

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

Heidi Swain

The Book-Lovers' Retreat

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Heidi
Swain

The
Book-Lovers'
Retreat



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To my Famous Five
You know who you are!

Prologue

It was utterly impossible for the three of us to get our heads around the fact that we'd been living in the cottage by the lake for three whole months now or to believe that in just a few hours we'd be handing back the keys and setting off for opposite ends of the country.

We had been serendipitously thrown together, three strangers leaving reality behind for one whole summer but now we'd got our lives working exactly how we wanted them to and we were ready to face the future, armed with our fresh starts. The three of us had become a unit, a solid one. Our shared trauma and soul-searching had pulled us together during our three-month journey and consequently we had formed a bond which we all knew would last for life.

'Unshakeable and unbreakable,' carefree Rose had said the night before as we sipped chilled champagne by the campfire next to the lake.

When she'd arrived, Rose had maintained she was just 'along for the ride' but between us we had scratched off the surface of the veneer she had coated her life in and discovered someone sweet, vulnerable and lost, floundering beneath. Now she had a life goal and a plan as to how she would achieve it. She was still the most outgoing and laidback one out of all of us, but she no longer used her up-for-anything attitude as a smokescreen.

'Unshakeable and unbreakable, for life!' Laurie had beamed, slurring the toast slightly and then snorting with laughter because

she still couldn't drink more than one glass of anything without getting the giggles.

Even though she had been reluctant to admit it, Laurie had been the one out of all of us who had been properly running away. In the early days, when we were first getting to know each other, she had insisted that she was looking forward to her fast-approaching trip down the aisle with her Mr Right (Mr Not So Right as it turned out), but it took until our visit to Hope Falls for her to crack.

We'd each of us made a secret wish at the waterfall. Rose and I had been happy with ours, but Laurie had burst into tears and confessed between sobs that she had wished for something to happen which would enable her to break off her engagement without upsetting anyone.

It had been a big ask, but between the three of us we had managed it and Laurie had promised she'd never run away from a situation again and would stop trying to be a people pleaser, which was the thing that generally made her want to run away.

And what about me? Well, I'd arrived with my head in every bit as much of a muddle as the other two, but I was sorted now. Feeling brave and set to follow my heart, I had let go of the ifs, buts and maybes. I had decided that I should stop dithering and blindly following the path already set out for me in the family business and embrace my creativity while the spark was still ignited and I had allowed myself to fall in love again, too. It turns out you couldn't – and really shouldn't – tar all relationships with the same brush...

'Heather!' Laurie screeched, pulling my thoughts away from the new man in my life. 'Please, hurry up!'

'Are you chickening out?' pouted Rose, standing naked as the day she was born and with a hand on one hip as she looked me up and down.

Laurie by contrast was mostly covered by the huge hoodie she'd just pulled over her head. I was sure she'd chosen to wear it with the purpose of covering her modesty until the last possible moment.

'No!' I shouted back, unzipping my jeans and wriggling out of them. 'Of course not. I'm coming now.'

Laurie peeped over the edge of the jetty and into the dark water beneath.

'I can't believe you've talked me into this,' she muttered to Rose as I quickly stripped and joined them.

'It will properly seal our bond,' Rose insistently said.

'Skinny dipping in the lake and developing pneumonia will seal our friendship?' Laurie frowned.

'Either that or the shock of the cold will kill us,' I shot back, grabbing both their hands which made Laurie drop her hoodie. 'Think of the headlines!'

Rose threw back her head and laughed and Laurie joined in too.

'Come on then,' she said, pulling us further back so we could have a decent run up. 'We'll do it on three.'

We looked at each other again and I felt a lump begin to form in my throat. No matter where our lives took us next, I would never forget the summer I'd spent beside the lake with these two incredible women.

'Let's go then!' Rose smiled, her eyes full of tears as Laurie sniffed.

We squeezed hands and ran.

'One, two, three!' we shouted together, not caring who could hear as our voices reached a crescendo and we jumped with complete abandon as far and as high as we could into the lake beneath us.

Chapter 1

Friday night drinks with my two best friends, Rachel and Tori, had been a solid tradition for almost a decade. Nothing was supposed to get in the way of our end of the week regular night out, but Rachel's increasingly clingy boyfriend, Jeremy, Tori's Thursday night hangover and my, at times, obsessive work ethic, had meant the ritual had taken a bit of a hit of late.

Not that my work ethic was much in demand now that I'd been made redundant from what I had once assumed was a data analyst job for life with a defined career path, but you get the idea. Friday night drinks had always been a big deal, even when cashflow was tight – for me and Rachel at least – at the end of the month. The trip out had been a priority since our student days so why Tori hadn't showed up after she'd picked The Flamingo, of all places, as the venue for our extremely important get together on that first Friday in July, was a mystery.

'She said this place was beyond tacky when I chose it three months ago,' Rachel reminded me as we made our way to a table as far away from the marabou bedecked bar as it was possible to get. 'And not in a *good way*,' she added, putting down her glass and embellishing her comment with air quotes. 'I am remembering that right, aren't I?' She frowned.

'You are,' I confirmed, twirling my glass to shift the paper umbrella and flamingo topped twizzler before taking a sip of the over-sweetened cocktail. 'But,' I added, wincing at the syrupy taste as I took another look around, 'I don't care about any of that. Not

tonight.’ I felt my insides fizz again and with more than the alcoholic hit. ‘Nothing can spoil tonight.’

Rachel shook her head but didn’t crack a smile as I had hoped she would. She’d been preoccupied all week, but then given the high school she worked in, trying to coax and coerce students into digesting and dissecting an English literature curriculum which they had no interest in, along with books that bore no resemblance to their lives, it was no surprise that she was looking stony-faced.

I opened my mouth to remind her that it was almost the end of term but then snapped it shut when I realised that reminding her of *that* would remind her that she still had three gruelling weeks to go until the summer break and our long-anticipated dream come true.

‘Here,’ she then said, and her face did finally break into a smile as she held out a long paper straw for me to take. ‘I pinched this from the bar. We’ll need it later, won’t we?’

I took it from her and danced about on the spot, almost spilling my drink. ‘You are excited then?’ I ventured, once I’d done a few twirls.

‘Of course, I’m excited,’ she giggled as she watched me. ‘I’m not going to let the prospect of end of term burn-out ruin anything.’

I was relieved to hear it.

‘We should have gone to Glitter to have a celebratory bop,’ she beamed, naming a popular local nightclub as I carried on jiggling about completely out of time with the music.

‘Or we could have gone to Raunch, for...’

‘I don’t need to go to Raunch,’ she cut in with a laugh. ‘Not now I’ve got Jeremy.’

I didn’t respond to that but mentally crossed my fingers in the hope that he wouldn’t somehow miraculously turn up and spoil

our fun. Again. His Friday night gatecrashing was becoming a horrible habit.

‘We’re not going to be able to hear ourselves think in here,’ Rachel pointed out when I didn’t say anything. ‘Let alone finalise details.’

‘I still can’t believe it’s happening,’ I grinned, pitching my voice above the noise of the DJ who had just turned the volume up further. ‘We really are doing it, aren’t we?’

‘We are,’ she shouted back, tapping her glass against mine before we downed the contents in one. ‘Well, we will be if Tori shows up and we can firm up the final details.’

The three of us had The Best (caps totally justified) summer break on the horizon and, as the countdown on my phone and the circled date on the kitchen calendar reminded me, we now had only twenty days to get through until it would finally be happening.

‘Six whole weeks,’ I dreamily sighed, mentally recalling the images on the website I must have visited at least a million times. ‘Six whole weeks in that cottage.’

I wondered what my grandad would say if he knew we were going to be staying in the very lakeside property which had been used as the main setting for the film adaptation of *Hope Falls*, the most wonderful of all the books he had introduced me to when I was growing up.

The book had helped us through my annual summer stay in the Lakes after Nanna had died and I loved it all the more for that. Not a day went by that year when Grandad didn’t read from it and by the end of August, I could have recited great chunks of it almost by heart.

To begin with, it was the descriptions of the dramatic landscape which captured my young imagination, but as I was transformed from a gawky tween to a moody teen, it was the love

story and the friendship of the three very different main characters, strangers thrown together in a bid to escape their individual problems and tragedies, that I had fallen for. I still wished Grandad had been around to see the film and I knew that if he'd met my friends, he would definitely have wanted to make the trip with us!

The getaway had been years in the planning and I still couldn't really get my head around the fact that it was so close to happening. I had the book and film obsessed friends I had always dreamed of and we really were moving into *the* cottage next to the lake for almost the entire summer!

'We won't be spending the whole time inside,' Rachel keenly reminded me. 'Not with all the locations to check out.'

'And lakeside picnics to re-enact,' I nodded, getting into the familiar but still thrilling swing of it. 'And the skinny-dipping.'

'Not forgetting the trips to the pub.'

'Absolutely not forgetting those,' I squealed, feeling like I was going to combust.

'I wonder who will get Heather's room?' Rachel asked, nodding at the straw which we would use to finally settle the argument.

'Me, I hope,' I quickly said. 'I'm more Heather than you and Tori put together.'

'Hm,' she said, pulling at one of the many threads we had always good naturedly tussled over. 'We'll see about that.'

Rachel and I had initially bonded over our obsessive love of the book when we spotted it in each other's packing boxes the day we moved into the same flat in university halls and then, having decided to spend a freshers evening giving our respective livers some respite from the endless shots which were still the favoured rite of passage used to initiate eighteen-year-olds into student life,

the deal was sealed when we watched the film and sobbed and laughed in all the same places.

I had then wasted no time in recruiting fellow enthusiast Tori, who was on the same course as me, to take up the role of third superfan. I had easily picked her out on the first day of lectures because she was wearing a *Hope Falls* T-shirt.

Unbelievably, the three of us had added our names to the cottage waiting list and stumped up the deposit to stay at the idyllic location almost three years ago, such was the demand of *Hope Falls* obsessives and we'd been saving to have enough in our bank accounts by the time we reached the top of it and had to pay off the balance ever since. Well, Rachel and I had been saving, Tori just had to ask her super wealthy dad to sign a cheque when the time came. Which was going to be very soon!

We had plans to re-read the book, re-watch the film and visit all the locations featured in and around the village of Lakeside. We were going to literally be living the book-lovers' dream and, unbeknown to my friends, I had another hope for the trip too.

I was going to use it to work out what I was going to do with the rest of my life now I had been made redundant, in exactly the same way that Heather had done. Granted, it was an ambitious ask to transfer something so monumental from the pages of a novel into real life, but one I felt the time spent living in the cottage would be equal to.

'I'm going to message Tori,' I said, pulling out my phone as another kaleidoscope of butterflies began to flutter in my tummy. 'I don't want anything screwing up tonight.'

'No need.' Rachel grinned, lightly touching my arm. 'She's here.'

As ever, it took a while for Tori to reach us. Her profusion of dark curly hair, porcelain skin and commanding presence always drew attention and coupled with the sequined cami romper and

Suola So Kate Louboutin heels, both of which pulled admirers in like a moth to a flame, it took even longer.

‘Oh my,’ said Rachel, when Tori eventually arrived at our table.

‘I agree,’ I joined in, my relief that she’d finally turned up chasing the butterflies away. ‘No wonder you’re late. You must have been fighting them off ever since you left your flat. You look stunning.’

‘She didn’t leave her flat,’ Rachel said meaningfully with a nudge, as Tori took the empty seat opposite ours and crossed her long legs. ‘She was wearing this outfit last night.’

Tori had the grace to blush as I threw her a faux shocked expression. Faux because, in truth, nothing Tori did shocked me anymore.

‘Oh my,’ I added myself as Rachel showed me the pre-drinks photos Tori had posted online as she had got ready to head out the night before.

‘It’s not how it looks,’ was Tori’s opening line, and not for the first time since we’d become friends.

‘No?’ laughed Rachel, arching an eyebrow.

‘No,’ said Tori, her usual sparkle and shine looking a little faded in spite of the dazzling outfit. ‘But I’m here now, so...’

Looking back, I probably should have spotted something was amiss, but in the moment, I was too giddy and excited about our up-and-coming adventure to pick up anything other than another cocktail.

‘So,’ said Rachel, in a teacherly tone. ‘Let’s get down to business, shall we? First things first, let’s find out once and for all who gets to sleep in Heather’s room.’

‘Me, me, me!’ I giggled and Rachel rolled her eyes.

Having torn the straw into three pieces, two short and one longer, she flagged down a stubble enhanced server, who was

wearing a pink feathered sheath dress and carrying a tray of garishly coloured drinks, to help.

‘Make it quick then,’ they said, putting down the tray and taking hold of the lengths of straw, once Rachel had succinctly explained the purpose. ‘And good luck,’ they added, lining them up in their grasp so they all looked the same length.

I held my breath as Tori took her turn first. She didn’t react when she showed us how short her piece was, but my heart thumped. Unlike the others, I didn’t just want the room because it was the prettiest. I wanted it because it was where Heather had decided about her future and that was exactly the purpose I had in mind for it. It was going to be my sanctuary and my safe place to explore all of the life-changing possibilities ahead of me.

‘You go next, Em,’ Rachel said generously.

‘Sure?’

‘Come on, girls,’ said the server. ‘I need to deliver these drinks.’

I swallowed hard and pulled at one of the pieces of the straw. It was longer than the one Tori had picked, but I didn’t want to count my chickens. Rachel took the third and I finally realised I had been victorious. I had bagged the room!

‘I can’t believe it,’ I said breathlessly, kissing a less than enthusiastic looking Tori on the cheek as I brandished my piece of the straw in her face and the server sashayed away. ‘I can’t believe it!’

I hoped everything else was going to fall as neatly into place.

‘I bloody can,’ said Rachel, but with no rancour. ‘Looks like we’ll be sharing the twin room after all, Tori.’

‘Actually,’ she croaked, folding her straw in half before dropping it on the table as she cleared her throat. ‘We won’t.’

Her porcelain skin had turned pale under her custom blend foundation and Rachel and I exchanged a look.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, slipping my straw stub into my pocket as a memento.

‘I’m really sorry,’ sniffed Tori, her eyes suddenly filling with tears, ‘but I’m not going.’

My mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

‘What do you mean, Tori?’ Rachel gasped. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘You have to come,’ I said, trying to jolly her along. ‘We’re the three musketeers, remember?’

Tori shook her head. ‘I’m not coming,’ she said again, her thickly mascara-lashed eyes flicking from one of us to the other. She looked mortified. ‘Because I can’t.’

‘What do you mean, you can’t?’ I gasped, the conviction behind her words finally sinking in and the desire to carry on dancing deserting me.

I had wondered before if Tori was really as invested in the fandom to the same degree as Rachel and me, but I’d never for one second thought she’d bail on the summer of a lifetime. Not when we’d been planning it for so long and especially when she knew how much it meant to us. She might have been spoilt to a ridiculous degree by her father and the most like how Rose had started out in the book among us, but she wasn’t mean.

‘I can’t,’ she then said, shuddering. ‘Because Dad’s cut me off.’

As the youngest of four and the only daughter, Tori’s dad had always given her anything and everything she wanted. Rachel and I thought it was his misguided way of trying to compensate for the death of Tori’s mum when she was just a toddler, but obviously we’d never said as much.

‘But you’re still paying your share, right?’ Rachel then blurted out. ‘You’re still going to pay your third of the cottage rental,

aren't you? Sorry,' she then immediately apologised. 'I didn't mean it to come out like that...'

She sounded desperate, as well she might. Without Tori's share of the money, the trip couldn't happen for any of us.

'I'm so sorry,' sobbed Tori, swiping away a tear. 'I can't do that either. Dad turned up at my flat after I'd posted those photos last night and said my spending has to stop. He's cut up all of my cards and frozen my allowance,' she further blubbed, as more tears fell. 'And as if that's not bad enough, he's refused to renew the lease on my place and made me move back home. He says it'll be for the best in the long run and it's what Mum would have wanted.'

It might well be, but his timing was appalling and it was a harsh lesson for Tori given he'd previously been so indulgent. More of a shock tactic really.

'Well,' said Rachel, trying to sound calm, 'perhaps it will be, but you have commitments, Tori, and your father's a reasonable man. I'm sure if you explained...'

'I've tried,' she cut in. 'That's why I was so late. He said no. He said that if you two bore the brunt of my irresponsibility then the repercussions of how I've been living and how I behave, might hit home. And that even if we somehow raised the money to pay my share, he still doesn't want me to go.'

'But you're a grown woman,' Rachel pointed out. 'He can't do that. We're supposed to be doing this together. We need to do this together.'

Tori shrugged, looking far more resigned to the situation than I would have been in her position, but then our lives were nothing alike.

'Well, what about savings?' I suggested, grasping at the last spark of hope but knowing it would be instantly snuffed out. 'Could you perhaps pay for your share of the balance out of any

money you might have set aside and therefore prove to your dad that you really are entitled to come?’

Rachel threw me a look.

‘You know I’ve never saved a penny in my life,’ Tori whimpered.

‘Of course, you haven’t,’ I sighed.

Why would she when the bank of Dad had funded everything she’d ever wanted and at the drop of a hat? This mess wasn’t really Tori’s fault at all. Had her father not been so willing to pander to her all her life, then she would never have had this harsh lesson to learn.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said, sounding wretched. ‘I’ve tried to reason with him but he says he’ll listen to me when I’ve decided what I’m going to do with my life. But how am I supposed to work that out when I’ve got no funds to have a go at anything?’

That was part of the problem. Tori was Mr Toad in extremely pretty packaging. She’d spent half her life flitting from one thing to another with no thought for the expense when she dropped whatever happened to be the latest craze or the hobby she hadn’t been able to get the hang of. Sticking at anything had never been her strong point. She’d dropped out of university the moment we got down to some real hard work and hadn’t committed to a single thing for more than three weeks at a time since.

It was ironic that the cottage in Lakeside might just have been the place where she would have been able to successfully fathom a few things out and now she wasn’t going to get the chance to go there.

‘Here,’ she sniffed, opening her Tom Ford clutch and shaking its contents on to the table. ‘This is all I’ve got. I’m hoping it might at least cover your train fare now I can’t drive you.’

‘Train fare?’ Rachel frowned, as Tori smoothed the few crumpled notes out. ‘I appreciate that you can’t drive us, Tori, but

couldn't we borrow your car?'

Tori shook her head.

'He hasn't confiscated your Range Rover!' I gasped. 'We could have borrowed that!'

'It's locked in one of the garages,' Tori wailed. 'He said you can't borrow it and I can take the bus everywhere from now on.'

The thought of Tori on public transport was very sobering indeed.

'Well, that's as maybe,' said Rachel, 'but if we do somehow find the money for your share of the cottage, we can't go to the Lakes on the train because it won't take us anywhere near as far as we need to go and a taxi from the station would cost a fortune and then leave us completely isolated.'

'And besides, I can't take my sewing machine on a train,' I added. 'We need a car.'

'Your sewing machine?' Tori frowned, momentarily distracted. 'Why are you taking that on holiday?'

'Because I have some commissions to complete,' I told her, trying not to sound too proud in the face of her crisis. 'I'll need to finish them and send them off while we're away.'

'I thought that patchwork stuff was just a hobby,' said Tori, wrinkling her nose.

'An increasingly lucrative one,' said Rachel, flashing me a smile in spite of our predicament. 'Especially now Em's creating more than just the memory pictures.'

