What are they planning? Something 'fun', designed to cheer me up? The 'end of an era' equivalent of the birthday bumps, perhaps? A quick dunk in the duck pond?

And then, just as I'm starting to think about feigning tiredness and winding up the evening, Sylvia, Olga and Bertha appear, quickly followed by Hilda, Margaret and a crowd from the WI. My heart sinks as I force myself to look delighted to see them. Under normal circumstances, I *would* be pleased. But right now, I just want to retreat upstairs to the relative quiet of the flat, away from all the well-meaning chatter and the laughter, and curl up on the sofa next to Zak and watch something mindless on TV.

But it looks as if that won't be happening any time soon because more villagers are arriving, pouring through the door, and I'm now realising what all the secret looks were about – my lovely friends have planned this, to show me how much I'm valued in the community.

And now Sylvia is clapping for silence and making a speech about how amazing I am, and how she did exactly the right thing handing the café over to me, and that I'll make a success of whatever I decide to do next because she believes in me. And everyone gathered here is cheering and clapping – and I'm holding back the tears, because I'm realising they're all my friends. Every one of the villagers turning up here tonight – and they're having to pack in through the door now – are known to me. I've celebrated their good news with them, and I've commiserated and given them cake and a listening ear when things have been going badly. And it strikes me that they're here now, tonight, to show me that they'll miss the Little Duck Pond Café. And they'll miss me, too . . .

I love the girls for doing this for me, but I really can't take much more of this.

My cheeks are aching with trying to keep smiling.

I just want to escape . . .

Jaz

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Oh, hell, why did we think this was a good idea?

I can see Ellie trying so hard to hold it together, but I know her too well not to realise that her smile is an act.

When I mentioned to Sylvia that we were having a night in for Ellie, and would she like to come along, she asked if she could invite other people, and thinking she meant Bertha and Olga, I said yes, of course she could. Ellie would be delighted to see them.

But it looks as if Sylvia's open invitation has swept round the entire village, judging by the numbers of people crowding through the door with good wishes for Ellie tonight . . .

I go up to her and steer her away, behind the counter. 'Are you okay?'

She shakes her head. 'Not really, Jaz.' She turns away to face the coffee machines, hiding her emotions from the chattering crowd. 'I mean, it's all so lovely, knowing the café meant so much to so many people, and hearing all their lovely comments. But it's just making me realise how much I'm going to miss everyone.' She shakes her head in despair. 'I've taken it all for granted but now that I'm losing it, I just feel so . . . lost.'

'Oh, love. Tell you what, why don't you slip away upstairs and we'll make your excuses. I'm sure people will understand that it's all just a bit overwhelming for you.'

'But all these lovely people have come here, just for me. I can't leave.' She looks at me hopefully. 'Can I?'

'Of course you can.' I smile at her. 'Hey, this is your night. You're allowed!'

She nods and blows her nose. 'Okay. Well, if you really think people won't mind . . .'

'Of course they won't. Go and put your feet up in the flat with Zak.'

Ellie smiles, takes a deep breath and turns around, ready to make a quick exit. Then her face freezes in shock as she stares at something behind me.

‘What? What is it?’ I ask, turning myself to see what’s going on.

It’s Milo.

Oh, no! What’s he doing here? He couldn’t have chosen a worse moment to turn up and rub Ellie’s nose in it!

He’s squeezing into the room, his height making him just visible above the crowd that’s gathered in here. And he’s waving and making his way over to us.

‘That’s Milo Masterson, isn’t it?’ says Ellie. ‘I saw a picture of him in the paper. A story about that Roastery place he owns.’ She looks at me in a panic. ‘I really don’t want to see him, Jaz. The last thing I need right now is to hear about his plans to knock the place down.’ She starts pushing through the crowd to get to the door on the far wall, which leads to the flat upstairs.

But as I follow her, Milo reaches us, and Ellie’s too late to escape.