'She is?'

'Yes,' Rachel said, sounding exasperated because we'd previously spent hours discussing it. 'She's adding the patterned patchwork panels to the skirts and dresses she designs and makes now, too, remember?'

‘Of course.’ Tori nodded, but I wasn’t convinced she did.

‘You’re sounding keen all of a sudden,’ I said to Rachel, her enthusiasm further diverting my thoughts from the catastrophe Tori had just landed us with. ‘I thought you said patchwork was for grandmas.’

‘I thought the stuff you started out doing was,’ she admitted. ‘All that measuring and precise matching up. It was as rigid as the graphs and spreadsheets you produce for your work. Zero creativity required.’

‘The spreadsheets I *used* to produce,’ I corrected, ignoring her slur on the much-loved traditional craft. ‘And the panels still have to be precise.’

‘But they’re in a different league now,’ she praised. ‘And the framed pictures, utilising fabrics with special meanings, are freestyle and extremely creative.’

‘So, you approve?’ I laughed, raising my eyebrows and feeling flattered as a cheer erupted because a stag party had arrived and was making its presence felt.

I didn’t need her validation, but it did feel good to have it and knowing how much value she placed on the security of a regular pay cheque, her attitude towards my designs would be a huge help when the time came to tell her that I was considering making them my only source of income.

My secret plan for my time at the cottage was to finally decide if I was going to launch my own business or commit to the job I’d been offered earlier that week as a data analyst for a far less appealing company than the one I had previously worked for.

I knew my parents would be all for me taking the safe option and, until recently, I would have been too, but this change in patchwork direction had sparked something of a change in me. Not that that would matter, I suddenly remembered, if the

holiday didn't end up happening and I was denied the perfect opportunity to think it all through.

'Absolutely,' Rachel then said, squeezing my arm as the DJ turned the volume up another notch. 'It's a great little hobby.'

Her words rather deflated my sails, but I quickly regrouped.

'Truth be told,' I bellowed above the din, before turning back to Tori, 'I've been dreaming of finishing my current commissions at the cottage in Lakeside, so we need to work out how we're still going to make that happen, don't we? And how to convince your dad to let you come, too.'

At that exact moment, a dazzling bearded drag artist took to the stage and draped a fuchsia dyed feather boa around the embarrassed looking groom to be, much to the delight of the rest of his stag and Tori grabbed my arm.

'Fuck,' she muttered under her breath and I followed her line of sight towards the bar.

'Rach,' I said testily. 'What's he doing here?'

Pushing his way through the crowd towards us and looking like a fish out of water was her partner, Jeremy.

'Did you tell him we were coming here?' I frowned.

On a previous occasion when he'd legitimately joined us on a night out, he'd almost decked a poor guy who was asking Rachel where the loos were and since then, he'd managed to track us down with one excuse or another on a regular Friday night basis.

'No,' she insisted, sounding flustered. 'I didn't. I said we might try that new bistro as we had stuff to sort out, but I never mentioned here.'

'Well, whatever his excuse for turning up,' I brusquely said, 'can we not discuss the holiday hiatus in front of him?' I truly hoped it was just a momentary pause in our plans. 'He'll only gloat.'

Rachel didn't contradict me.

‘So, what will it be tonight?’ Tori tutted, reeling off a few of Jeremy’s former pretexts for turning up without an invitation. ‘Place your bets, folks. Will it be the lost wallet and no funds to get home combo?’

‘Or the misplaced keys to our flat?’ I joined in.

‘Or a double-booked meal with his parents?’ Tori finished up, adding in a low voice, ‘Who Rach was nowhere near ready to meet.’

‘Hey,’ he said, bending to kiss Rachel’s cheek, when he finally reached us.

‘Hey,’ Tori and I said dully back.

‘It looks like rain out there,’ he said, waving a handbag umbrella about. ‘And you left this at the flat.’

‘Pathetic,’ Tori mouthed at me, her own woes momentarily forgotten.

‘Thanks,’ said Rachel, taking it from him and shoving it under the table.

Under normal circumstances and had I not still been in a state of panic about coming up with Tori’s share of the cottage rental and convincing her dad to let her come with us, along with planning new transport arrangements of course, I would have been tempted to make something of Jeremy’s flimsy excuse for turning up again. But only tempted. Rachel seemed to have a blind spot where he was concerned so it really wouldn’t have been worth it in the long run.

‘I went to the bistro first,’ he said, when none of us spoke. ‘I thought you said you were meeting there tonight, Rach.’

‘I did,’ she said. ‘But we changed our minds.’

‘So, what made you come in here instead then?’ I couldn’t resist asking. ‘It’s a far cry from the bistro.’

Given that he knew we had holiday details to finalise, it would have made more sense for him to check out quieter venues. The Flamingo was the noisiest bar in town by far.

‘He’s probably got one of those tracker app things rigged up to Rach’s phone,’ Tori quipped.

I shot her a look and then looked at Jeremy who I could see had turned red, even under the neon lights of the bar.

‘I think you might be right,’ I muttered back.

It was yet another red flag, but I knew I wouldn’t get anywhere by waving it in front of Rachel. For some reason she was convinced that Jeremy’s behaviour was proof that he cared, as opposed to proof that he was borderline dangerous, and the last thing I wanted was for us to fall out over him.

‘He’s crazy about me,’ she had said when justifying his former lashing out.

Crazy was one way of putting it. As I looked at the mismatched couple, I felt determined to get Rachel away from him and to the Lakes for the summer, and if at all possible, I still wanted to take Tori along with us too.

Chapter 2

Having finally parted company with Jeremy, dropped a tearful Tori at her family home in an Uber that Rachel and I footed the bill for, and with her designer clutch still carrying the money she'd tried to give us, Rachel and I headed back to the flat we shared and spent a fractious weekend trying to come up with a rescue plan.

By the end of Sunday, not only did we not have one, but Tori's father had refused to change his mind about her coming even if we did somehow raise her share of the money. He had gone as far as to cite disinheritance if we made more of an issue of it and that soon dampened Tori's determination to still join us. Nothing, apparently, was worth risking that.

And as if that wasn't all bad enough, I had also foolishly mollified my parents by telling them about the interview I'd recently attended. Having both grown up in households where money was less than plentiful, my parents were all for structured careers, annual pension contributions and regular savings.

It was what made them feel secure and consequently, they had always assumed it would make me feel safe too. It had for a while, but with the exciting prospect of launching my own business to now consider, I was wondering if it really was 'the only way to go,' as my father always endorsed. If I did now decide to go ahead, I was going to have even more explaining to do.

Thankfully, however, I had taken on my parents' regular savings advice which could make my change of career a more palatable option. Added to my redundancy money I still also had the modest financial gift kindly left to me in Grandad's will, so I

had enough tucked away to live off, albeit frugally, for a year should I decide to screw my courage to the sticking place and put my patchwork plans into full-time practice. The only problem was, I had set my heart on making up my mind about it all at Lakeside and now it looked quite likely that I wouldn't be going.

Our landlord had been happy to know that Rachel's mum was going to pop in every other weekend to keep an eye on the flat while we were away but vetoed our proposition to sub-let for a month. Our last remaining hope was to pick the winning lotto numbers and that wasn't likely to happen, no matter how much effort we put into manifesting them.

'I could use some of my savings to pay Tori's share,' I suggested to Rachel who was still crunching numbers at the kitchen table late Sunday evening. 'And between us we could replace them a bit at a time in the same way we've been saving up to book the cottage.'

It wouldn't be ideal but if I didn't get to Lakeside to make my decision, I wouldn't need the funds immediately because I would most likely forget the business idea and take on the job I'd just been offered.

'Absolutely not, Em,' Rachel said firmly, frowning at the calculator and jabbing at the keys with the end of a pencil. 'You know how long it's taken us to save for this in the first place. We're not touching a penny of your nest egg. That's ring-fenced and I won't hear another word about it. Lending money to friends never ends well, in my experience.'

I daresay she had a point, so let it drop.

'I had no idea car rental was so expensive,' she then groaned, as she winced at the numbers on the display and puffed out her cheeks.

'Well, maybe you could ask Jeremy if he wants to come?' I suggested as I twisted the tea towel around my hands. 'He's got a car, hasn't he?'

That obscene proposal was proof of how utterly desperate I was feeling.

‘I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that,’ Rachel tutted as she dropped the pencil on the table and drained her cut price Pinot Grigio Blush in one huge gulp. ‘You don’t even like him.’

I screwed up my nose, unwilling to tell another lie. I had tried my best not to make my dislike quite so obvious since she’d dismissed mine and Tori’s concerns after loo-gate. The last thing I needed was to give Jeremy enough ammunition to brand me the bitchy best mate, but perhaps I already had.

‘Bloody hell,’ I huffed, throwing the tea towel at the sink and sharing the last of the wine between our glasses. ‘This is all Tori’s dad’s fault. I blame him entirely for this mess.’

‘What?’ Rachel spluttered. ‘I can’t believe you’re saying that when only last week you were the one saying that he needed to curb her spending!’

‘Oh, I know,’ I conceded. ‘But I didn’t expect him to do it right before our holiday and,’ I added, so I didn’t sound quite so self-centred, ‘before Tori had experienced something which might actually have turned out to be of benefit to her.’

‘Be that as it may,’ sighed Rachel, pulling back the sleeve of her Sunday sweater and stroking the entwined hearts tattoo on the inside of her wrist, ‘it’s happened and we need to find a way around it.’

I put down my glass and looked at my own tattoo. It was identical to the ones the girls in the book had had done to show their solidarity just a few weeks into their time at the cottage. Rachel and I had also had ours done together, paid for by some of our first student loan cheque. Tori had been supposed to get one too, but she’d missed the appointment and then never booked another. A classic carefree Rose trait.

‘You know,’ I said, unusually voicing my opinion, ‘I’m not entirely convinced that Tori has ever been invested in *Hope Falls* in quite the same way as we are.’

‘The only thing Tori has been truly invested in up until now,’ Rachel smiled ruefully, ‘is having a good time. But we love her anyway.’

‘That we do,’ I agreed. ‘God, I wish she was coming with us.’

‘At least you’re saying it like it’s still happening.’ Rachel smiled.

‘It is,’ I insisted. ‘It must. And it won’t be right with just the two of us.’

Rachel’s phone rang then. It was Jeremy, still sulking that Rachel hadn’t seen him since the umbrella drop-off in the bar and keen to let her know that he felt particularly affronted about that because he wasn’t going to see her over the summer break either. Personally, looking at my friend’s dark circles and furrowed brow, I couldn’t help thinking that if we could still find a way to pull it off, that might be no bad thing.

The following Friday was my last day working for Visionary and it was also the day of the self-imposed deadline Rachel and I had set to either come up with the money or find someone to take Tori’s place. We’d both drawn blanks and Tori, bless her heart, had been making the most random and off the wall suggestions to raise the funds which would enable us to still go.

‘This is nice,’ said Rachel, looking around the bistro when she joined Tori and me for Friday night drinks. ‘Far better than The Flamingo.’

We were only there because I had spotted a voucher in the local paper which made the cost of a meal out almost justifiable. I wondered how long it would be before Jeremy showed up, but didn’t say the words out loud.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ I said instead, taking in Rachel’s dishevelled appearance and smudged eyeliner. ‘You look as if you could do with a bit of a pick-me-up. Maybe we could go on to there after we’ve eaten here. What do you think, Tori?’

Tori had already been at the bistro when I arrived, which had never once happened before. She was *always* late, even if only by a couple of minutes. It was Rachel who was unfailingly on time.

‘Best not,’ Tori said, with a small smile. ‘My curfew is eleven, so...’

‘You have a curfew?’ Rachel frowned. ‘Should we be worried?’

‘No, no,’ said Tori, sounding surprisingly accepting of her current predicament. ‘It’s fine. I don’t like traveling late on the bus anyway and Dad’s not some sort of controlling ogre. I know deep down that he’s doing this for my own good.’

It really was a strange position for a thirty-something to find themselves in, but I admired her for accepting it, though I didn’t say as much for fear of coming across as patronising. I didn’t comment either on the fact that Rachel was concerned about Tori’s curfew but completely unaware that Jeremy was every bit as controlling of her.

‘So,’ Tori said. ‘Have you found anyone to take my place?’

‘Afraid not,’ Rachel sighed.

‘And, therefore, I’m guessing that means you’re still getting on for five thousand short of what you need, right?’ she asked, sounding slightly perkier, though goodness knows why.

‘It’s nearer ten actually,’ said Rachel, biting her lip.

‘Ten!’ Tori gasped, her cheeks suddenly flushed. ‘How do you work that one out?’

‘It’s the car rental,’ I explained. ‘We could probably buy a car for what it would cost to rent one for six weeks.’

‘Hey,’ said Rachel, clicking her fingers. ‘If we do win the lottery, that might not be a bad idea.’

‘If you did win the lottery,’ Tori tutted, ‘I hoped you’d spend more than a few grand on a car.’

‘Well,’ I reminded them both. ‘We haven’t won the lottery, we aren’t likely to win the lottery and as a result, we don’t have the funds to buy a car. We don’t even have Tori’s share of the cottage balance and we’re out of time now.’

I squeezed my eyes shut and swallowed down the lump in my throat which sprang up every time I thought about giving the dream up.

‘It’s not going to happen, is it?’ I then burst out, feeling light-headed.

At the start of the week, I’d been full of fight, but it was leaching out of me now faster than a puddle evaporating in a heatwave.

‘I’m not giving up yet,’ Rachel said determinedly.

‘Me neither,’ added Tori. ‘Although I’m not as convinced that you’re still going now as I was five minutes ago.’

‘Why not?’ Rachel asked, handing me a tissue to dry my burgeoning tears.

‘Because the money I’ve raised is nowhere near enough,’ she sighed.

‘You’ve raised some money?’ I asked, having wiped my eyes. ‘How have you managed that?’

‘I’ve got a good chunk towards my share of the rental now, but...’

‘How?’ Rachel asked again.

Tori waved her hands around trying to make light of what she’d done. ‘I sold some stuff,’ she said airily. ‘A few pairs of shoes, a

Valentino dress and that Tom Ford clutch.'

'What?' Rachel screeched. 'You loved that bag.'

'Not as much as I love you two.' Tori swallowed. 'I couldn't get anywhere near what I paid, I mean, Dad paid, for any of it, but I have four grand sitting in my bank waiting to be transferred to whoever needs it.'

'I can't believe you've done that,' I said, reaching for her hand.

'Well,' she confided, 'I would have done more but Dad cottoned on to what I was up to when the courier came to collect the parcels and put a stop to it. I told him I had to honour the sales I'd already made and he agreed to that but said no more because it was cheating.'

'Oh, Tori.'

'He wanted me to hand the money over too, but when I told him it was for you two, he relented.'

I didn't know what to say. Tori parting with even one thing from her precious walk-in Carrie Bradshaw style dressing room was a huge deal, but shoes, a dress *and* her beloved clutch was a truly selfless act, especially as she was handing the proceeds over.

'Thank you, Tori,' I said, releasing her hand and raising my glass to toast her generosity.

'My pleasure,' she said, clinking her glass against mine and Rachel's. 'I only wish it was enough to get you out of the dilemma I've landed you in. Four grand isn't going to make any difference at all, is it?'

I opened my mouth to reassure her that her efforts were hugely appreciated, but was pulled up short by the smile lighting up Rachel's face. I sent up a silent prayer hoping that she hadn't invited Jeremy along after all. That said, he wasn't known to be free and easy with his spending, so surely, he wouldn't have signed up to take on Tori's shortfall, would he?

‘It might make all the difference, actually,’ Rachel said mysteriously.

‘How so?’ Tori asked, sounding intrigued.

‘Yes,’ I added. ‘How so, Rach?’

‘Well,’ she said. ‘And please don’t be mad about this, Em.’

‘What have you done?’ I croaked.

It was Jeremy. It had to be. I was going to end up being the third wheel on my once-in-a-lifetime book-based dream getaway.

‘I know we said we wouldn’t contact Catriona Carson until a couple of days before the balance was due,’ Rachel began.

‘That’s the name of the cottage owner, isn’t it?’ Tori cut in.

‘Yes,’ I confirmed. I had felt bad about agreeing to not letting her know what had happened until the last minute but I was desperate to cling on to the dream until the very last gasp.

‘But then I remembered the waiting list,’ Rachel carried on.

‘The waiting list?’ Tori echoed.

‘Catriona had previously told me that she has this long list of people waiting to jump in and stay at the cottage at short notice if, for any reason, a party had to drop out.’

‘Oh god.’ I panicked. ‘You haven’t given up our booking, have you?’

‘Of course, I haven’t,’ Rachel tutted. ‘Do you really think I’d do something like that without talking to you first, Em?’

‘No,’ I said, feeling chastened. ‘Sorry. Of course not.’

‘So,’ said Tori, sounding frustrated. ‘What have you done?’

‘Nothing yet,’ Rachel said, ‘because I wanted to discuss it with you first, Em.’

‘Go on.’

‘Well, I called Catriona and explained our predicament.’

‘And?’

‘She was really sympathetic.’ Rachel smiled. ‘She knows how much it means to the fans of *Hope Falls* to stay at the property.’

‘And how much it costs,’ Tori added with an eye roll.

Just a few days ago that wouldn’t have been a consideration for her at all, so perhaps her father’s plan wasn’t as cruel as I had first thought.

‘And,’ Rachel continued, ‘she has offered, but only if you’re completely onboard with the idea, Em, to contact some of the other people on the waiting list and find someone who could step in and take Tori’s spot.’

I sat for a moment and let the reality of that sink in. Was I onboard with that idea? It certainly sounded as though Rachel was.

‘Are you annoyed with me?’ Rachel asked, when I didn’t say anything.

‘No,’ I reassured her. ‘Not at all. It really was only fair that you let her know that there was a problem with our booking because we were cutting it fine for her.’

‘Good,’ said Rachel. ‘Great. I did worry that you’d think I’d overstepped the mark, but...’

‘Honestly,’ I smiled, ‘it’s fine.’

‘So, you’d be staying with a stranger?’ Tori grimaced.

‘Um,’ Rachel mumbled. ‘Well, yes, but...’

‘But a stranger who loves the book and film as much as we do,’ I said, the idea growing on me and my smile spreading further. ‘And given where we’re going and what we’re going to be doing, that’s the most important thing to have in common, isn’t it?’

‘Exactly,’ said Rachel, sounding even keener.

‘But are there single travellers on the waiting list?’ I asked, trying not to get too swept along. ‘I’ve always kind of assumed that this was the sort of trip you made with friends or maybe a partner.’

The perfect number was three, though, because that was how many stayed at the cottage in the book.

‘Well,’ said Rachel. ‘According to Catriona, there are lone names on the list and all she has to do is match us up with someone who can join us at such short notice for the full six weeks. She said we could email each other before we go, just to make sure there’s the right sort of vibe between us and we don’t end up being stuck with someone we can’t gel with.’

I mulled the idea over a bit more. In theory it sounded like the perfect solution. Had this just been a random two week holiday somewhere I wouldn’t have even considered it, but with the passion for the book prompting the entire trip, then surely, we were bound to gel with whoever Catriona had on her list, weren’t we? And of course, added to that there was the knowledge that the entire book was about three strangers, so in a way, the idea of staying with someone we didn’t know made the adventure even more authentic.

‘But what about the bedrooms?’ Tori asked, sounding to my ears at least, a little put out and suddenly not quite so willing to accept her situation. ‘You’ve drawn straws now. What if this interloper...’

‘They won’t be an interloper,’ Rachel said seriously. ‘They’ll have paid just as much as we have to be there and have exactly the same rights to the place as we will. If we go into this thinking that the other person has crashed our party, then it’s never going to work.’

‘All right,’ Tori relented. ‘I get that, but what will you do if this other person wants that double room?’

‘Well, that’s non-negotiable,’ said Rachel. ‘I’ll share the twin with whoever signs up and Em will still have the double.’

‘Unless Catriona signs up a couple?’ Tori added mischievously. ‘The place is advertised with space to accommodate four.’

‘No,’ said Rachel, sounding exasperated. ‘That’s not going to happen. Catriona was happy to tick just one name off her list and keep our group limited to three. It’ll be one person and one person only. You probably won’t get your deposit back, Tori, but this could be a solution to our problem. The only solution and one that kind of fits in with what happens in the book. What do you think, Em?’ she asked, turning her dark, doe eyes on me.

‘I think our hope has been restored.’ I nodded. ‘I’m still truly sorry that you can’t come with us, Tori, but I think we should go for it, Rach.’

‘Yes,’ Tori then relented, with a sigh and a kind smile. ‘So do I.’

Chapter 3

Right at the beginning of the following week, Rachel and I exchanged emails with Catriona to discuss exactly how the new arrangement might work. She had the names of three people who could potentially join us, and, having shared the details those people were happy for her to pass on, we opted to contact – and hopefully spend our summer with – Alex, a self-employed graphic designer who lived in Manchester.

In an ideal world, given our proximity, we would have met up – Leeds to Manchester was only about an hour away on the train – but it wasn't meant to be. Alex was working flat out tying up a big design project and Rachel was at school every day and spending most of her evenings either with Jeremy or, thanks to Tori's fundraising efforts, looking for a car.

As I wasn't heading out to work, I'd offered to take on the vehicle search, but my car knowledge turned out to be – to directly quote my friend – utterly useless. Apparently, my colour matching skills were of no relevance in this instance, it was the mpg we needed to be mindful of and I didn't even know what that meant.

Zoom calls hadn't worked for getting Rachel, Alex and I together either. Even though I was available when I wasn't working on my commissions, the other two had full diaries which never tallied. However, as the emails flew backwards and forwards between us, and mine and Rachel's excitement reached fever pitch again, none of us thought it was an issue because we had instantly bonded over our shared love of the book and film and were satisfied to leave it at that until the day we arrived at the cottage.

Alex was the epitome of a *Hope Falls* enthusiast with far more knowledge of both the book and the film than Tori (not that we told her that when we shared the details about our new holiday-mate) and, like me, also had a penchant for perfect packing.

This became the source of much amusement when I revealed that my luggage was already good to go days before the off, but Rachel, by contrast, hadn't even started thinking about hers because she was the consummate, chuck it all in a bag the night before type. Alex and I both agreed that just the thought of that brought us out in hives. There was no way we weren't going to get along and the subsequent shared laughs, in-jokes and mild ribbing of Rachel started to secure our bond, days before we'd met.

'I'm still sad Tori's not coming,' I told Rachel as I waved her off for her last day at school at an even earlier time than usual, 'but I'm really looking forward to meeting Alex.'

'Me too,' she said, buzzing Jeremy – who had offered to drive her to pick up the ancient, but hopefully reliable Volkswagen she'd found for us in a local garage – into the building. 'Especially after her reaction to the skinny-dipping email. She sounds like she's going to be great fun!'

'She really does,' I agreed happily.

Of all the scenes Tori, Rachel and I had been planning to re-enact while staying at the cottage, I had assumed it would be the skinny-dipping in the lake which would have to be set aside in the presence of a stranger. However, if Alex's up-for-it attitude stretched beyond her email response then perhaps not.

'All set?' asked Jeremy who, as always, was dressed impeccably in a navy suit, crisp white shirt and navy tie. 'The traffic's starting to build, so we'd best head off.'

'Yep,' said Rachel, handing him the huge box of cupcakes she'd been icing for her form until way past her bedtime. 'Let's go.'

Standing side by side, Jeremy's clothes pristine and Rachel's already creased, the pair were not an obvious match. What was it, I wondered, that had drawn them to each other? Whatever it was, I wished it had missed. I'd only had two semi-serious relationships in my life so far, but neither had been a case of opposites attracting and both had ended without too much weeping and wailing. I couldn't imagine, should Rachel decide to call it a day, that the same would be said of her and Jeremy's parting of the ways.

'I won't be late,' said Rachel, kissing my cheek which was warm as a result of my uncharitable thoughts. 'I still need to pack.'

Jeremy shook his head and rolled his eyes and I felt my dislike of him bristle further. When I rebuked Rachel for not packing it was in good humour, but when he did it, without even uttering a word, it felt critical and on a completely different level.

'What?' she flushed, noticing his reaction. 'I haven't had time. It'll be fine.'

'It might well be.' He then brightly said, 'Because at this rate, you won't be organised enough to go off on this prolonged girls' getaway and that would suit me fine.'

Rachel looked at me and beamed, his unspoken criticism dismissed in less time than it took her heart to beat or before the implication of what he was saying had opportunity to register.

'I love that you're going to miss me that much,' she said, squeezing his arm. 'Isn't that sweet, Em?'

'Yeah,' I said, feeling my stomach roll. 'Ever so.'

'I'll message you before I set off from school tonight,' she told me, as she headed out the door. 'Then you can come down to see the car.'

'Okay,' I squeaked, feeling my excitement stirring again and surpassing the negativity Jeremy's presence always evoked.

Our neighbour was kindly letting us park in the space he paid for but wasn't currently using and the headmistress at Rachel's school had agreed to accommodate the car there until we sold it if the space was unavailable when we got back at the beginning of September. Ideally, I hoped the car would be quickly off our hands and we could return some of the money she'd selflessly raised to pay for it to Tori.

Once Rachel and Jeremy had gone, I sat down at the kitchen table, fired up my laptop and sent off a 'hedging my bets' email which I knew was long overdue. The company which had offered me the new job were aware that I was heading off for the summer and had proposed scheduling my start for September when I could join the team as they began working on a brand-new portfolio.

I felt rather guilty about agreeing to their generous offer, but knew that in order to make a well-balanced decision about my future, it was necessary to share my eggs amongst more than just the one basket.

Having done that, I rechecked I'd packed everything I was going to need for my heavenly holiday then waited for my over-excited and racing heart to settle. Anything to do with the holiday triggered the biggest adrenaline rush, so it was some time before I could settle to planning out the details of a secret commission Rachel's mum had asked me to undertake.

Thankfully, Rachel was used to me asking her to act as a model to size the flowing white cotton dresses I then embellished with patchwork panels and hadn't given my recent request to measure her again a second thought.

I was beyond excited when Rachel eventually arrived back with the car, which was plenty big enough for ferrying everything we needed to take on our extended vacation. As I walked around, ostensibly inspecting it, I experienced another rush of happy hormones. After the stress of the last few days, it was a huge relief

to know the trip really was happening. Even though it wasn't in quite the way we had originally planned it, the way it now fitted more neatly into the plot of the book gave it a more thrilling edge. Sorry, Tori...

I grinned at Rachel, thinking that not only was I finally heading back to my beloved Lake District, I was also taking with me all those happy memories of summer holidays spent there with Nanna and Grandad while my parents carried on working, as well as their treasured book.

'I think it'll be all right,' Rachel said, scrutinising the car and also smiling from ear to ear. 'Although,' she added, her smile faltering, 'there was a bit of a rattle when I went around a few corners.'

She bit her lip as I opened the passenger door and peered inside. 'Did it sound like a metal water bottle rolling about by any chance?' I asked.

Rachel frowned as I retrieved the offending article bearing the name of Jeremy's gym from behind the driver's seat.

'Oh yes,' she beamed. 'He must have left it in there when he was having a look while I paid.'

I knew the sabotage was pure gaslighting, but didn't point it out and helped her carry the multiple boxes and bags she'd filled the car with, and which signified the end of another school year, up to the flat.

'Is Jeremy still feeling fed up about you going away for so long?' I asked, as I later sat cross-legged on her bed and watched her random packing.

We had decided not to open a bottle of fizz, as was the usual custom on the last day of term, because Rachel would be driving the next day and we were both already completely wired. However, I couldn't drink my tea either because I was forcing

myself to sit on my hands to stop myself reaching out to fold her crumpled clothes.

For someone who was so conscientiously organised in her professional life, certain aspects of Rachel's personal life were surprisingly messy. But then everyone needed an outlet, didn't they? Even meticulous Monica in *Friends* had that secret chaotic cupboard. As with most things in life, it was all about balance.

'It's linen,' Rachel grinned when she saw me struggling to keep my hands to myself. 'It's supposed to be creased and yes, he is. Well, not fed up exactly,' she loyally corrected. 'And I do get where he's coming from. Six weeks without seeing each other is a really long time, especially when...'

'Especially when what?' I asked, when she didn't carry on.

'Oh, it doesn't matter,' she said, her change of tone letting me know that she had no intention of finishing whatever she'd unguardedly started to say.

I knew better than to try and push her for an answer, but she was right, six weeks was a long time. Secretly, I was hoping it was going to be long enough to turn her off him completely.

'Tori briefly dropped by earlier,' I said, to move the moment on. 'She wanted to wish us both the best time.'

'That was kind of her,' said Rachel, sounding relaxed again. 'If it was just you and her going, and not me, I don't think I could have done that.'

'Me neither,' I agreed.

'Was she okay?'

'I think so.' I shrugged. 'Happier than when the threat of disinheritance had been hanging over her but still a bit flat. That's only to be expected though, given that she'd had to bus it here which is totally not Tori's style, is it?'

‘Definitely not,’ said Rachel, sitting on the lid of her crammed suitcase. ‘I still can’t believe she’s going along with her dad’s wishes, but saying it’s what her mum would have wanted was a masterstroke on his part. I really do hope she gets some benefit out of the situation and finds something meaningful she wants to commit to.’

‘Me too,’ I agreed, tugging on the suitcase zip. ‘It would be a total travesty if she went through all those trips on public transport and there was no pay-off at the end of it.’

We were a bit behind our time from the off the following morning because Jeremy kept Rachel talking on the phone for so long and then we had trouble closing the car boot. It took multiple attempts to secure it and we only managed it then because Rachel’s mum, who had travelled up to collect the flat keys, added her strength to the endeavour.

It wasn’t because we’d over-packed the space, the catch was obviously faulty or knackered. Or possibly, given the age of the car, both. Not that we cared as long as it got us to all of the places we were so looking forward to seeing and exploring.

‘I hope it won’t spring open en route,’ I nonetheless panicked, thinking of my perfectly packed bags of patchwork and my precious, not to mention, expensive Janome sewing machine. ‘I don’t relish the thought of looking in the wing mirror and seeing my fabrics strewn all along the road behind us.’

‘It’ll be fine,’ said Rachel, waving my concerns away with another yawn as she dropped a bag on the backseat.

I hoped she was going to be okay to drive. She was always worn out at the start of the summer holidays but this year she seemed wearier than ever and given the conversation we hadn’t finished the night before, I had the feeling she had more on her mind than just recovering from the end of another hectic term.

‘Have you got that special bag of fabrics?’ Rachel’s mum asked me with emphasis and in a clandestine whisper while her daughter was distracted. ‘I hope they were all right?’

‘They’re perfect,’ I told her with a smile. ‘I’ve already started matching them up and because they’re all cotton, they’ll work together a treat. That said, I haven’t cut them out yet. Are you completely sure it’s okay for me to do that?’

‘Absolutely.’ She nodded, giving my hand a squeeze. ‘They were only sitting in the back of my wardrobe. At least this way we’ll be able to enjoy them again.’

‘What are you two whispering about?’ Rachel demanded, before I could say anything else.

‘I was just saying to Em that if I know my daughter,’ her mum blagged, ‘and the state of her packing, then her clothes might benefit from a trip along the road if that boot does spring open. The breeze might help blow out some of the creases!’

‘Ha, ha,’ said Rachel, pulling her mum in for a hug.

‘Grandma would be thrilled to know you’re doing this,’ her mum then said tearfully.

‘I know,’ Rachel sniffed.

I hadn’t been the only one to benefit from a grandparent loving the book. Rachel had introduced her grandma to the story and together they had read it multiple times and also watched the film before the old lady’s eyesight had failed her. Rachel had then set up the audio version of the book so she could enjoy that as well as listen to the movie.

‘If she was still here, she’d be coming with us,’ Rachel added thickly, echoing what I had thought my grandad’s reaction to the trip would have been.

‘That she would,’ her mum agreed. ‘Now come on, you two, you need to go. Heaven knows you’ve waited long enough; you

don't want to waste a single second of this adventure.'

We didn't need telling twice and rushed into our respective seats. I forced myself to not feel guilty that Tori wasn't with us. She'd accepted the situation and wouldn't have been impressed to know that either Rachel or I were feeling anything less than on top of the world about finally heading off.

'Here goes nothing,' said Rachel, tentatively turning the key in the ignition while I crossed my fingers.

The engine sprang into life and we let go of the breath we'd both been holding. When I'd sent Tori a photo of the car the evening before she'd immediately messaged back that we shouldn't have paid four grand for it and Rachel was quick to reply that we hadn't. The old jalopy had been just over half that amount but insurance, breakdown cover and fuel had earmarked all of the rest. Tori had been mightily amused about that.

'Don't worry,' said Rachel's mum, leaning through the window and fondly patting the steering wheel. 'This'll see you right. I had a VW when I was your age and it just ran and ran,' she reminisced.

'I hope you're right,' said Rachel, clumsily finding first gear. 'Bye, Mum!'

'Bye!' she called after us. 'And if you've got enough phone signal when you get there, don't forget, three rings!'

According to the satnav, the journey from Leeds to Lakeside should have taken far less than three hours, but finding the tucked away property proved quite a challenge, in spite of the detailed directions Catriona had sent us. I wasn't sure if that was because we were too excited to concentrate properly, or if the cottage really was so well hidden.

Neither Rachel nor I really minded the delay as we had the *Hope Falls* soundtrack playing on a loop courtesy of Spotify, and

the scenery which lined the road became ever more enchanting and increasingly dramatic with every passing mile. My head was awash with nostalgia and my eyes filled with tears on more than one occasion as lakes, valleys, hills, mountains, woods, drystone walls and picturesque cottages enthralled us while Rachel carefully navigated the twisting roads and narrow lanes.

‘There!’ I screeched, making Rachel stamp on the brake as I pointed out the pale blue painted postbox and gate which would lead to our dream retreat. ‘Oh my god! This is it!’

Grinning, Rachel pulled up alongside another car, wrenched on the handbrake and turned the engine off.

‘I don’t know why my legs are shaking,’ she laughed.

Once we’d climbed out and had a quick stretch, I pulled her in for the biggest hug.

‘What was that for?’ she asked, when I eventually released her.

‘For getting us here, of course,’ I said seriously. ‘I know how knackered you are and you haven’t driven for ages.’

‘It was fine,’ she said. ‘I’ve got so many endorphins whizzing around my system, I barely worried about making the trip, but thank you for acknowledging that and don’t worry, I’ll be feeling even better in a few days. As soon as I’ve got school out of my head, I’ll be full of beans.’

‘More beans,’ I laughed, because compared to earlier, she was already pretty bouncy. ‘And that’s good, because you know how packed the itinerary is.’

‘That I do,’ she beamed, giving me another hug. ‘Can you believe we’re really here?’

‘Don’t.’ I swallowed. ‘You’ll have me in tears if you’re not careful.’

‘Well,’ she said, giving me a playful shove away. ‘We don’t want that, do we?’

‘I wonder if this is Alex’s car?’ I then asked, taking more notice of the other vehicle.

It made ours look even more shabby by comparison, but at least it had got us to our dream destination.

‘I doubt it,’ Rachel reminded me. ‘She said she wouldn’t be able to get away before three today, remember? And Catriona said we wouldn’t be disturbed. I reckon it belongs to a hiker.’

‘Oh, yes,’ I remembered. ‘I daresay you’re right. Thank goodness Alex didn’t want us to wait to all go into the cottage together. The suspense would have killed me!’

I hadn’t said as much, but I was also secretly pleased that Rachel and I would get to explore it alone. I hoped that wasn’t mean. I was genuinely on-board with welcoming someone else, especially as their presence meant our holiday could still happen, but there were certain moments I still secretly wanted to keep just for us.

‘And at least she’ll be here in time to watch the film,’ I added, to balance out my selfish thought. The last thing I wanted was to attract bad karma.

Rachel and I looked at one another and squealed again. Watching the film was a first night tradition when staying at the cottage, we had been told, and one we were both very much looking forward to upholding.

‘Shall we take our stuff with us now, or go and look around and come back for it in a bit?’ Rachel asked, eyeing the path beyond the gate.

There were multiple winding steps down to the cottage, which was completely hidden from view by a thicket of dense trees, so going and coming back again would be a bit of a trek, but I couldn’t wait to see the place now.

‘Let’s just go,’ I said, putting a hand on the gate and feeling my heart rate quicken again. I knew dozens of people had opened the

gate since the film had been made, but it was thrilling to be doing it myself, rather than imagining it. 'I don't want to arrive weighed down with all our stuff, do you?'

'No,' said Rachel, locking the car. 'I want to savour every second. I'm always telling my students to be aware of their thoughts and feelings when they experience something for the first time, because you never get that chance again.'

'You're absolutely right,' I agreed.

I'd never really thought about that before.

'Come on then,' she said, joining me at the gate and running her hand over the top of it before linking arms. 'Let's go.'

Mindful of what Rachel had said, we didn't race down the steps, but took our time, taking in the view in all directions, savouring the heady perfume coming from the trees, the fresh scent of which was the result of a recent downpour, and admiring the surrounding mountains and hills which seemed to hold the valley beyond in a comforting embrace. It all reminded me of time spent with Nanna and Grandad and as silly as it might sound, I willed them to be watching me.

'Okay,' I said, pulling Rachel closer as we reached the bottom of the first flight of steps and paused for a moment. 'When we turn this corner, we're going to get our first glimpse of the cottage. Are you ready?'

Rachel swallowed and nodded. 'I hope it's as wonderful as we want it to be,' she said, sounding a little apprehensive.

'Having studied the images on the website for literally years,' I reassured her with a knowing smile, 'we absolutely know that it will be.'

And it was. Nestled among the trees and encased in a wraparound covered veranda, complete with swing seat, fairy lights, pots full of lush green plants and outdoor lanterns, sat the traditional slate roofed, pale blue wooden cottage of our dreams.

‘Oh my god,’ gasped Rachel. ‘Oh my god, Em!’

She rushed forward down the last of the steps, but I was rooted to the spot. It was perfect. Perfect in every possible way and I hadn’t got anywhere near the threshold yet. Even from this distance it took my breath away so goodness knows what state I’d be in by the time we went inside.

‘Come on!’ Rachel called over her shoulder as she ran across the grass to the veranda just as I caught sight of someone standing around the side of the building.

It was a man.