‘Ellie.’ He looks anxious. ‘I heard about tonight . . . everyone coming here to support you. And I had to come. I’ve got some news for you.’

‘News?’ Ellie stares at him warily.

He nods. ‘The thing is, I’ve decided to withdraw my offer on the café. I know we signed the contract, but if you’re in agreement with my plan, we could rip it up and –’

‘*What?*’ Ellie’s shock blasts out of her in a shriek, all her suppressed emotion emerging at once. ‘Did you say you’re *withdrawing your offer?*’

A hush descends on the room. Everyone is looking over. I slip my arm protectively around her waist.

Milo looks around him, then he murmurs to Ellie, ‘Can we . . . can we talk privately?’

She shakes her head, drawing herself upright as if to brace herself against a blow. ‘These people here tonight are my friends,’ she says firmly, although I detect a little catch in her voice. ‘I want them all here with me when you say what you have to say.’

Milo swallows hard. ‘Okay.’ He nods, looking around him with an awkward smile. And I hold my breath, waiting to hear what he’s going to say. They’ve both signed, so he can’t break the contract if Ellie still wants to go ahead with the sale . . .

He takes a deep breath, clears his throat and announces, ‘As you know, it had been my intention to buy the Little Duck Pond Café. I’d planned to knock the building down and build a brand-new property in its place. But I’ve changed my mind and that’s why I’m asking to withdraw my offer.’

Ellie is staring at him in disbelief. ‘But you can’t just go back on your word just like that. It’s a *contract*, for goodness’ sake!’

Milo nods. ‘Instead of buying the place and turning it into a house, I’ve decided I’d like to invest in it, on one condition. That it remains in your hands, exactly as it is. A café.’

There’s a moment of absolute silence as everyone takes this in, and when I look at Ellie, all the colour has drained from her face. She catches hold of my arm, swaying a little, and I grasp her to steady her.

Milo, his voice a little unsteady, continues. ‘I’ve got years of marketing experience and I’d like to help you take the café and the baking school and the on-line business to the next level, Ellie. If that’s what you’d like. I can’t bear to see a business just vanish when it deserves to succeed.’

There’s a low hum of interested chatter, and Maddy quips, ‘Wow, *Dragons’ Den* has arrived in Sunnybrook!’ This lightens the atmosphere, making everyone laugh.

Seeing that Ellie isn’t dismissing this out of hand, Milo goes on. ‘I’d like to think we could get your winning cheesecake into supermarkets, along with a range of your other bestsellers. And maybe expand the baking school, holding residential

courses during the summer with students staying in glamping pods.’ He shrugs. ‘Just an idea and I’ve got lots of them – all of which could boost the business, which would mean you wouldn’t need to sell.’

Ellie laughs, looking amazed. ‘But . . . what made you change your mind?’

I nod. ‘Yes, do tell, Milo. You told *me* the café was sad and old-fashioned and was failing to keep up with the times.’

He gives me a sheepish look. ‘Yes, well, that was then. Look, I never thought I’d admit this, but . . . well, I was wrong believing this place had had its day. Many of you rallied round to help me find my daughter, when Mabel went missing, and I confess I was overwhelmed by the kindness you all displayed towards a complete stranger. And thinking about it afterwards, I realised that this café truly is at the heart of your community, in such a special way. Places like Roastery, dare I say it, will come and go. They’re purely business enterprises, there to make money. But this place . . . it’s special. Because of the staff, who go the extra mile to make people feel welcome, and the customers who feel so attached to the place that they feel heartbroken at the thought of it closing. As is clearly shown by the turnout here tonight.’

‘Take him up on his offer, Ellie!’ shouts a man in the crowd.

‘Yes, we’re on tenterhooks here,’ says a woman’s voice. ‘And I’m definitely not the only one who’ll miss your triple chocolate muffins if you decide to sell up.’

I give Ellie an encouraging squeeze. The colour is returning to her cheeks, although she looks really emotional.