‘Rach,’ I called back, wondering who it could be. Catriona had given us the code to unlock the box holding the keys and said we could let ourselves in. ‘Wait up!’

I rushed to join her just as the man stepped further out of the shadows. He was a little taller than both of us, wearing dark jeans and a dark red shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal tanned forearms. His hair was dark too, thick and short and as we got closer still, I could see he had brown eyes. Incredibly kind looking brown eyes, to be precise. Whoever he was, he was extremely good-looking.

‘Oh,’ Rachel gasped, as she finally became aware of him.

‘Sorry,’ he apologised, holding up his hands. ‘I didn’t mean to make you jump.’

‘It’s okay,’ said Rachel, throwing me a quizzical look.

I shrugged in response to indicate I had no idea who he was either. Perhaps the other car on the road didn’t belong to a hiker after all.

‘I managed to get finished early,’ he said, with a small self-conscious smile which made the corners of his kind eyes crinkle. The lines looked to be a permanent feature and suggested he smiled a lot. ‘I thought it would be better if I got here in time for

us all to go into the cottage together, just like in the book. I wanted us to have the perfect start, so...'

'Sorry,' I interrupted, confusion overriding my initial acknowledgement about how handsome I thought he was, along with my excitement about having finally arrived. 'Who are you?'

He looked from Rachel to me, his smile faltering. 'I'm Alex,' he said, stepping further forward while holding out his hand and pinning me with his dark eyes which, close to, I could see were flecked with gold. 'I'm your housemate for the next six weeks.'

Chapter 4

Had it not been for Rachel coming to her senses and giving me a nudge, I might well have ended up standing on the veranda staring at Alex in stunned silence for far longer than the few seconds that in reality it probably was.

‘You’re Alex?’ she asked, unable to keep the incredulity out of her surprised tone.

It was a relief to hear that she sounded as flabbergasted as I felt.

‘Yes,’ he said, dropping his hand, which I hadn’t made any effort to acknowledge even though it had been angled in my direction. ‘I’m Alex,’ he further confirmed. ‘Is everything okay? I know I’m earlier than I said I’d be, but...’

‘But you’re...’ I started to say, my mouth opening and closing as the words dried up.

‘Here now,’ Rachel briskly and brightly intercepted, stepping between us. ‘Which is wonderful, because it means we can all go in together.’

‘That’s what I just said,’ Alex pointed out, smiling again. ‘Is everything okay?’ he asked, looking from one of us to the other.

‘Of course.’ Rachel vigorously nodded, throwing me a look. ‘We’re just a bit awestruck, aren’t we, Em? To finally be here, I mean. I’m Rachel, by the way.’

She stepped aside again and gave me a pleading look when I didn’t respond.

‘Yes,’ I blurted, no doubt making a total hash of hiding what I was really so surprised about. ‘Completely overwhelmed.’

‘We’ve waited a long time for this moment,’ Rachel beamed, sounding more like herself. ‘I still can’t believe it’s actually happening.’

I wondered if she was talking about finally being at the cottage or meeting *him* rather than the gal pal I knew we had both been expecting. Either way, she was right.

We had waited years for this moment and although I had known that our arrival wouldn’t be quite the same as when the three women in the novel had arrived, because two of us already knew each other, being thrown together with Alex – who was very definitely not the person we were expecting – was a total distraction and had turned the greatly anticipated moment into something else entirely.

I had genuinely been looking forward to meeting someone I didn’t know since accepting Rachel’s solution to Tori dropping out, and further fuelling our alignment with the plot, but Alex was a surprise not even my wildest imaginings had been capable of dreaming up.

‘Me too,’ Alex agreed, seemingly and thankfully unaware of any of what I was thinking as he looked at the pretty cottage exterior. ‘And I know everyone must say this when they first arrive,’ he added, with another tentative smile. ‘But it looks exactly how it does in the film, doesn’t it?’

‘It does,’ said Rachel, sounding a bit choked. ‘I was just about to say the same thing myself. They couldn’t have picked anywhere better to represent the cottage in the book.’

If she really had been about to say that, then she’d got her thoughts together far quicker than I had. My head was still processing the shock that Alex was a guy and I’d spent more time looking at him than admiring the cottage. I can’t deny, I felt rather resentful about that. My first impressions of the place had been

hijacked and right when I had been so determined to focus on them.

‘So,’ said Alex, looking from Rachel to me. ‘Shall we go in?’

My gaze swept over the picture-perfect abode which was to be our home for the next six weeks and I made a concerted effort to take note of as many of the details as I could. I forced myself to remember what Rachel had said about absorbing something the first time you experienced it, and apply it to something other than Alex.

‘I think we should,’ she said, pulling her phone out of her pocket to retrieve the key code she’d earlier added to her notes. ‘No signal here at all,’ she commented, waving the phone about. ‘So no three rings for Mum.’

‘I managed to send a text to my parents back on the road,’ said Alex, looking over his shoulder in the general direction. ‘If we share the same network, you might be in luck up there too.’

‘Your parents wanted you to let them know you’d arrived?’ Rachel asked, sounding touched.

‘They did,’ he said, turning a little pink. ‘It was the first thing I did when I arrived.’

‘I love that.’ Rachel beamed.

‘They’re as excited about me taking this trip as I am,’ he said, no doubt encouraged by her positive comment to further share. He took a breath and then more sombrely added, ‘They know how much it means to me.’

If it meant that much to him, I would have expected him to sound more excited about it, but then I’d already had one lesson about making assumptions that day so reined in my reaction to his solemn sounding words.

‘From what you’d written in your emails,’ Rachel smiled, ‘we could tell you’re as big a fan of the book as we are.’

I knew she had said that to remind me rather than acknowledge Alex's passion. My reaction to him wouldn't have gone unnoticed by my observant friend and she was already setting herself up as keeper of the peace. Not that I had any intention of deliberately causing trouble, but there could be no denying that it was going to take me longer than her to process the change of dynamic.

'And the film too.' Alex laughed, rubbing his hand around the back of his neck. 'I'm as obsessed by both as they come.'

That was something positive to cling to, I supposed.

'Good,' said Rachel. 'And thanks for the heads up about the phone signal. I'll see if I can message when we go back to the car for our stuff.'

'Have you got the code?' I asked, thinking we'd been standing about long enough.

'Yes,' she said. 'Here it is. I thought it would be...'

'Twenty-nine, zero, five?' Alex and I suggested together and I laughed along with the pair of them in spite of my unsettled feelings.

'Exactly,' Rachel giggled. 'But I guess if it was, the world and his wife would have been able to access the cottage, wouldn't they?'

Alex smiled at me while Rachel keyed the correct random number into the key safe and knowing that his trivia knowledge really was up to scratch if he had memorised a minor character's birthday, I smiled back.

'Here they are,' said Rachel, sliding open the box and reverently handling the three cottage keys as if they were priceless jewels. 'One for each of us. Who's going to do the honours?'

'I think one of you should,' said Alex, taking a step back. 'It seems only fair given that I was very late to this party and I'm only here thanks to you picking my name off the waiting list.'

The irony of that wasn't lost on me. We had picked him.

'Are you sure?' Rachel asked. 'I could use a number generator or something.'

'Not without a phone signal you couldn't,' he reminded her. 'And, I am sure. You two go ahead.'

Rachel smiled warmly as she thanked him and I thought she looked perfectly at ease with him too. She had clearly completely recalibrated her thoughts already. I might have been impressed by Alex's trivia knowledge but I still wasn't sure how I felt about spending the whole of the next six weeks living with him.

'You do it, Em,' Rachel then said, holding out one of the keys for me to take.

'No,' I said, closing her fingers around it and knowing how big a deal it was for both of us. 'Let's do it together.'

With my hand over hers, she slid the key in the lock and we turned the handle and pushed the door open.

'Wow,' the three of us breathed as we peered in the doorway.

'It's...' Alex started to say, but stopped himself.

'Just like in the film,' sighed Rachel as we followed her inside.

Once over the threshold, we each took our time, exploring the luscious cottage interior on our own. It was exactly how I hoped it would be, but with a special something extra I couldn't put my finger on. It felt luxurious and yet there was nothing in the whole place which was shiny or new and the resultant atmosphere was warm, welcoming and lived in, with a vintage vibe you'd expect from somewhere set up to tastefully replicate the early nineteen eighties, which was when the book had been published and was set. Not even Alex's unexpected existence could diminish the pleasurable sense of immediately feeling at home among the Laura Ashley inspired interior.

The open plan living and kitchen area housed a squishy sofa complete with floral print cushions, thick throws, matching curtains and two comfortable looking armchairs as well as packed bookcases, deep window seats and a huge wood-burning stove. The patterns which defined the era had been stylishly matched to fit the woodland setting and it took no effort at all to imagine Heather, Laurie and Rose sitting there wrapped in blankets and warming up after their dip in the lake.

The kitchen was authentically rustic. Locally made pottery, ancient Le Creuset, and a wooden dining table and chairs complete with jam jars crammed full of pretty wild flowers. It was cottagecore perfection and I knew that if any of the characters from the book wandered in there too, I wouldn't have batted an eye.

Then there were the bedrooms and bathrooms to swoon over. The twin beds were made up with Laura Ashley Champion pale pink linen and the double... I stopped on the threshold of the sweet pea patterned double room and its en suite bathroom with the huge tub and my breath caught in my throat.

There were jars of sweet peas on the nightstand and more on the windowsill. I could pick up their intoxicating sweet scent as it filled the room and I imagined how wonderful it was going to feel to drift into a deep and satisfying slumber, my head filled not only with the scent which permeated the book, but also so much of my childhood thanks to Grandad's horticultural prowess...

'I suppose this had better be mine,' Alex said from behind me, cutting through my wistful thoughts and making me jump as he peered over my shoulder. 'Unless you and Rachel want to bunk in here together and I take the twin?'

Even though we had got on so wonderfully well via email we might not have done had we got around to broaching the issue of bedroom allocation.

‘Have you seen the size of these towels?’ Rachel gushed as she rushed out of the twin room, a huge dusky pink bath sheet clasped in her hand. ‘Oh,’ she said when she realised what Alex had just said. ‘Oh Em...’

‘So,’ I said briskly, turning my back on the dream bedroom and shoving the fantasy of sleeping in it to the back of my mind. ‘Alex is going to take the double and you and I can share the twin, Rach.’

‘But,’ she faltered.

‘And it looks like it’s going to rain again,’ I said loudly, cutting her off and steering us all back towards the sitting room, ‘so we’d better start ferrying our stuff, Rach.’

‘I’ll give you a hand,’ Alex offered. ‘I’ve already carried mine down. It’s just out on the veranda.’

‘No,’ I said, perhaps a little too sharply, given the way his eyebrows shot up. ‘No need. We can manage. Why don’t you make some tea? Or coffee? Either would be great.’

There was no way I wanted Alex ferrying our stuff. I was going to need the trips to and from the car to purge myself of the unkind thoughts I was now in danger of succumbing to and which if I wasn’t careful, would completely eradicate my excitement.

‘Oh, Em,’ said Rachel, sounding upset as she rushed to keep up with me when I set off along the path at speed. ‘Let me talk to Alex about the bedroom.’

‘Talk to him about the bedroom,’ I laughed as I glanced back at the cottage. ‘What can there possibly be to say to him about the bedroom, Rach? You can hardly share the twin with him, can you?’

I bit my lip hard to stop myself from blurting out anything mean about Jeremy having something to say about the possibility of that.

‘No, I know,’ she tried to soothe me by saying, ‘but you’ve wanted to stay in that room forever.’

‘Funnily enough,’ I croaked, my breath tight in my chest as I took the steps back to the road too fast, ‘I’m well aware of that.’

‘Em,’ Rachel panted. ‘Slow down.’

By the time we’d reached the car, I was bent double with a stitch and in spite of the fact that I’d incoherently muttered most of the way, I still didn’t feel any better.

‘At the end of the day’ – I resignedly shrugged, when I had breath enough to properly speak again – ‘it’s just a room.’

It was *so much more* than just a room.

‘I know it’s more than just a room,’ Rachel sighed, echoing my thoughts.

She pulled me in for a hug which made more tears spring to my eyes.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I swallowed, turning away and going completely overboard. ‘The break’s most likely already ruined anyway, isn’t it?’

‘Ruined?’ Rachel frowned.

‘Yes,’ I said, waving my hand back towards the cottage. ‘In case you hadn’t noticed, Rachel, Alex is a guy.’

‘Of course, I’ve noticed,’ she said, sounding cross.

‘You can’t tell me we would have picked his name off the waiting list if we’d know he was a bloke,’ I said bluntly.

Rachel shrugged, but didn’t deny it.

‘We should have searched for his name online,’ I groaned, giving it further thought. ‘Or on social media at least, but we were getting on so bloody well in those emails.’

‘Oh, you’ve remembered that, have you?’ Rachel then snapped, her patience with me finally finding its breaking point.

‘What?’

‘That we were getting along fine.’

It was my turn to shrug then.

‘It’s not Alex’s fault we assumed he was a woman,’ Rachel pointed out. ‘And at the end of the day, he’s *still* Alex. He’s exactly the same person he was in those emails. There’s no difference about him at all.’

I couldn’t imagine that Jeremy would feel the same way if Rachel told him she was going to be sharing a cottage for the next six weeks with an attractive man. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask her if she was going to mention exactly who had taken Tori’s place, but I bit the words back knowing the resultant row would only make the situation worse.

‘That’s as maybe,’ I said instead. ‘But it still changes things. The vibe’s all off now.’

Rachel rolled her eyes. ‘We knew it was going to be a bit different as soon as we decided to include someone we didn’t know in the trip, whether they were another woman or a man.’ She tutted, fiddling with the dodgy boot catch. ‘And given the plot of the book, that was actually supposed to be a positive thing, wasn’t it?’

I didn’t say anything.

‘Wasn’t it?’ she said again.

I couldn’t bring myself to say that she was right. ‘So, you’re still up for skinny-dipping, are you?’ I asked her instead.

She jumped back as the boot lid sprang open. ‘I don’t know,’ she said, her cheeks turning pink. ‘Perhaps when we know Alex a little better...’

‘I don’t want to get to know him better,’ I harrumphed. ‘He’s pinched my room.’

Rachel let out a long breath. ‘You said it was *just* a room.’

‘You know it’s not *just* a room.’ I swallowed. ‘You just said so yourself.’

I reached into the boot for the first of my bags and Rachel did the same.

‘Well, I do want to get to know him better,’ she said. ‘And not only, in case you’ve forgotten, because this trip is a dream come true and he’s now a part of it, but also because there’s a story there.’

‘You think?’ I sniffed.

‘You know there is,’ she nudged. ‘When he said about his parents knowing how much this trip means to him there was way more implied by the words than him just having a crush on Heather, Rose or Laurie.’

‘Perhaps,’ I said, pushing back through the gate, the thought of lugging my luggage and sewing machine down to the cottage making my legs prematurely ache. ‘Anyway, hadn’t you better message your mum rather than searching for clues about his?’

In the end, because further rain was imminent and there was a distant rumble of thunder, Alex did help us carry our stuff. We’d just got the last of it inside when the first heavy drops fell.

‘Thank you,’ I said, as I relieved him of the box which contained my sewing machine and set it down carefully on the table.

‘I’ve taken quite a few holidays in my time,’ he said, sounding amused as he interestedly eyed the image on the box, ‘but this is the first time I’ve ever known anyone to bring a sewing machine along with them.’

‘It’s for my work,’ I told him.

‘Oh, talking of work,’ he carried on, ignoring my blunt response. ‘I’m going to carry on too. I’ve just secured a rebranding contract with a small but growing restaurant chain, so I’ll be

having one day a week working back in my office in Manchester while I get the project up and running.'

'Congratulations,' said Rachel, handing round the mugs of tea Alex had made and which were rapidly beginning to cool. 'That sounds exciting.'

'It is,' he said. 'Thanks.'

'Bad timing though,' I couldn't resist saying. 'No one wants to work on a break, do they? Especially one as special as this.'

Alex did acknowledge my tone then and I was annoyed that I noticed how his face suited the smile far better than the deep frown my comment prompted.

'You've literally just said you've brought your sewing machine with you because it's for your work,' he tersely shot back.

'Yes,' I volleyed. 'But the work I've brought with me isn't office based and doesn't require internet access which we haven't got here.'

'It's more of a hobby really,' Rachel said disloyally and I shot her a look.

'And beyond a day a week at the moment, neither does mine,' he returned, ignoring Rachel. 'I'm at the planning stage and can actually think better without the distraction of being online.'

'I'm guessing you'll drive down as you've got your car?' Rachel asked, stepping between us again. 'Rather than take the train.'

'I will,' he said, looking around her and directly at me again. 'And it's a bit of a trek. At least two hours each way so you'll be rid of me for one whole day a week.'

I smiled but didn't comment.

'And I had been going to suggest that I could do a big shop on my way back as I've seen online that there's only a small general store in the village here,' he carried on, 'but we'll see how we get on, shall we?'

I could tell from the back of Rachel's head that she was mortified, but I coolly held Alex's gaze.

'Yes,' I said, 'by all means, let's see how we get on.'

Chapter 5

After that, we each went our separate ways for a while. I left Rachel sifting through the contents of her luggage which she had tipped out on her bed and took my time finding the perfect spot to set up my sewing space.

I knew there was a beautiful scrubbed pine table with painted legs in the window of the double bedroom and I had formerly been planning to utilise that, but as I had been denied the room, I would have to set up somewhere else.

In the end, I opted for the table in the corner of the sitting room which had the benefit of windows on either side so the light was probably even better than in the bedroom. Not that I was prepared to acknowledge that because I was still smarting over the switch. However, covered in a patterned oilcloth the table offered plenty of room and as I arranged my sewing box, along with the bags which held the commissions I was currently working on, I pictured myself happily working there for the next few weeks and feeling very much at home.

I settled my hoard of material underneath, making sure Rachel's secret surprise was tucked right at the back. She wasn't likely to go looking through any of it, but I wasn't going to risk her seeing the project and recognising the fabrics. If she ran true to her usual end of term form, she'd sleep through the next couple of days and I would be able to get ahead with it. The dress was ready to be sewn together but the patchwork panels still needed to be cut out and positioned before being incorporated into the skirt and bodice.

A movement beyond the window caught my attention and I leant further over the table to seek out the source. I was surprised to see Alex sitting outside. It was still raining, the thunder still rumbling but, thanks to the overhanging roof, the veranda appeared to be completely dry. I could tell by the way he was sitting that he was on his phone and I wondered if he was composing 'I hate my housemate' texts to send to friends and family when he went offsite and found a signal. My stomach twisted at the thought.

'What shall we have for dinner?' Rachel asked, when she emerged from the bedroom, stretching her arms above her head and yawning loudly. 'I'm starving.'

'You've been ages,' I said, looking up and smoothing out the kink in my neck and only then noticing the time.

With the cottage to further explore, I had only intended to work briefly on the piece I had been asked to create by a former colleague for his wife's silver wedding anniversary present but, as always, I had become immersed in the design and then the stitching and the time had whizzed by without me noticing. If I did decide to take my sewing sideline further, I felt fairly certain that my passion for it wasn't going to dwindle.

'Oh, Em,' said Rachel, putting her hands on my shoulders and looking at the partly constructed design. 'This is exquisite.'

'Thank you,' I said, holding it at arm's length and feeling a pleasing glow of satisfaction with how it was coming together. 'I'm really enjoying creating it.'

The design incorporated material and fabric objects which held special memories from the couple's wedding day, including a piece of floral fabric which had been used to make the bridesmaids' dresses, a lace-edged monogrammed handkerchief which had served as the bride's something borrowed and something old, as well as some tiny pale blue silk roses and covered buttons. I was integrating some hand embroidery too, to commemorate the date

and create a floral edge and the finished piece was going to be mounted inside a box frame that I had already painted in Farrow & Ball Middleton Pink.

‘This is all a far cry from what you started out doing, isn’t it?’ Rachel said admiringly, my *hobby* gaining her approval again.

‘Yes,’ I agreed, thinking back to the carefully measured cushions and baby quilts I had cut my patchwork teeth on. ‘It is.’

‘And so are your dresses,’ she added, kissing my cheek. ‘I’d even be tempted to wear one of those myself.’

I was relieved to hear it.

‘Hey,’ she then said to Alex who had come in via the door next to where I was working. ‘Is it still raining?’

‘Mizzling,’ he said, glancing at what I was doing. ‘Nothing like before.’

I slid the panel back into the bag I used to keep what I was currently working on flat and safe.

‘I don’t know about you two,’ he said, looking towards the kitchen, ‘but I could go for something to eat. It feels like ages since lunchtime.’

‘I agree,’ said Rachel, patting her stomach. ‘I’m starving. Must be all the excitement.’

‘Could be,’ Alex responded, sounding as far from excited as it was possible to get.

I had a feeling that my lacklustre response to his presence and subsequent snippiness was most likely responsible for his downbeat tone and my stomach rolled again.

‘Either that or the multiple trips to and from the car to collect our stuff,’ I suggested, making an effort to join in. ‘Thanks for helping with that, Alex. You saved us at least two extra trips.’

‘Rain-soaked trips, too,’ Rachel added, smiling at me.

‘You’re welcome,’ he said, sounding a bit brighter. ‘My legs are feeling it though and I have to admit, I’m already looking forward to falling into that big bed later tonight. That double mattress is the comfiest thing I’ve laid on in a long time. Have either of you tried yours out yet?’

‘No,’ I said shortly, my desire to make amends taking flight again.

‘I’ve tried mine,’ said Rachel, squeezing my shoulders. ‘And it was blissful. Come on then, let’s go and have a look at what Catriona’s put in the fridge for us, shall we?’

Catriona, at our request, had stocked the fridge and larder with essentials and some local produce including huge swirled Cumberland sausages. Because they were so big, we decided to share two of those between us and serve them with buttery mustard mash and the peas, which were still in their pods and, according to a note on the table, had earlier been picked fresh from Catriona’s own garden.

The sausage and mash combo wasn’t exactly high summer fare, but then the weather and the temperature felt almost autumnal when compared with the rest of the country. It was classic Lake District weather and exactly as I remembered it from my holidays staying with Nanna and Grandad.

‘Bagsy firing up the barbecue to cook the sausages,’ said Rachel, sounding way too eager as she extracted the paper-wrapped parcel from the fridge. ‘Whenever I go to Jeremy’s place, he’ll never let me near his. He comes over all hunter-gatherer and I’m left sorting the salad and other sides.’

‘I’m embarrassed to say, from what I’ve heard, that’s pretty standard among our sex,’ Alex sighed. ‘My dad’s the same. Once he’s got his Griddle King apron on and the tongs in his hand, there’s no stopping him.’

I couldn’t help but laugh at that.

‘You don’t fancy fighting Rachel for the honour then?’ I asked. ‘If your dad is usually the barbie boss, aren’t you keen to have a go yourself?’

‘God, no,’ he grinned, making his eyes crinkle again and I wished he wouldn’t. ‘I wouldn’t want to deny Rachel the pleasure and besides, I burn everything. You don’t want me anywhere near that thing.’

‘Duly noted,’ Rachel said happily.

‘But what about the weather?’ I asked, wrinkling my nose. ‘It’s coming down again out there.’

‘It’s dry on the veranda though,’ Alex said, confirming what I’d earlier noticed. ‘I was sitting out there for quite a while and never felt a drop.’

‘In that case,’ I suggested, ‘let’s eat out there too, shall we?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Rachel. ‘Then we can come back in and fire up the wood-burner. It’s certainly cool enough to justify it, isn’t it?’

‘Definitely,’ I agreed.

‘And then we’re going to watch the film, aren’t we?’ Alex asked, sounding hopeful. ‘We can’t miss out on that on our first night here, can we?’

They both looked at me and, even though the dynamic in the cottage felt nothing like I had been expecting, I had no intention of ruining Rachel’s first night. Or Alex’s. Or mine, for that matter. My previously guilt-riddled rolling stomach was proof that I wasn’t going to be that mean, even if I was still in shock.

‘Of course, we’re going to watch the film,’ I said enthusiastically. ‘Now, who wants wine?’

It was idyllic sitting outside, wrapped in fleecy throws and sharing out the food. Alex’s mustard mash was to die for and I had made a decent job of shelling the peas, dropping them in boiling water and then scooping them straight out again. The rich red

wine was good too. It knocked off some of the awkwardness that had been lingering from the moment we arrived and, which I knew deep down, I had done very little to eradicate.

The air smelt fresh and clean and there were birds twittering among the trees which surrounded the cottage. I loved how green and lush everything was and was very much looking forward to taking the path through the garden down to the lake. The cottage had its own private little shore and quite a few of the scenes in the film had been set there to tie in neatly with the descriptions in the book.

‘Well, Rachel,’ said Alex, pulling me out of my reverie as he sat back in his chair. ‘That Jeremy fella you mentioned earlier is certainly missing a trick because you clearly know your way around a barbecue.’

‘Why, thank you,’ she said, raising her glass and looking a little fuzzy around the edges. ‘I will take that compliment.’

‘And I’ll second it,’ I said, clinking my glass against hers.

‘Was he going to be the third person in your party?’ Alex asked and I spluttered so hard, a little of the wine I’d drunk shot up my nose. ‘I take it that’s a no?’ he grinned.

‘That’s a definite no,’ I resolutely confirmed and Rachel gave me a look. ‘Jeremy is absolutely not the *Hope Falls* type, is he, Rach? But then...’ I added, cocking a brow at Alex, ‘I haven’t come across any other men in real life who are.’

I’d chatted with a couple via online forums, but that was it.

‘I have,’ Alex told me. ‘But only recently and only a few.’

‘So, what drew you to the book and film originally?’ I asked, drinking another mouthful of wine. ‘Did you find your own way to it or were you helped along? Coerced even?’

‘Oh,’ he said, turning red and shifting in his seat. ‘That’s a story for another night.’

‘I sense intrigue,’ I said, fixing him with a piercing look. ‘I bet there was a woman involved somewhere along the line, wasn’t there?’

‘Em,’ Rachel said.

‘It’s fine.’ Alex swallowed. ‘There was, but I’m not getting into it now. I most likely will at some point, just not yet.’

‘I wish you would tell us now,’ I persisted, the inhibition reducing impact of the wine doing nothing to stop me leapfrogging the boundary he’d just set up.

‘Em,’ Rachel said again.

‘What?’ I shrugged. ‘I’m just interested. There’s no harm in being interested, is there? If we’re going to be living together for the next six weeks it makes sense to find out a bit more about one another, doesn’t it?’

Rachel shook her head and looked apologetically back at Alex. When she had suggested letting Catriona find us a new housemate, I had gone along with it in the spirit of the book and on the assumption that having *Hope Falls* in common would be enough for us to properly bond, but was it?

‘Jeremy is my partner,’ said Rachel, tracking further back in the conversation, most likely to stop me from prying deeper into Alex’s personal affairs. Or offending him. Or both.

‘And how does he feel about you being away for six weeks?’ Alex asked. ‘It’s a long time. Are you planning to meet up at some point?’

‘It is a long time,’ she agreed, ignoring the first question Alex had asked, ‘but this trip was planned long before Jeremy and I got together and nothing was going to stop me from taking it. I won’t see him until September now.’

It was a relief to know that Jeremy’s attention seeking and mithering couldn’t sabotage Rachel’s passion for our getaway and

I gave her a virtual high five.

‘I’m going to miss him though,’ she then said quietly.

‘Sorry,’ Alex apologised. ‘I didn’t mean to upset you.’

‘You haven’t,’ she reassured him, as she started to gather the dishes together. ‘I’m just overtired and feeling a bit sentimental as a result.’

‘She’s always like this at the end of term, Alex,’ I added, more to make myself feel better for not factoring her feelings about missing Jeremy in, than to reassure Alex. ‘You should hear the way she cries over anything on TV, even adverts. She’ll be better in a few days when she’s caught up on sleep and got Jeremy out of her system.’

‘Em!’

‘Shit, sorry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t mean that how it sounded.’

It was a classic case of loose lips sink friendships. Especially when they’d already sunk too much wine. Definitely more of a Rose than Heather slip up.

‘I know what you meant,’ she said.

I hoped she didn’t.

‘Shall we go in and get set up for the film then?’ Alex suggested diplomatically.

‘Yes,’ I said, standing up too quickly and further feeling the impact of the quickly gulped units, along with a dip in my mood which had just started to lift again. ‘Good idea.’

Rather than raise my spirits, getting ready to watch the movie made mine sink further. I had been looking forward to a first night bubble bath in the double room’s heavenly tub ahead of curling up to watch the film in the very place where much of it was filmed. Consequently, the shower in the twin room en suite, although high end and surprisingly powerful, was a poor substitute and

Alex's confession when I came out of the bedroom didn't make me feel any better either.

'Any chance I could use your shower?' he blithely asked. 'I'm not a bath person.'

'Of course,' said Rachel, while I gritted my teeth. 'No problem.'

'Oh my god,' I hissed when he was out of earshot. 'Can you believe that? I'm broken-hearted here and he hasn't even noticed!'

'Why should he?' Rachel frowned. 'And besides, there was nothing stopping you asking him if you could use the bath, was there?'

That was me told and I supposed she did have a point. To make amends for my waspishness, I made the area in front of the TV as cosy as it could possibly be. I lit the candles, sorted the fire, arranged the throws and curled up with Rachel on the sofa. The scene was beautifully set and my heart was finally back to thumping in anticipation.

While we waited for Alex, we thumbed through our ancient, tatty but treasured paperback copies of the book and when he did finally join us, he was carrying his too. It was exactly the same edition as ours which cheered me even further, as did what he was wearing.

'Oh my god!' Rachel gasped, when she spotted him. 'Where did you get that? I need to get me one of those.'

'Shipped from the US,' he said, standing in front of us and pulling the hoodie, which looked to be not quite oversized enough for his frame, further down.

'Turn around,' Rachel demanded.

'Oh wow,' we said together. 'That's so cool!'

The heather-coloured hoodie had #TeamHeather emblazoned across the back and down one arm and the entwined hearts logo,

which matched our tattoos and had been created for the film, on the left breast of the front. Rach, Tori and I had T-shirts, but I'd never seen a hoodie. Not a decent one anyway.

'I love it,' said Rachel. 'We need to get one, Em, don't we?'

'Absolutely,' I agreed, feeling a little choked as I looked at our books lined up together on the coffee table.

'There are different coloured ones with the other two names on,' Alex explained, turning back around again, 'but it had to be team Heather for us. I mean, me.'

The slip of the tongue drew my gaze away from the books and, coupled with the flush of colour on Alex's face which accompanied it, re-sparked my interest in his 'how I came to *Hope Falls*' story, but I snuffed it out. Rachel would never forgive me if I started digging so soon after she'd wrestled the spade from my wine infused grasp.

'I'll get you a Rose or Laurie one for your birthday, Rach,' I said and she frowned.

'And while we wait for it to be delivered,' I quickly carried on, 'we'll have to make do with our matching tattoos, won't we?'

As one, Rachel and I pulled back the sleeve of our PJs and showed Alex our wrists.

'Oh wow.' He smiled, bending to take a closer look. 'They're gorgeous.'

When I looked up, my senses assaulted by the freshly showered scent of him, he was staring at my face, rather than my wrist and I quickly pulled my sleeve down and sat further back on the sofa. For a mad moment, I had wondered what it would feel like if he lightly ran his thumb over the top of the tattoo and looking up and finding his eyes trained on my face, made me wonder if he'd read my thoughts. My cheeks flushed scarlet as a result.

‘How about hot chocolate with all the trimmings to really get us in the mood?’ suggested Rachel, thankfully breaking the spell as she flung the fleecy blanket right over me and jumped up.

Alex stepped aside as she skipped to the kitchen and I tried not to breathe in the lingering scent of his pine infused shower gel which matched our surroundings to a T.

‘I was going to suggest more wine,’ I said, forcing myself to sound unaffected as I twisted around to look at her. ‘But hot chocolate would be wonderful. Given the weather and how chilly it is this evening, something warming will be far better than wine.’

As hard as I tried, I found I couldn’t relax into the film. Rachel cried buckets at all the appropriate moments and I noticed Alex shed a tear too, but not at the same time as my friend. I was eager to ask what had triggered his reaction to certain scenes, but didn’t. Instead, I dabbed my eyes with the tissue I’d put up my sleeve in anticipation of the usual torrent and sniffed when I knew Rachel would be expecting me to.

It was the first time I’ve ever faked it and the resultant guilt was no doubt the reason why I didn’t sleep a wink that night. That and the fact that the single bed, although incredibly comfortable and beautifully dressed, looked to be nowhere near as accommodating as the long wished for double next door.

Chapter 6

With Rachel still out for the count the next morning and, in spite of the fact that I was tired from lack of sleep, I quietly pushed back the duvet and slipped out of the bedroom knowing I would regret it if I didn't curb my desire to run about the cottage comparing the descriptions in the novel to the objects in front of me. For the time being at least, I needed to make more productive use of my time.

I would easily be able to put the main part of Rachel's dress together when she was up and about because that could be a garment for anyone, but the patchwork panels were another matter. She would instantly recognise the fabrics I was using and therefore stealth was required if I was to keep the surprise under wraps until the final stitch was sewn and the dress was complete.

However, before I settled to start, I made myself a coffee and, for just a couple of minutes, quietly admired the silent cottage with the biggest smile lighting up my face. I still couldn't really believe that I was here. I selected another well-thumbed novel from the packed shelves and drank in the lush green view of the surrounding trees which filled every window.

Then, mindful of the minutes ticking by, I sat at the table and readied myself to begin. I kept the anniversary piece next to me, just in case Rachel woke earlier than expected and I needed to grab it to cover up what I was really doing. I tried not to let my annoyance, that had I been in the double room as originally planned and with the door closed it wouldn't have been an issue, sour the moment, and began.

Having selected the patterned fabrics I thought would work best together, and arranged the interlocking shapes, I had just started carefully cutting out the pieces for the sleeve inserts when the rain began to drum on the roof, the back door opened and Alex rushed in carrying a holdall. How I didn't end up cutting more than the material I'll never know.

'Shit!' I swore, my heart racing, but not from the usual excitement associated with the place, as I put the scissors down. 'I thought you were still asleep.'

His bedroom door was shut and, as it was so early, I had assumed he was enjoying the comfort of the coveted double bed.

'Sorry,' he said, as he quickly closed the door behind him, put down the bag and pulled off his jacket.

'Mind,' I tutted, covering the precious fabric with my hands as the raindrops he displaced splattered far and wide.

'Sorry,' he said again.

His voice sounded husky and thick and when I looked up, I could see his expression was wretched. His kind eyes were filled with sadness and there were dark smudges under them, all signs of the smiley crinkles wiped away. Clearly, I wasn't the only one who hadn't had a restful night. So much for his expectation that he was going to crash out. I could have felt smug about that but the sadness radiating out of him tempered the emotion.

'Are you all right?' I frowned, concern about the change in him overriding my preoccupation with where a few raindrops had landed.

His eyes flicked to the bag as he ran a hand through his mussed-up hair before bending over to unlace and pull off his boots.

'Yeah.' He swallowed, standing back up and avoiding my eye. 'I'm fine.'

'Well, you don't look fine,' I said brusquely.

‘Thanks.’

‘I mean you look tired,’ I clarified. ‘If it’s any consolation, I didn’t sleep either.’

If the set of his stubbled jaw was anything to go by, my admission was no consolation at all.

‘Would you like a coffee?’ I offered. ‘I was just thinking about making myself another one.’

‘No,’ he said, picking the bag up again. ‘No, thank you.’

‘What have you got there?’

‘Nothing,’ he said, taking a step away.

‘Where have you been?’ I asked, taken aback that he sounded so defensive and feeling suspicious as a result.

‘Down to the lake,’ he said, the words catching in his throat.

‘Oh,’ I responded, feeling a surprising pang of disappointment. ‘I had hoped we might go there for the first time all together. It’s another one of the traditions associated with the place.’

His expression suddenly changed from upset to incredulity. ‘I’m not being funny, Emily,’ he said. ‘But yesterday, at times you left me with the impression that doing things together was the last thing you wanted. I know we had a meal together and watched the film, but you seemed hell-bent, on more than one occasion, of leaving me in no doubt that we wouldn’t be doing anything beyond that as a group.’

I knew I had come across as being pleased about him having a day away at work every week and I had also been rather forthright at bedtime when I shared my solo plans for today, but that was because I was determined that Rachel shouldn’t feel guilty about catching up on her end of term kip, so I could work on her dress. It had genuinely had nothing to do with me trying to further shut Alex out.

That said, I could appreciate why he had thought it might, especially when combined with the memory of my more than frosty welcome. I chewed my lip as I mulled it all over. As uncomfortable as I still felt about his unexpected presence, I knew I had to make amends for the less than lovely first impression I had clearly made because this was every bit as much his dream getaway as mine.

‘The thing is...’ I awkwardly began. ‘And I know it’s absolutely not your fault...’

‘You don’t need to explain,’ he interrupted. ‘I get it. You were expecting another girl to make up the group and you’ve got lumbered with me.’

‘I wouldn’t say lumbered,’ I rushed to say. ‘We did pick you after all.’

‘It’s fine.’ He shrugged, turning away, having picked up my mug. ‘I’ve got my own stuff to do anyway, so don’t worry about including me in anything. I’m perfectly happy going it alone. I’ll make you another drink.’

I wasn’t sure if that made me feel better or worse.

‘Do you mean that?’ I called after him. ‘About going it alone, I mean.’

‘Yeah,’ he said, looking back. ‘I do. You and Rachel are welcome to carry on as if I’m not even here.’

While the kettle came to the boil, he stowed the mystery bag in his room and when he came back to the table, he handed me the freshly made drink and looked at the picture I was working on along with the pieces I had just started to cut out. Some of the gloom he had carried back with him from the lake seemed to have lifted, but he still looked dog tired.

‘So, I’m guessing this is why you needed to bring your sewing machine,’ he commented, once he had taken it all in. ‘Is this your work? Is this what you do for a living?’

‘No,’ I said, making sure the mug was set down well out of harm’s way and not feeling the same desire to put the work away as I had the day before. ‘It’s not my day job. Like Rachel said, it’s just a hobby really.’

‘It’s beautiful.’

‘Oh,’ I said, feeling suddenly hot, and not only because he was standing so close. ‘Thank you.’

I hadn’t been expecting him to say anything like that.