‘Where’s that contract, Milo?’ She gives him a wobbly smile. ‘Let’s tear it up.’ She starts to cry – happy tears this time – and everyone starts cheering and applauding.

‘Someone once accused you of having the emotions of a robot, Milo,’ shouts Maddy, ‘but I don’t believe it. I think you’re amazing.’ She grins over at me and winks.

Sending Milo a sheepish smile, I clear my throat. ‘Er, that certain someone now knows she was wrong, and she’d like to

apologise most humbly.’

He grins, his eyes lingering on mine, sending a lovely feeling of warmth through me. ‘Apology accepted,’ he says.

Ellie

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

It's closing time on Monday, and as I lock the door after waving off the final two customers, my heart lifts at the thought of being able to do the same thing tomorrow, and the day after, and every day after that! The horrible stress of the past few months is fading away. Today, my spirits feel light, like one of Jen's perfect Victoria sponge cakes.

I've just about come back to earth after Milo's amazing investment proposition on Saturday night. Knowing I probably won't have to sell up after all feels utterly incredible and I hardly slept last night, thinking about the motivating chat we had yesterday afternoon about the future of the Little Duck Pond Café.

Milo seems certain that a modest investment on his part, along with the business-boosting ideas we discussed over coffee (and a slice of prize-winning cheesecake), will mean the business can go from strength to strength, and we should be able to afford to keep Mum at Wonershly Hall. I have faith in Milo, and I could tell by the way he was talking that he genuinely cares about the café and the village.

I have a feeling he cares a lot about Jaz as well, although when I broached the subject with her this morning, she burst out laughing and said there was no way on earth she was getting into another 'relationship situation'.

'Give me twenty years, then I might consider letting another man in,' were her exact words.

I turn with a smile as Primrose, Katja, Fen and Madison emerge from the kitchen, chatting about Maddy's lap-dancing lesson later.

'Come on, then. Give us a demonstration.' Primrose grins. 'You can pretend I'm Jack.'

'Get lost!' Maddy, who hardly ever blushes, is turning distinctly pink about the gills at the very thought.

'Oh, spoilsport,' says Katja. 'We'd all benefit from a bit of lap-dancing tuition, I'm sure.'

‘Er, speak for yourself,’ grins Fen, cradling her bump. ‘Imagine if I started doing sexy-sexy dancing for Rob in this state! He’d crack up laughing for a start, and I’d probably end up doing myself a permanent injury.’

‘If I get really good at it, I promise I’ll show you how it’s done,’ concedes Maddy. ‘But I wouldn’t hold your breath, girls. Being seductive doesn’t exactly come naturally to me. I just want to hoot with laughter all the time. We were exploring how to seduce with words at last week’s class and I nearly got thrown out for extracting the Michael and spoiling the mood.’

‘Oh, hell, what did you say?’ Katja grimaces.

Maddy shrugs. ‘Just that if they were keen to talk dirty, they should come and inspect the inside of my fan oven, and that definitely wasn’t a euphemism.’

I’m still laughing as I wave them off through the back door.

As they’re leaving, Archie’s car draws up – with Mum in the passenger seat – and I hurry outside to greet them.

‘It’s so lovely to see you!’ I draw Mum into a hug as she gets out.

‘Oh. My handbag.’ She glances around her, looking flustered. Mum hates to be parted from her bag these days, even though there’s hardly anything in it.

‘You’ll have left it in the car,’ says Archie, and Mum leans in to get it.

‘She still thinks you’re selling the café,’ Archie murmurs in my ear as I hug him, too. ‘The idea’s stuck in her head and I can’t seem to dislodge it. I was hoping you might be able to put her mind at ease.’

‘Right.’ I smile at her as she emerges, bag looped over her arm. ‘Hey, I’m really glad you decided to visit me today. I could do with some help, Mum.’

She nods. ‘I’m your man.’