‘I mean it,’ he continued seriously. ‘It’s stunning. What’s this all about?’ he asked, pointing at a specific part of the anniversary commission.

I explained who it was for and what it was designed to commemorate and how every piece of the fabric held a special significance, but that until I had been given them to work with, they had been packed away in a box at the back of a cupboard.

He was listening so intently that I then got completely carried away by his interest and told him all about the skirts and dresses I also made and how some of those included treasured fabrics too.

‘I’ve also been thinking about designing blouses,’ I finally finished up, feeling slightly out of breath.

I realised then that I had been prattling on for ages, but he didn’t seem to mind.

‘I love it all,’ he said, sounding sincere. ‘What a wonderful gift and I don’t just mean that your pieces are unique gifts for the lucky recipients. You have an incredible talent, Emily. The way you’ve put this anniversary piece together is quite extraordinary.’

My heart skittered and I turned to look at him, just to make sure he was in earnest. His face was unexpectedly close to my shoulder and I felt another rush of heat pulse through me. It pooled much further south than the earlier spike in my temperature.

‘Thank you,’ I croaked, then turned back to the table.

He straightened back up again, leaving behind a lingering trace of aftershave.

‘So,’ he said, sounding more composed than I felt. ‘If this isn’t your day job, what is?’

I took a long breath, but it didn’t much settle me as I tried to trick myself into believing that my reaction to him was the result of what he’d said, rather than his physical proximity. It was his kind words and high praise which had caused my body’s reaction, I sternly told myself, definitely not his closeness.

‘I’m a data analyst,’ I told him. ‘But I’m currently between jobs.’

‘Really?’ he said, sounding genuinely shocked. ‘That’s very different to this,’ he added, with a further nod to the table.

I was almost tempted to tell him that it was my intention during our holiday to think about whether I was going to give the patchwork sideline the opportunity to become my main hustle, but fought the urge off. Not even Rachel or Tori knew what I was considering and I needed to further consider my options before I took on board anyone else’s opinion.

Alex’s brain didn’t get that memo though and he shared his thoughts regardless. ‘And I hope you’re as passionate about analysing data as you are about sewing perfect stitches,’ he said, with a small smile. ‘But if you’re not, then I’d seriously think about making this your main line of work.’

I risked another look at him. Knowing he was a little further away, it should have been safe, but it wasn’t and my heart fluttered in response.

‘Not that it matters what I think,’ he said, with a shrug and another smile before he turned back to his room. ‘But one thing I do know,’ he sighed, ‘is that we should all follow our hearts. We

should all do the things that make us happiest, before we run out of time.'

He quietly closed the door behind him and after a few seconds, I picked up the scissors again. Rather than try to deny how attractive I found him, because that was proving increasingly impossible, I focused instead on what he'd said.

His words had been relevant to the plot of the book, but I had the distinct impression that he hadn't been thinking of either that or the film when he said them. The emotion in his tone suggested that the sentiment came from a place of personal experience and not necessarily a happy one.

It was lunchtime before Rachel emerged from the bedroom looking tousled and sounding groggy. I had made great headway with her dress and had long since packed it away so she found me curled up in the window seat reading the paperback I'd earlier selected from the bookshelf. It wasn't a patch on our favourite, but it made a change.

'Hello sleepyhead,' I smiled, setting the book aside. 'Are you ready for some lunch? Or would you prefer breakfast?'

She opted for a combination of both and we sat at the kitchen counter tucking into bacon and avocado sandwiches and fresh fruit smoothies.

'I'm sorry you've had to spend your first morning here on your own,' she apologised.

'Well, I'm not sorry,' I told her with a wry smile. 'I know it probably sounds selfish, but I've loved it and it was always part of the plan for you to rest up. And besides, I wasn't alone the whole time. I saw Alex earlier.'

'Oh, really?' she said, looking towards his room as she pressed a napkin to her lips. 'I thought he was still asleep.'

‘No,’ I responded in a low voice, in case he could hear me. ‘He was up even earlier than me and he’d been down to the lake.’

Rachel wrinkled her nose. ‘Damn,’ she said, ‘I wanted us to all go down there together the first time.’

‘Me too,’ I sighed. ‘And I’m sorry, but I think it’s partly my fault that we didn’t get to do that.’

‘I’m sure it isn’t,’ she said unconvincingly.

‘He pretty much said it was,’ I told her, thinking back over the awful impression I’d left him with the night before. ‘Although...’

I let the word hang as I thought about the holdall he had carried in with him and the look of sadness he had also brought back from his visit to the lake.

‘Although?’ Rachel repeated.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ I shrugged. ‘It was probably nothing.’

‘But?’ she encouraged, raising an eyebrow and leaning in.

‘I just got the feeling that he’d gone to the lake alone for a more specific reason than me being a cow to him yesterday.’

‘What sort of reason?’ Rachel asked, not denying my bovine behaviour.

‘I don’t know,’ I said again, thinking of the look on his face and the tense set of his shoulders and jaw, ‘but I don’t think it was a happy one.’

‘Well, that doesn’t sound good,’ said Rachel, puffing out her cheeks. ‘Was he okay?’

‘No,’ I told her. ‘I don’t think he was actually. But given my less than warm welcome yesterday, he was hardly going to open up to me about whatever was on his mind, was he?’

‘I suppose not,’ Rachel said, still making no attempt to suggest that I hadn’t behaved badly which left me in no doubt that I had.

‘But he did say,’ I carried on, trying to distance myself from my unkind conduct, ‘that we were to carry on with our pre-made plans because he’d got his own things to do.’ Rachel raised an eyebrow again. ‘And I’m pretty sure that wasn’t down to my frosty welcome,’ I hastily added.

‘It seems to me,’ she said, reaching for the last of the sandwiches and sounding intrigued, ‘that we’ve all come to Lakeside with secrets.’

I knew I had and was now certain that Alex had too, but the fact that Rachel had a secret was completely fresh information.

‘Is that right?’ I questioned, waiting for her to spill the beans.

‘Uh huh,’ she said as she chewed.

‘So, what’s yours then?’ I blatantly asked when she didn’t say anything else.

‘You first,’ she nodded, a mischievous smile appearing before she took another bite.

‘All right,’ I tutted. ‘Touché.’

‘I’m sure all will be revealed when it’s meant to be,’ she said sagely. ‘But in the meantime, I’m going to treat myself to another few hours in bed.’

I willed myself not to waste time trying to guess what Rachel and Alex’s secrets might be as I tidied away the dishes, re-laid the wood-burner, courtesy of Catriona’s list of instructions, and returned to the cosy book-nook in the window.

I spent just as long that lazy afternoon looking around the beautiful cottage and out at the hills as I did reading what was on the page. I mulled over the kind things Alex had said about my patchwork projects and considered what a future dedicated to it might look like.

It was still pure fantasy, but I allowed myself the luxury of imagining how my website might look, along with my Etsy shop

and stalls at trade fairs and festivals. I considered dozens of different dress designs as well as the sort of people who might wear them.

I even thought about the person *I* would be if I decided to go for it. No more smart suits and sleek up-dos for me. I would be able to wear the clothes I loved to design and make and not just at the weekends! In my head it was all perfect, but then I realised there was danger in that.

I had put my time at the cottage on a pedestal and it had turned out that no matter how hard I'd planned, no matter how many lists I'd made, the reality was already turning out to be nothing like I had imagined it would be.

I knew Tori's absence and Alex's presence accounted for much of that, but would something similar happen if I raised my expectations about my prospective business too high? Had my parents got it right after all? Maybe I would be better off sticking to the security of what I knew and keeping my patchwork as a weekend and evening interest? Why risk potentially spoiling what I already had?

I put the book down and rubbed my temples, grateful that I had six weeks rather than six days to get it all straight in my head, and somewhere I found beguilingly beautiful in which to do it.

'Where's Alex?' asked Rachel when she later joined me again.

Her day in bed had clearly suited her as she was looking much more like her old self, in spite of whatever the secret was that she was holding so close to her chest.

'Still in his room,' I told her, with a nod to the closed door. 'Has been all afternoon.'

'Do you think we should knock?' Rachel frowned. 'Just to make sure he's okay.'

'No,' I said. 'I'm sure he's fine. He'll come out when he's ready. And for all we know,' I added, 'he might be working on that

rebranding project he told us about. We wouldn't want to break his concentration, would we?'

'I suppose not,' said Rachel, moving slightly as a shaft of sunlight, the first we'd seen since we'd arrived, shone through the window and lit the room up.

'Would you look at that?' I laughed. 'I was beginning to think the rain was a permanent feature.'

'Let's go to the lake,' Rachel said keenly. 'Make the most of it before it clouds over again.'

'All right,' I said. 'I'll grab a sweater and we'll go.'

It was cool outside in the early evening air, but nowhere near cold.

'We mustn't forget to water all these pots,' Rachel said quietly, mindful we were outside the room Alex was in as she nodded at the tubs of huge leaved hostas and purple flowering petunias. 'As the rain doesn't reach here, they're bound to dry out.'

'We'll do it when we get back,' I said. 'Come on.'

Beyond the veranda there was a well-defined path which led us through the woods and at the end of that we knew we would find the pebbled shore that belonged to the cottage, with access to the lake.

'Doesn't it smell amazing?' Rachel sighed dreamily, veering off the path to pick up yet another pine cone that had most likely fallen the autumn or winter before.

The pocket on the front of my hoodie was already bulging and I was beginning to wish we'd brought a bag.

'It does,' I agreed, breathing in a lungful of the fresh, cool air. 'If I said it smells green, would you know what I meant?'

It was a smell reminiscent of my childhood.

‘Funnily enough,’ Rachel laughed, ‘I would and I can get a whiff of petrichor too which, given the amount of rain that falls here, is a bit of a surprise.’

‘You’re right,’ I agreed. ‘The ground is hardly dry, is it?’

We linked arms just before we reached the end of the path and squeezed close together.

‘Here we go,’ said Rachel.

It was time for another first impression and I hoped there was going to be nothing to twist or diminish this one.

‘Let’s do it.’ I nodded.

We stepped out of the trees and down the slight incline to the pebbled lakeshore.

‘Oh my god,’ I gasped, a lump forming in my throat. ‘It’s huge.’

The lake filled the whole of the view and was surrounded by dense trees with hills and even mountains beyond. I had known the body of water was vast from scenes in the film and online searches, but it wasn’t until I stood beside it that I could appreciate just how huge it actually was.

Even after all my summer holidays spent in the Lake District with Nanna and Grandad, I couldn’t remember anything quite as spectacular as this, but then I was looking through the eyes of an adult now rather than a young girl. Perhaps that made a difference?

‘Look,’ said Rachel, tugging at my sleeve.

Tucked under the canopy of the trees closest to the shore were two Adirondack chairs and a bench. There was a rope swing tied to a tree branch a little further along, as well as the jetty the three main characters had jumped off during the famous skinny-dipping scene. I could also see a small rowing boat moored alongside it.

‘This is every bit as wonderful as the cottage, isn’t it?’ I said, feeling in awe all over again and selfishly grateful that Alex wasn’t

with us.

I know I had said to him about coming down to the lake for the first time together, but I was pleased it was just me and Rach. It would have been even better if Tori had been with us but that wasn't meant to be. I walked over to see if the chairs were wet and finding they weren't, reverently sat in one, rubbing my hands along the length of the smooth wooden arms.

'In the film, the women really sat in these, didn't they?' I breathed.

'They did,' Rachel confirmed, sitting in the other. 'I wonder which one Heather sat in?'

'Definitely this one,' I said, patting the one I had picked.

'I reckon it was this one,' Rachel grinned back, meaning hers.

I hugged my knees to my chest and looked out over the lake. It was extraordinarily beautiful.

'I'd love to camp out here,' I whispered, swallowing over the lump in my throat which was determinedly hanging about to make up for the fact that the shock of finding Alex at the cottage the day before had ensured it hadn't shown up then.

'I don't know about that,' Rachel beamed, her eyes shining as she nodded to the pebbled shore. 'But weather permitting we could definitely moon gaze.'

I hoped I looked as ecstatic as she did because I certainly felt it. I had no idea what had knocked the wind out of Alex's sails when he'd come down here, because the view was magnificent.

'Moon gazing would be wonderful.' I beamed back.

Wanting to make the most of the sunshine, we then walked arm-in-arm to the end of the jetty.

'Selfie!' I insisted, pulling my phone out of my pine cone packed pocket. 'Come on.'

It took a while to select the best view because there were so many possibilities and then I snapped away, scrolling through the results just as the sun disappeared behind the clouds again and the temperature dropped as a result.

‘When I get a signal somewhere,’ I said enthusiastically, ‘I’ll send these to ‘Tori.’

Rachel didn’t say anything.

‘Unless you think I shouldn’t,’ I said. ‘I wouldn’t want her to think I was rubbing her nose in it.’

‘Let’s sleep on it,’ Rachel suggested, sitting down and pulling off her plimsolls and socks. ‘Although I daresay she probably would like to see what we’re up to.’

‘What are you doing?’ I frowned, shoving my phone away again.

‘Testing the water.’ She grinned, dangling her feet over the edge. ‘If I’m going to be jumping in here in the buff, I want to feel the temperature first.’

I bit my lip, as she braced herself to plunge her feet in because I knew exactly what she was going to say.

‘Fuck!’ she screeched, pulling her feet out of the water as quickly as she’d dropped them in. ‘That’s freezing!’

‘Of course, it is.’ I burst out laughing. ‘What did you expect? We had the wood-burner lit last night and need I remind you, we’re in the Lake District, so it was hardly going to be tropical, was it?’

‘There’s no frigging way I’m swimming in there,’ she giggled, massaging her blue toes.

‘That’s one use we’ve found for Alex then,’ I guffawed.

‘What do you mean?’

‘We can use the fact that he’s a bloke as an excuse for not wanting to strip off, can’t we?’ I said, giving her a nudge. ‘No one need ever know we wimped out!’

‘That’s not a bad idea,’ she said, twisting around to shove her frozen foot in my face. ‘Feel that. Not even the promise of a stress-free autumn term would tempt me to go in that water in the nip.’

Chapter 7

Although we were both aware that there was something going on with Alex and consequently a little concerned, I did manage to convince Rachel that we should leave him to it. That said, I wouldn't have done had his mood not lifted a little during our post-lake conversation on Friday. Had he remained as morose then as he had been when he initially arrived back from the lake, then I would have made more of an effort to draw him out and include him.

Having spent more time at the lake and pottering about the cottage, by Sunday Rachel and I were keen to venture further and set our sights on another popular setting in the film, the nearest pub. The information in the property folder backed up what we'd researched online and we knew that The Drover's Rest in the nearby village of Lakeside was just a mile and a half away and could be reached within a brisk thirty-minute walk. As it was so close, we thought we'd risk the weather and go on foot.

'Alex,' said Rachel, having quietly knocked on his bedroom door. 'We're going to the pub for lunch. Will you come with us?'

We'd hardly seen him, but in the brief moments when he had left his room to make a drink and prepare a meal, we'd exchanged a few words and I was still happy to leave him to it as he'd requested. Rachel, however, was beginning to think that he'd been holed up alone long enough and was increasingly determined to prise him out of his shell again.

'No, thanks,' came his eventual muffled response. 'I might walk down and join you in a while though.'

‘Okay,’ she said, shrugging in my direction. ‘We’ll maybe see you later then, but we’ll take door keys in case you decide you want to head off somewhere else.’

‘I don’t think that’s likely,’ I said to Rachel as we set off, remembering to take our waterproof jackets with us along with the cottage keys.

‘Tell me again what he said when he came back from the lake,’ Rachel asked once we were out of earshot of the cottage.

‘I’ve already told you a thousand times,’ I sighed, throwing her a frustrated look. ‘I’m not going over it again.’

‘All right,’ she shot back. ‘There’s no need to snap.’

‘I’m sure he’s fine,’ I told her in a more placatory tone. ‘I wouldn’t be so willing to leave him on his lonesome if I didn’t genuinely believe that, would I?’

‘I suppose not,’ she reluctantly acknowledged.

‘And you were happy to leave him alone too, until today, weren’t you?’

‘I know, it’s just...’

‘We know he’s got something going on,’ I interrupted. ‘But it’s not our business to pry, is it? You’d hate it if the boot was on the other foot and he was trying to fix you, wouldn’t you?’

‘I don’t want to fix him.’ She blushed.

‘Rach,’ I said, reaching for her hand. ‘You want to fix everyone. It’s one of the many reasons why the kids at school love you so much. You’re the most nurturing person I know.’

She was partly pacified by that, but I could tell she still ached to know what was going on with Alex.

‘Just think how you’d feel if he was trying to winkle your secret out of you,’ I then cunningly said, putting her in his shoes. ‘You’d

hate an intervention, wouldn't you? No matter how well meant. And I'm sure Alex would too.'

'I would,' she said hastily. 'You're right.'

'So come on then, before it starts to rain,' I insisted, pulling her along and feeling relieved that she was going to let it drop again. 'Let's look for landmarks from the film as we walk. The village is left from here, isn't it?'

'No,' said Rachel, checking the directions Catriona had left us. 'It's right.'

I looked first in one direction along the road and then the other.

'But the girls turn left at the gate to go to the village in the film,' I pointed out, my ponytail swinging as I tried to pick out any familiar looking trees or roadside rocks.

'That's as maybe,' said Rachel in her most teacherly tone as she showed me the notes and pointed to her right, 'but IRL, the village is this way.'

'Something else that's not how I imagined it.' I sighed without meaning to.

'Oh now, come on,' she scolded. 'Don't be so dramatic. It's not that big a deal and I bet the village will be exactly what we're expecting.'

Thrillingly, she was right. We walked, following the directions Catriona had left for us and it didn't take us long to reach the tiny village of Lakeside which was partly made up of a postbox, the pub and a small general store and post office combined, all of which looked exactly as they had in the film. There was also a picturesque telephone box library and a Lilliputian village hall, but nothing more. One sweeping glance was all it took to take in the utterly charming place and it was all instantly and heart-thumpingly recognizable.

‘Even the hanging baskets are the same!’ Rachel laughed, when we reached the pub.

Set a little way back from the road, which was more of a lane really, there was enough space in front of the whitewashed pub for a couple of benches and picnic tables and the baskets and tubs were filled with bright red geraniums and blue and white trailing lobelia, just like they had been described in the book and depicted in the film.

‘And the village store has the same ones too,’ I said, pointing out the similarly planted pots which flanked the door.

‘Come on,’ said Rachel. ‘I’ve got a good feeling about this place. Let’s go in.’

I felt nervous as we stepped through the door of The Drover’s Rest, even more so when a few heads turned in our direction, but the feeling didn’t last long. The interior of the pub felt every bit as familiar as the outside had, only it was perhaps a little larger than I expected and Rachel and I were both mesmerised.

In just the same way as when I’d first stepped into the cottage, it felt like I was walking straight into the pages of the book. As I looked about, my mind started to run through a showreel of the scenes from the film which had been shot there and I felt my shoulders relax.

There were a few up to date touches, but there was also the same oak bar which ran almost the whole length of one side of the pub with a few stools in front of it and wooden tables and chairs grouped together around the huge, but currently unlit inglenook. There were old-fashioned booths too and framed photos taken during the filming hung on the walls. The atmosphere felt as warm as the welcome we received from a glossy black Labrador who trotted over to greet us, her claws tapping lightly on the traditionally flagged floor.