‘You are indeed. And I was thinking about baking Maisie some of those chocolate biscuits she likes – the ones you used to bake for me when I was little, remember?’

Her face lights up in a smile. ‘Have you got chocolate chips? You can’t make them without chocolate chips.’

‘I’ve got loads of chocolate chips. Why don’t we go into the café and bake some together?’

‘Perhaps Maisie would help?’ offers Archie. ‘Is she up there?’

I nod. ‘She’s doing her homework with Zak but she’s probably finished by now. Can you buzz the flat, Archie, and ask her to come down? And Mum and I will get on with our baking.’

‘Great!’ Archie winks at me and goes off, and I hear him telling Maisie that her gran is here to see her.

‘Now, we need a bowl and some flour,’ Mum says, looking around the café kitchen. ‘And lard. We need some lard.’

‘Oh, yes. Lard. I’d forgotten about that. We used to put margarine and lard into pastry back then, didn’t we? I’m afraid we’ve just got butter today, Mum.’

‘Well, I suppose that’ll have to do.’

‘And chocolate chips!’ I produce some from the cupboard with a flourish.

Then Maisie comes in and runs straight over to Mum to give her a big hug. ‘I’m going to help you with the baking, Gran. You have to be careful you don’t burn yourself on the hot oven, okay?’

‘Burn myself?’ Mum plants a kiss on Maisie’s head and laughs. ‘You don’t need to worry about me, my love. I make biscuits every day, didn’t you know?’

Maisie gives me a little smile and I wink at her, and she says, ‘How many chocolate chips shall we put in, Gran?’

‘Ooh, a hundred.’

‘What about two hundred?’

‘Even better!’

Watching them together, Maisie helping Mum on with her apron, my heart melts.

‘Gran would love some hot chocolate,’ says Maisie. ‘Wouldn’t you, Gran?’

‘I would indeed.’

I laugh. ‘And I suppose you would, too, Maisie?’

‘Yes, please.’

I grin at Archie, who’s leaning against the counter, watching the goings-on with a fond smile. ‘Right. Two hot chocolates coming up. And . . . an Americano, Archie?’

‘Perfect,’ he says, and Mum follows me through to the café.

Watching me, she shakes her head sadly at the coffee machine. ‘How do you work those things? I’ll never get the hang of it.’

‘Well, that’s okay. You don’t have to. You can just leave it to me.’

‘But I can’t. I have to help you. Then you won’t sell the café.’

I swallow, my heart flipping over at her anxious face. ‘Mum, I’m not selling. That was just a rumour you heard. We’re staying right here.’

She gazes at me, her face still troubled. ‘Are you really? Because sometimes Archie tells me fibs to make me feel better.’

‘Does he?’

She nods, leans closer and whispers, ‘But I pretend that I believe him.’

I chuckle softly. ‘Well, Archie wasn’t telling fibs this time, Mum. I’m definitely not selling the café, so you never need to worry about that.’

She nods. ‘Good girl.’ She pats my arm. ‘Do I get that . . . white stuff on my drink?’

‘Whipped cream? Yes, of course you do. And chocolate sprinkles if you’d like?’

She gives a snort of laughter. ‘What sort of question is that? Of *course* I want chocolate sprinkles.’

‘Excellent. Can you go and fetch Maisie and Archie? Tell them their drinks are ready.’

‘Yes, boss.’ Her eyes sparkling, she gives a little salute, and I smile, watching her go with tears in my eyes.

I love my mum so much and I was devastated when the doctor gave her the diagnosis. But I’ve learned such a lot about dementia since then.

‘Okay, folks. Hurry up. Or the drinks will get cold.’ I lay everything on the table by the counter, and Maisie comes running through, followed by Mum and Archie.

I’ve learned that you have to cherish all the special moments you have together. And I’m planning on having a *lot* more of those in the future . . .

Jaz

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

It's early July and a fair has arrived in Sunnybrook. The whole village, it seems, has turned out to make the most of this sunny Sunday on the green.