‘Hello you,’ said Rachel, bending to give her a fuss. ‘Aren’t you wonderful?’

‘She certainly thinks she is,’ said a guy who walked out from a back room and stepped up behind the bar. ‘What can I get you? I’m Connor, the landlord,’ he continued, with a wide smile and attractive Irish lilt. ‘Welcome to The Drover’s Rest.’

‘Hello Connor,’ said Rachel, straightening up again.

‘Hi,’ I said, with a small wave.

Rachel bent to fuss the dog again and Connor, his gaze following her, appeared transfixed. I practically heard the twang of Cupid’s bow as his arrow hit its mark.

Wearing a red and navy checked shirt with a band T-shirt underneath and sporting a thick but closely cropped black beard, Connor wasn’t my type and I didn’t think he was Rachel’s either. Not that it mattered because she wasn’t looking for a date or a holiday fling. Her relationship with Jealous Jeremy was one hundred per cent exclusive, so poor smitten Connor was destined for disappointment.

‘We’re staying at...’ Rachel started to say when she straightened up again.

‘Don’t tell me,’ Connor laughed, holding up a hand. ‘You’re staying at the *Hope Falls* cottage and you’re the newest arrivals on the book and movie pilgrimage.’

‘Is it that obvious?’ Rachel laughed in response, stepping closer to the bar.

She was completely oblivious to the impact she was having on Connor’s heartstrings, but I knew love at first sight when I spotted it.

‘Only to those of us in the know,’ he said. His face flushed beneath his beard as she smiled up at him. ‘You get a feel for these things.’

‘Is that right?’ Rachel asked.

‘It is, but you usually travel in threes,’ he recovered enough to say. ‘Sometimes fours. Is there someone missing from your party?’

‘Funnily enough,’ said Rachel, amazed by his powers of deduction, ‘there is.’

‘So, I am right then?’ He grinned.

‘One hundred per cent,’ I confirmed.

‘And you’re planning to visit all the sights and recreate as many of the scenes as you can back at the cottage and down at the lake.’

I didn’t bother to feel put out that he was reeling our itinerary off as if it was something he’d been privy to a thousand times before, because he most likely had been. The cottage guests would all visit his pub and, as he had rightly predicted, we would be doing the tour, seeing all the sights and enjoying the occasional re-enactment.

That said, this holiday was inimitable to me, a once in a lifetime opportunity and I wanted it to feel special. *Extra* special in fact and, a few moments aside, so far it hadn’t quite lived up to expectations.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ laughed Rachel, taking Connor’s observations onboard as stoically and as quickly as she had got her head around Alex being a guy. ‘You’re right and you’ve obviously seen and heard it all before.’

Perhaps I needed to take a leaf out of her book, as far as Alex was concerned anyway. Rachel had been waiting the same amount of time as me to take this holiday and no doubt had the same expectations as I did, but she was still managing to have a completely hiccup-free holiday in spite of our unexpected housemate.

‘I sure have,’ Connor confirmed. ‘But not as many times as I’ve read the book and seen the film.’

‘You’re a fan?’ I asked, sounding surprised.

‘Of course, I’m a fan,’ he laughed, his gaze turning to me. ‘How could I move here a couple of years ago to run this place and not be?’

He had a point. It was a shame he hadn’t been here during the filming though because I would have happily spent hours picking his brains about that.

‘The third member of our party will be delighted to hear it,’ I told him.

‘And where is she today?’ he asked, looking to Rachel and then back to me again.

‘He,’ I corrected, amused that he’d made the same assumption as Rachel and I had, ‘is back at the cottage.’

‘Hallelujah!’ Connor cheered approvingly. ‘Another guy! That is a rarity. I’m looking forward to meeting him. It’s always good to get another bloke’s perspective on certain aspects of the film adaptation.’

Rachel let out a yelp and turned red. The Labrador had given her bare legs a nudge with her wet nose as a reminder that she was still there, waiting to be fussed again.

‘Come on, Sidddy,’ Connor called, but the dog didn’t budge.

‘Sidddy,’ said Rachel, relenting and giving her another stroke. ‘That’s an unusual name.’

‘It’s short for Obsidian,’ Connor explained.

‘As in the stone?’

‘That’s right.’ He beamed again. ‘The stone that’s used for protection, not that my Sidddy is any sort of a guard dog and thankfully we don’t need one around here.’

His heart might need protecting though because if the continued look on his face was anything to go by, he was going to be heartbroken when he found out Rachel was already spoken for.

‘The village looks lovely,’ I commented, happy to know it was a safe as well as picturesque place. ‘Small, but perfectly formed.’

‘My thoughts exactly,’ he agreed.

His eyes were back on Rachel again.

‘Any chance you could squeeze us in for lunch today, Connor?’ I asked as my tummy rumbled and I noticed that most of the tables were already taken.

‘Of course,’ he said, picking up a couple of menus. ‘Follow me.’

Once Connor had settled us in a booth, I was about to ask Rachel if she was aware of the impact she was having on him, when a woman came over and introduced herself as Catriona and I was denied the chance.

‘I was going to wander down later to see how you’re all settling in,’ she said. ‘But if everything’s okay, I won’t intrude. Are you still sure you don’t want the cleaning service?’

‘Thank you.’ I smiled. ‘We’re completely settled and more than happy to look after ourselves.’

The money we were going to save cleaning up after ourselves and changing our own sheets was even more appreciated now.

‘And the cottage is stunning,’ added Rachel.

‘And so is the lake,’ I gushed. ‘It’s all perfect.’

‘And Alex?’ she asked, her eyebrows raised. ‘How’s he finding it? Hard, I would imagine.’

Rachel and I exchanged a look.

‘Sorry,’ she then said. ‘I should really ask him that, shouldn’t I?’

‘Why would he be finding it hard?’ Rachel frowned.

Catriona’s freckled face turned bright red. ‘Oh, he hasn’t said anything,’ she groaned. ‘Of course, he hasn’t. Why should he? I’m so sorry,’ she apologised again.

‘We haven’t actually seen all that much of him,’ I told her. ‘And no, he hasn’t said anything which would suggest he’s finding the visit hard, although,’ I added, ‘he has hinted that there might be more to him being at the cottage than a desire to fulfil a long-held dream.’

Catriona turned even redder then. ‘Well,’ she said. ‘It’s not my place to comment on that. I shouldn’t have said anything at all. Let’s just forget I mentioned it.’

Looking at Rachel’s inquisitive expression and knowing how many questions I now had whizzing about in my head, I guessed that was going to be easier said than done.

‘You’ve got my number if you need anything, haven’t you?’ Catriona carried on. ‘I won’t disturb you, but you can always call if you need me.’ She took a step away. ‘Any problems just let me know, and I’ll sort them.’ She nodded, clearly relieved the conversation was over.

She rushed away and Rachel looked at me, wide-eyed. ‘What do you suppose that was about?’ she asked.

‘Obviously, the baggage Alex has brought with him,’ I said, eyeing the menu and thinking again of the bag he had carried back from the lake. ‘And which we’re not going to speculate over, right?’ I reminded her, even though I was desperate to pick it all apart.

‘Right,’ she agreed, opening her own menu.

‘I reckon it has something to do with a woman though,’ I blurted out as my eyes scanned the list of meals but didn’t take a single dish in. ‘That Heather hoodie he wore to watch the film was nowhere near big enough, was it? I wonder if he’s pining for an ex?’

‘I thought we weren’t going to speculate,’ Rachel smirked.

‘We’re not,’ I said, sitting up straighter and banishing the image of Alex’s kind eyes. ‘To be honest,’ I said, changing track, ‘right

now, I'm more interested in the impact you're having on the lovely landlord over there.'

'What?' she tutted, as a deep frown formed. 'Don't be so ridiculous.'

'He's smitten, Rach.' I grinned.

'Don't be daft...'

Convincing her further was impossible because her mobile started ringing.

'Oh,' she said, once she'd pulled it out of her pocket. 'Guess who?'

'Jeremy,' I ventured, in a more sarcastic tone than I'd intended.

I knew it must have been killing him not to be in constant contact.

'No,' she retorted sardonically, accepting the call. 'It's Tori.'

Connor was hovering to take our order by the time we'd filled Tori in about our third housemate and what the cottage was like and she insisted that we send her a selfie of the two of us in the pub as well as the shots I'd taken at the lake.

'And that landlord sounds like a total hunk,' she said, sounding very much like her usual self and Rose from the book rolled into one. 'So, get him in the shot too.'

I had resisted telling her how good-looking Alex was.

'You really want to see what you're missing?' I asked, just to be sure she meant it.

'I damn well do,' she said. 'I need something to cheer me up.'

'Have you got any further with your new life plan?' Rachel asked.

'Not yet,' she sighed. 'I'm still readjusting to living back at home.'

‘Well, don’t readjust for too long,’ Rachel said gently, knowing that meant she was sleeping all day and binge-watching Netflix all night. ‘The sooner you’ve got something going, the sooner you’ll get your dad off your back.’

‘I know,’ Tori said. ‘Anyway, I better go. He’s changed my phone contract and I haven’t got unlimited anything anymore.’

‘Poor Tori,’ I said, after she’d gone and I’d sent her the lake selfie.

‘And poor Jeremy,’ said Rachel, scrolling through her messages folder. ‘Would you look at this lot? He must be really missing me.’

She showed me the ridiculous number of messages and voicemails already stacked up unheard and unread and I willed myself not to make vomiting noises.

‘You did tell him that you weren’t going to be able to call him all that much while we’re here, didn’t you?’ I frowned.

‘I did,’ she sighed. ‘But he clearly still wants to keep in touch, even if it is all one way. How sweet is that?’

‘Saccharine sweet,’ I said, clapping my hands as Connor came over carrying two packed plates of the traditional roast beef lunch we’d opted for.

‘Oh wow,’ said Rachel, abandoning her phone when she spotted the vast Yorkshire puddings.

‘Enjoy.’ Connor smiled, carefully setting the meals down.

‘Hang on,’ I said, whipping up Rachel’s phone and turning the camera on. ‘Can you just take a snap of us for our friend?’

He willingly acquiesced.

‘And,’ I added, before he headed back to the bar, ‘just one more, with you in it.’

‘Me?’ he laughed.

‘Yes, please,’ I told him. ‘Because for some reason, after Rachel described you, our friend back home thought you sounded like quite a hunk.’

‘Oh, well, in that case,’ he said, grinning at Rachel who looked mortified. ‘You’d better get my best side, hadn’t you?’

I made sure most of the screen was filled with him and Rachel and pressed send before she had a chance to veto it.

‘Thanks, Connor,’ I said, as I turned the phone off and rammed it into my pocket so Rachel couldn’t fret over the mountain of messages while we ate.

‘Always happy to oblige,’ he laughed and sauntered back to the bar.

‘Don’t encourage him,’ Rachel tutted, obviously having processed what I’d said earlier about him liking her. ‘And give me back my phone.’

‘No way,’ I said. ‘If you think I’m going to sit here trying to enjoy my dinner, while you scroll feeling sorry for Jeremy, then you’ve got another think coming.’

‘Don’t you think I should just let him know we’re here, now I’ve got a decent signal?’

‘No,’ I said sternly. ‘I don’t, because it will set a precedent. Now, eat your puddings before they deflate, and maybe you can do it after.’

Chapter 8

Rachel and I chatted about the pretty pub and the perfect village all the way back to the cottage and by the time we'd remembered that I'd still got her phone and she hadn't let Jeremy know she'd arrived, she was out of signal range and the rain had started to pour. I did feel a little bad, but for her rather than him.

'You could walk back up to the road and do it first thing tomorrow,' I suggested as we ran on to the veranda to avoid a thorough soaking. 'It might be dry again by then.'

'I suppose I could,' she said, biting her lip, 'although I do feel bad that I haven't been in touch at all so far.'

Conversely, I was ecstatic about that.

'I should have done it when I messaged Mum three rings the day we arrived,' she carried on. 'But I was so excited to be here, that I didn't think and you know how he worries.'

I wanted to say that I knew how he liked to know exactly where she was every minute of the day and not knowing for once would do him no harm at all, but stopped myself.

'I do,' I said instead, shaking out my coat and hanging it on a hook next to the door to dry, 'but he wouldn't want you catching a cold just to send a text, would he?'

'No,' she sighed heavily, hanging her coat on the hook next to mine. 'I guess not.'

I looked at her furrowed brow and wondered if my discouraging her from messaging was as reprehensible as the

behaviour Jeremy resorted to and that she frustratingly hadn't picked up on, but then I reasoned that my actions came from a completely different place, one of love and in this instance, to stop her getting soaked and genuinely risk catching a chill.

'Come on,' I said, finding the door unlocked and guessing Alex hadn't gone out after all. 'Let's go in and get the kettle on. We've got a lot of relaxing to do.'

The next couple of days ran comfortably and comfortingly according to our original plan. I took my time putting the finishing touches on the anniversary picture and Rachel continued to recover from her end of term exhaustion. As far as I was aware, she hadn't ventured back up the road to message Jeremy. An action which I was blown away by but didn't comment on for fear of breaking the spell. I had no idea what Alex's plans had been, but he had finally remembered there was life beyond his bedroom door and that was a relief all round.

By the time Wednesday dawned, he almost resembled the man we'd first met and when he emerged from his room, ready to drive down to Manchester, the dark circles under his eyes had almost completely faded. Whatever had got him so stirred up during that first trip to the lake had clearly taken quite a toll and a long time to recover from and I was certain he hadn't been back, which was a shame because it was such a beautiful spot and of course, integral to both the book and the film.

'Will you be driving through Lakeside this morning, Alex?' I asked, as he checked he'd got his keys, phone and wallet.

'I will,' he said. 'But only for around three seconds. I had another look at the details about the place in Catriona's folder yesterday and it's hardly a sprawling metropolis, is it?'

'No,' I agreed, wondering if he intended to visit the pub. Connor would be delighted if he did. 'One blink and you'd miss it,

although it looks exactly like it does in the film. I don't suppose I could blag a lift with you as far as there, could I?

He looked rather taken aback. 'Of course,' he said, picking up his jacket and sounding nonplussed. 'You aren't planning on carrying shopping back though, are you? It'd be a bit of a trek from there with heavy bags.'

'No,' I said. 'I want to send a parcel and if you don't mind dropping me off, it will save me having to ask Rachel to drive me later. I want to make sure I catch the early collection. Assuming there is more than one.'

'Is it that lovely anniversary picture?' he asked.

'It is,' I told him, showing him a photo of the finished piece in its frame on my phone.

'Wow,' he said, taking in the intricate final details. 'It looks even better than the day I saw you working on it.'

Was it my imagination or did his cheeks colour a little at the mention of that day?

'Thank you,' I said. 'I'm really happy with how it has turned out.'

'I can send it from Manchester if you like?' he then kindly offered.

'That's very kind,' I said, putting my phone away again. 'And thank you, but I'd rather do it myself.'

'That's fair enough,' he nodded. 'And, as we've made it this far into the holiday without further falling out, you can add anything you want to this shopping list, if you like.' He smiled, referring back to another of our earliest interactions, but this time making me blush.

'Thanks,' I said, taking the piece of paper from him.

I wondered if the falling out situation would have been different had he spent more time out of his bedroom and I found

myself hoping not.

‘That’s kind,’ I added. ‘And much appreciated.’

I’d got over my initial upset that he hadn’t turned out to be the person Rachel and I had been expecting to share the cottage with and had no desire to waste more time smarting over it. I had far more important things to think about during my summer than Alex’s gender, and took the offer of adding to his shopping list as a metaphorical olive branch. Not that it should have been him who was offering one.

‘Do you want anything picking up when I do some shopping in Manchester, Rachel?’ he asked, as she wandered out of the bedroom, looking sleepy and dishevelled.

‘I do actually,’ she said, coming to read what I’d added so far. ‘But I don’t know how you feel about buying feminine hygiene products, Alex.’

I turned to look at her and felt a rush of tears gather behind my eyes. Not only had she not been rushing to message Jeremy, she’d also got her period. I felt like punching the air.

‘I’m sure I’m up to it,’ he said. ‘It certainly wouldn’t be my first time.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, then frowned at me. ‘What’s up with you?’

‘Nothing.’ I swallowed. ‘Do you want the usual?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Two packs, please. I’ve almost run out. I’ll pay you later, Alex, if that’s okay? My brain hasn’t quite engaged yet.’

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘No problem. Are you ready, Emily?’

‘Just a sec.’ I swallowed, adding a couple more things to the list before handing it back and picking up the parcel, along with my bag and coat. ‘Alex is going to drop me at the post office,’ I told Rachel. ‘I won’t be long.’

‘Okie doke,’ she said, heading back to the bedroom, with a mug of coffee from the pot. ‘See you both later.’

‘Are you all right?’ Alex asked as I watched her close the door.

‘Yes,’ I said, then cleared my throat. ‘Sorry. Let’s go. I don’t want to make you late.’

During the last couple of days, I had begun to panic that the secret Rachel had come to the cottage with was that she was pregnant. I knew her cycle every bit as well as my own so I was well aware that she was a little late.

The thought of her being tied to Jeremy through a baby had played heavily on my mind, but not anymore. I still didn’t know what her secret was, but at least it wasn’t that. It was a huge relief and restored my hope that they might not end up together forever after all. Had I thought it through rationally, of course, I would have realised sooner that a baby wasn’t on the cards because Rachel hadn’t stopped drinking.

‘Your car’s much smarter than ours,’ I told Alex as he held my parcel while I arranged my bag and pulled on my seatbelt.

I noticed he’d put the bag from the lake on the back seat and I was itching to know what was inside and whether it had any connection to what Catriona had indiscreetly said in the pub.

‘Thanks,’ he said, carefully handing over the parcel before closing the door and walking around to get in. ‘But yours is a classic.’

I wasn’t sure about that.

‘But,’ I countered, feeling thrown by how close we were once he had settled himself into the driver’s seat, ‘there are no scratches or dents on yours.’

‘Thankfully not,’ he laughed, the sound filling the car as he turned the key in the ignition. ‘Any comments you’d like to make about the weather before we set off?’

‘What?’ I frowned.

He turned to face me and I didn’t know where to look. Not only were we in close physical proximity, we were also eye to eye and I was unsettled by the impact that had on me.

‘We’ve shared the cottage for almost a week,’ he pointed out, ‘and yet we still know so little about each other that now we’re alone you’ve started talking about the paintwork and condition of my car to keep a conversation going.’

He said it with no rancour, but that didn’t stop me from bristling. Or was it his nearness that set me off again?

‘Is it any wonder?’ I bit back, looking away as my heart thrummed in my chest. ‘You’ve been hiding out in your room for days. We could hardly have a heart to heart with a solid door between us, could we?’

I regretted the harsh words the second I’d uttered them, but I knew deep down why I’d said them. It was my preoccupation with his intensely kind eyes that I resented. I was supposed to be thinking about nothing other than *Hope Falls* and my future during this holiday, but it was proving impossible when he was taking up so much room in my head.

‘Sorry,’ I choked. ‘That was uncalled for.’

He took a breath before answering. ‘It’s fine,’ he finally said. ‘And you’re right. I suppose I have been hiding out.’

The sadness in his tone, and knowing I was the one who had caused it, fractured my heart.