'Can I take Emma on the teacups, please, Jaz? I'll be really careful and I'll keep hold of her hand all the time.'

I glance at Milo and smile over at Mabel, who's standing with Emma, watching the merry-go-round moving at a snail's pace.

'I know you would,' I call. 'You're a very clever, sensible girl.'

'Except when she manages to escape the house at the crack of dawn and go scooting by the river on her own,' murmurs Milo, looking horrified at the memory.

'She won't do that again.'

'She'd better not.'

We exchange a smile, and he calls over, 'If Jaz says it's okay, that's fine. But you need to wait until it stops.'

Mabel turns and gives Milo a look of disbelief. 'Well, I know *that*, Dad!'

I grin. 'Stop being a clucky mother hen.'

'I can't.'

'Fair enough.'

The teacups grind to a halt and the children get off, then we help Mabel and Emma onto the ride, making sure they're secure. When we stand back, Emma tries to get up and wave at me, but Mabel keeps her arm firmly around her and tells her she has to sit down.

'Do what Mabel says, love,' I call, smiling at her obvious excitement.

'Can you believe we're doing this?' says Milo, as we watch their painfully slow progress, waving each time they come

around.

I grin at him. ‘No, I can’t. I thought you were the most annoying man in the world when I first met you.’

He snorts. ‘I thought you were a sandwich short of a picnic, hiding in that bush.’

‘I wasn’t *in* the bush.’

‘Semantics.’ He waves away my objection. ‘To be honest, I still find you a bit alarming occasionally.’

‘You do? Well, that’s okay because I still find you annoying at times.’

‘Not at the moment, hopefully.’

I smile. ‘Definitely not at the moment.’

‘Good.’ He nudges my shoulder. ‘Hey, maybe one day you’ll give in and agree to have dinner with me.’

I laugh, more loudly than I mean to. ‘I wouldn’t hold your breath.’

‘It would just be dinner. Nothing else.’

My heart is beating faster just thinking about a date with Milo. Because I know that’s what he means. But for now, I know my own mind, and I’m definitely not ready for anything except friendship.

‘You’re living next door to me. Just be thankful for that,’ I tell him pertly. ‘And *wave*, for goodness’ sake!’ I give him a sharp nudge, and as Emma and Mabel trundle around once more, we smile and cheer and wave together.

He laughs. ‘Hey, I didn’t need permission from *you* to live in that house. I decided to stay there because I’d grown to quite like the area.’

‘And the neighbours.’

He nods. ‘And the neighbours.’ He slips an arm around my waist and murmurs, ‘One neighbour in particular.’

I chuckle, knowing I should probably pull away from him because this entirely contravenes our agreement to be friends

and nothing else. The trouble is, I *like* the feel of his hand on my waist . . . and the male scent of him . . . far too much, in fact.

And when I turn to reprimand him, his annoyingly sexy mouth is much too dangerously close for my liking. I'm trapped by the warmth of his eyes and his smile, and when he bridges the gap and kisses me – just very softly, *achingly* softly – that kiss is doing things to me that really shouldn't be happening . . .

‘Just friends, though, eh?’ He pulls away with a knowing smile.

I smile back, my traitorous heart tripping over itself.

‘Just friends . . .’

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Dear Reader

I really hope you enjoyed this story of the power of community when all hope seems lost, and the beginnings of a new start for lovely Jaz. I really enjoyed writing it, especially being able to bring in lots of favourite characters from past stories. It felt just like reuniting with old friends!

The focus of my next story – out in June – will be twins Krystle and Carrie, both of whom have appeared in previous tales of the Little Duck Pond Café. When Krystle wins a small fortune, will all her dreams come true? And what lessons will she learn about true love? One thing's for sure, she's in for a roller-coaster ride!

I hope you'll join me for this one. And until then, happy reading!

Love, Rosie xxx

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