‘You’re on holiday,’ I said huskily. ‘And totally entitled to do whatever you want. I shouldn’t have said anything...’

‘No,’ he said, cutting me off. ‘I’m pleased you did and I think it’s high time we started over.’

‘You do?’ I swallowed.

‘I do,’ he said, sounding stronger. ‘Can we please start again, because in spite of the fact that it might not have appeared that way over the last few days, I do want this holiday to be a success. I *need* it to be a success.’

He didn’t say why.

‘So, can we start again?’ he asked, offering me his hand. ‘Hi.’ He then smiled. ‘I’m Alex and I’m delighted to finally be here.’

I took a deep breath and felt my face flush as I slipped my warm hand into his cool one. The touch of his skin set my insides alight, but I tried my best to outwardly pretend the contact had no impact at all. I was determined to embrace the second chance he was offering and hopefully use it to turn off my feelings and dial down my libido.

‘Hi,’ I stammered, the word catching. ‘I’m Emily and I’m delighted to be here too.’

‘What are your plans for the next few weeks, Emily?’ he asked, sounding completely unaffected as he released my hand and put the car into first gear.

‘Well,’ I began, the feel of his fingers holding mine lingering long after he had withdrawn them.

I shrugged the sensation off and in the spirit of our fresh start, quickly ran him through the schedule Rachel, Tori and I had come up with in the two minutes it took him to drive to Lakeside. I felt better for having cleared the air, but my heart still felt as uncomfortably close to the danger of being hijacked as it had been before.

‘Oh, my goodness,’ Alex gasped as Lakeside came into view. ‘This is...’

‘Just like in the book,’ I laughed unguardedly. ‘I know, believe me, I know.’

He pulled up outside the pub and shut the engine down.

‘And the film,’ he said, looking first one way up the road and then the other. ‘Wow.’

‘Do you want to get out and look around?’ I asked.

‘I’d better not,’ he said, checking the time. ‘I really should get going and I’m meeting my mum for lunch so I need to get as much done as I can this morning. I’ll definitely come back later in the week though.’

‘You absolutely have to meet the pub landlord,’ I told him. ‘He’s a *Hope Falls* fanatic too and was thrilled when we told him the third member of our party was a guy.’

He turned to look at me again and my heart skittered.

‘I am a member of your party then?’ he asked.

I fussed about, making a total hash of releasing my seatbelt. ‘Of course, you are,’ I confirmed, my own eyes tracking back to his even though my brain was trying to resist.

‘I’m very pleased to hear it.’ He smiled, making those wonderful crinkly lines reappear. ‘It might have taken me a few days to get my act together, but now we have five glorious weeks to make the most of.’

‘Exactly,’ I said on an out breath. ‘Five whole glorious weeks.’

I tried not to get het up about the fact that the first of the six had already flown by. I would now put my feelings of attraction for Alex to one side and get us back on track. After all, as Rachel had been so keen to keep pointing out, we’d all got along famously when we’d been emailing each other and at the end of the day, the Alex sitting next to me was still that Alex. The one I had thought would make a fine friend.

‘I wonder if Connor, the landlord, might be up for occasionally making our party a foursome?’ I said in a show of bonhomie. ‘That would even things up for you, wouldn’t it?’

If he was, I would let Connor know that Rachel was already spoken for, just to make sure he didn't get the wrong idea or his heart properly broken.

'Yes.' Alex smiled. 'I'd like that. It would be good to chat to another bloke about the book and the film adaptation too.'

'Funnily enough,' I smiled back, 'that's exactly what he said.'

I had quite a wait until the post office opened, so I sat outside the pub and fired up my phone. I only had one message and it was from Tori. She loved the photos taken at the lake, but asked where the snap of the swoonworthy landlord was. I pinged a message back saying I'd sent it from Rachel's phone and that she should ask her to send it again if it hadn't landed.

'Good morning,' said Connor, who appeared with Siddy and a hosepipe and set about dousing the baskets and tubs. 'Are you waiting for me?'

'I'm not,' I told him, jumping up to dodge the splashes from the deluge and almost tripping over Siddy in the process. 'I'm waiting for the post office to open. Although as you're here, there is something I wanted to ask you.'

'Ask away,' he said, turning off the hose.

'I was wondering, if you ever have some free time, if you might like to spend some of it with us?'

'Oh wow,' he said. 'I would. I'd like that very much, thanks.'

I thought I'd better explain about Rachel straightaway in case he thought I was matchmaking, or worse, that she herself had asked me to suggest he should hang out with us.

'It would help even things up for Alex,' I therefore hastily added. 'I feel for him a bit, being lumbered with two women he doesn't know. He wasn't part of our original party, but took the spot when our other friend had to drop out.'

‘I see,’ Connor said thoughtfully. ‘That matches the plot though, doesn’t it?’

‘It does,’ I nodded. ‘Though for a while,’ I then creatively carried on, ‘we thought Jeremy, that’s Rachel’s partner, might take the place, but it didn’t work out.’

‘Rachel’s partner?’

‘Um.’

He was quiet for a moment and I could tell he was recalibrating. ‘I’m pleased you’ve mentioned him,’ he then said, ducking his head. ‘I could have made a fool of myself there, couldn’t I?’

‘Knowing Rachel as well as I do,’ I told him, ‘she wouldn’t have let you.’

‘Serious, is it?’ he asked, reeling in the hosepipe. ‘This relationship with Jeremy.’

‘Sadly,’ I said, knowing I couldn’t lie, ‘I think it is, yes.’

‘Why sadly?’ he asked. ‘Do you not like him?’

Oops.

‘I wouldn’t go that far,’ I winced, knowing I already had. ‘But if it comes up, would you mind not letting on that I put it like that?’

‘All right.’ He grinned. ‘Mum’s the word.’

I hoped it was. The last thing I needed was for Rachel to somehow find out that I’d been bad mouthing her relationship or her boyfriend, no matter how mildly, and especially to someone who clearly thought she was the bee’s knees.

Chapter 9

‘What about cheese?’ Mrs Timpson, who ran the post office and general store, asked as she waved a waxed packet about. ‘How are you fixed for cheese? This is local and goes down a treat with that fruitcake you’ve decided on.’

I had posted my parcel and was now being subjected to a sales pitch canny enough to rival any Dragon in the Den by a woman wearing a floral tabard and with a soft grey wash and set. Her grandmotherly appearance had duped me completely and she’d reeled me in the very second she’d handed over the proof of posting receipt.

‘I think we’re all right for cheese, Mrs Timpson,’ I said, trying to put my foot down, especially as *I* hadn’t even decided on the fruitcake. *She* had. ‘And I haven’t got a bag to carry all of this back to the cottage in anyway.’

‘You better have one of these reusable jobbies as well then,’ she said, adding a jute bag with the name of the store printed on the side to my growing pile of superfluous purchases. ‘It’ll last you forever. And that will mean you can take the cheese. Yes?’

‘Why not?’ I feebly caved as she began ringing everything up and I began to fear for my holiday food fund.

I thought my arm was going to drop off by the time I had made it back to the cottage. I’d kept switching hands, but after a certain point it didn’t make any difference.

‘Where have you been?’ Rachel frowned, when I staggered in and dropped the shopping all over the floor. ‘You’ve been gone

hours.'

She didn't sound particularly impressed, but in that moment, neither was I.

'I got fleeced in the shop,' I said, scooping everything back up. 'The owner, Mrs Timpson, went in for the kill the second she'd got hold of my parcel and I'm thirty quid lighter now. Anyway, what's up with you?'

'Nothing,' she said, stowing the cheese in the fridge and the artisan bread in the cupboard with an extremely heavy hand and pairing it not with the jar of locally made chutney I'd also got, but with a face like thunder.

'Well, I don't believe that for a second.' I tutted, pouring myself a glass of water and drinking it down in one long go.

'Of course, you don't,' she snapped. 'Because you know exactly what's wrong.'

'No, I don't,' I frowned, rubbing the middle of my chest because the water had been really cold and I'd gulped too much air down with it.

She gave me a look which could have killed and I pitied any of her poor students who found themselves on the receiving end of it.

'You're going to have to fill me in,' I said, putting down the glass with one hand and neatly catching the phone she tossed me with the other.

I hoped she hadn't somehow been in touch with Connor and he'd already forgotten his promise to keep schtum about my slip of the tongue relating to Jeremy.

'Did you do it on purpose to stir up trouble?' Rachel demanded, her bottom lip trembling.

'Do what?' I asked, beginning to panic.

Rachel and I rarely argued and I had certainly never done anything awful enough to warrant making her cry.

‘You may have noticed,’ she tearfully told me, ‘that I’ve done as you suggested and held out on Jeremy, to make sure he got the idea that I wasn’t going to be constantly available while we’re staying here.’

‘You have.’ I swallowed.

A part of me thought she hadn’t been in touch, but another part, a larger part, hadn’t dared to believe it. Under other circumstances I would have been thrilled, but I genuinely couldn’t account for her current state of upset and that tempered my desire to offer her a high five.

‘But I know now the real reason why you didn’t want me to call him too soon,’ she said, an angry edge replacing the upset in her tone and further baffling me. ‘How could you be so mean, Em?’

‘I don’t understand...’

She snatched back her phone, found what she was looking for and held it up in front of my face.

‘Now do you understand?’ she shouted.

I looked at the screen and found the craftily cropped photo of her and Connor smiling with their heads together in the pub on Sunday looking back at me.

‘It’s the photo I took on your phone in The Drover’s on Sunday,’ I stupidly said.

‘I know it is,’ she seethed. ‘And I know who you sent it to!’

‘Oh shit,’ I gasped, as I realised what I’d inadvertently done. Jeremy and Tori were the top two listings in her favourites. ‘That’s why Tori never got it. I sent it to...’

‘Jeremy!’ Rachel screeched. ‘You sent a photo of me and another man, looking *extremely* happy, to my boyfriend and right at the beginning of when we’re not going to see each other for the

next month and a half and then talked me into having zero contact with him.'

And, of course, Jeremy wasn't just any boyfriend, was he? Had it been any other boyfriend, the misunderstanding could have been easily explained, there most likely wouldn't have even been a misunderstanding to explain, but Jeremy was the most clingy, jealous and manipulative man I'd ever encountered.

'Shit,' I said again, as the implications – especially having seen and heard how he'd reacted to a guy innocently asking Rachel where the loos in a club were – sank in.

'I can't believe you'd do that,' Rachel carried on, sounding horribly hurt and, even worse, disappointed.

My eyes flicked from the screen back to her face. 'Surely, you're not thinking that I did this on purpose,' I gasped.

She gave me a look which implied that was exactly what she was thinking.

'And as if that wasn't bad enough,' she continued, 'just as I was standing up on the road and in the middle of the conversation trying to smooth it all over because the messages I discovered from Jeremy when I finally turned my phone on had gone from mildly irritated to "*I'm coming to bring you home*," Connor pulls up and starts going on about you, me, him and Alex making up a foursome!'

'I can explain about that,' I told her.

'No need,' she said, through gritted teeth. 'I've already worked it out. You thought you'd get Jeremy out of the picture and fix me up with Connor who you conveniently, but completely inaccurately, think has the hots for me.'

I knew she was upset but that didn't warrant her thinking quite so badly of me.

‘Did Jeremy hear what Connor was saying?’ I asked, trying not to show her how much she’d upset me.

‘No,’ she huffed. ‘But he knew I was talking to a man.’

‘You are allowed to talk to other guys, Rach,’ I pointed out.

‘I know that,’ she snapped. ‘I’m not stupid or anywhere near as under Jeremy’s thumb as you and Tori seem to think I am.’

The whole situation was further proof that the relationship wasn’t a healthy one and that she was completely wedged under Jeremy’s thumb but it wasn’t the moment to contradict her about that. For now, I had to let that go, along with my upset over what she’d assumed about me.

‘He’s not really coming up here to get you, is he?’ I tentatively asked.

‘No,’ she said, letting out a long breath. ‘I think I managed to calm him down on the promise that I’d check in every day at a set time from now on and that—’

‘You’ve got to be kidding,’ I cut in, unable to stop myself. ‘That’s ridiculous.’

‘Not as ridiculous as you sending someone, who’s feeling a bit fragile because I’ve left them for the entire summer, a photo of me with another man and looking very happy about it, and then,’ she raged on defensively, ‘set me up with someone else.’

‘Look,’ I said, unable to hold back now she’d maligned me a second time. ‘I sent that photo to Jeremy by mistake. I genuinely thought I was sending it to Tori and you can look at the message she’s sent me, and quite possibly the one she’s now sent you, to prove that.’

Rachel shifted from one foot to the other, but didn’t comment.

‘And yes,’ I ploughed on, ‘I have asked Connor if he’d like to hang out with us on the odd occasion because I thought that

might be good for Alex. I thought having another guy around who loves *Hope Falls* as much as he does, might even things up. Given that you've been on at me to make more of an effort, I thought you'd be all for that.'

Rachel went to speak, but I didn't let her.

'And last, but by no means least, when I was talking to Connor, I made a point of telling him that you're in a relationship, a serious one. And I was right, he does like you, but he's a stand-up guy and has therefore now assigned you to the friend zone.'

I walked away before she could comment and, in lieu of having my own room to flounce off to, grabbed my jacket from the hook by the door and strode down to the lake.

Once there, I sat in one of the Adirondack chairs and hugged my knees to my chest. I stared out across the lake to the hills beyond and willed myself not to cry. So much for the fresh start Alex had been so keen to embrace that morning and which I had done my best to initiate.

Posting that patchwork commission was a real milestone and something wonderful to celebrate. It was the most creative piece I'd designed so far and I had planned to revel in the pleasure completing it afforded me. I had imagined Rachel and I celebrating over a lunch made up of all the things Mrs Timpson had coerced me into buying, but not now. The magical moment was well and truly lost.

'Em.'

I jumped at the sound of my name a while later and twisted round to see Rachel emerging from the path through the woods carrying a picnic basket and with rugs tucked under one arm.

'Hey,' she said, coming to stand next to me. 'I thought you might be hungry.'

I'd sat for what must have been a couple of hours in the beautiful spot, but I didn't feel much soothed by the lovely

location and I hadn't made any headway with my decision-making either because I hadn't been thinking about my future. Rather than channelling Heather and deciding which life path to take, I had fallen to brooding over the unsatisfactory start my fantasy holiday had so far had.

First there had been the presence of Alex to get my head around along with the fact that he had moved into my dream sanctuary without a second thought. And now, my best friend, who had accepted Alex far more willingly than I had, had accused me of trying to sneakily sabotage her relationship with her partner from hell.

'And given how much you spent on all this,' she carried on when I didn't comment, 'I thought we should enjoy it while it's at its freshest.'

I pulled one of the blankets out from under her arm and wrapped it around my shoulders. It was chilly sitting in the shade, but it wouldn't be too much longer before the sun reached our side of the lake and things warmed up a bit. At least it hadn't rained.

'I'm really sorry, Em,' Rachel sniffed, dumping the basket in the face of my sullen silence. 'I walked back up the road after you went out again and I have had a message from Tori and, having thought back over how Connor was earlier, compared to last Sunday, I know you were right about him, too.'

I looked at her and shook my head.

It was more than a little frustrating that she hadn't mentioned Jeremy in her apology or acknowledged that his reaction to the photo I'd inadvertently sent had been OTT in the extreme. How was it possible that my strong, intelligent, independent friend was so blinkered where that man was concerned? What was it about him that had managed to wrap her so tightly in his web?

I was desperate to get to the bottom of that, but knew that if I risked saying anything else even remotely scathing about him,

she'd cut me out and then I wouldn't be able to be there for her when it all came to a head. Because it would at some point. I was certain of that.

'Sending that photo really was a genuine mistake,' I said quietly.

'I know.' She nodded, lowering herself into the seat next to mine.

'And asking Connor to join us really was for Alex's benefit,' I further said. 'He was so keen when I suggested it while he drove me to Lakeside earlier.'

Rachel nodded. 'I know that too.'

'When we first met him,' I told her, 'I would have been happy if he had planned to stay hidden in that precious double room for the entire duration of our stay, but not now. From today on, I wanted to make more of an effort to make the three of us being here a memorable experience for all the right reasons.'

Rachel's eyes filled with tears and I reached across and grasped her hand.

'Oh, come on,' I said, drawing a line under the drama. 'Let's eat. I'm starving.'

The food might have been a bit on the pricey side, but it was delicious. The cheese especially, when paired with the rich fruitcake in the Yorkshire tradition, was a taste sensation. And the bottle of red we drank alongside it was perfect too. The sun shone long enough to warm the side of the lake where we were sitting and as I sat back in the chair, closed my eyes and lifted my faces to the heat-filled rays, I finally felt as though I was living the *Hope Falls* dream.

This was the nirvana I had been trying to achieve all along. Not the row which preceded it of course, but this moment, this wonderful time-out moment with my friend. I wished again that Tori could have been with us, not that she could sit still and quiet

for three seconds together, but we had Alex to make up for her loss now.

His smiling face and kind brown eyes popped into my head and, unbidden, I let out a long and very contented breath. That had to be more to do with the relaxed state the late lunch wine had prompted than the fact that I found him easy on the eye, right? I really did need to take a leaf out of Connor's book and just like he'd shifted Rachel into the friend zone, very quickly plonk Alex in there too.

'Penny for them?' Rachel asked, just as I was about to drift off.

I opened one eye and squinted at her, taking a moment to marshal my thoughts.

'I was just thinking how this finally feels like the holiday I was hoping for,' I said honestly. 'And how happy I am to have sent that commission off. What about you?'

She didn't say anything and I shielded my eyes from the glare of the sun bouncing off the smooth unsullied lake so I could look at her properly.

'What is it?' I asked, my perfect moment disappearing with a pop when I found her biting her lip and looking preoccupied. 'What were you thinking about?'

She rolled her shoulders and I knew she was gearing up to say something important. It was one of her classic tells.

'I'm feeling bad about not knowing what's been going on with you lately,' she said. 'I've been so immersed in the end of term and... some of my own stuff, that I haven't been here for you as much as I should have been and I'm sorry about that.'

'What are you talking about?' I asked, wondering what she meant by her own stuff. 'You've been a total rock since I was made redundant.'

‘Well,’ she shrugged, ‘that’s kind of you to say, but if I really had been a good friend, then I would have known you’d interviewed for another position with a different firm already, wouldn’t I? You should have told me, Em.’

‘How did you know about that?’ I frowned, sitting up.

‘I spoke to Mum earlier as well as Jeremy,’ she said, sounding hesitant but a little happier. ‘I understand congratulations are in order. Why hadn’t you said anything?’

‘Congratulations?’

‘Mum went to check on the flat and there was a message light flashing on the phone,’ Rachel explained. ‘She wasn’t going to listen to it, but then started to worry that it might be something important and what with us being away for so long...’

‘What was it?’

‘Confirmation from someone called Greg,’ she said with a small smile, ‘that your contract would be waiting for you to sign when you got back from your holiday and that he and the team were looking forward to you starting with them in September.’

‘Oh.’ I swallowed. ‘I see.’

‘Congratulations!’ she said again.

She sounded thrilled, but I wasn’t. It had been my intention to keep the new job under wraps so I could reach a decision about my future without her knowing about it. Rachel, like my parents, very much favoured a safe career path and was all for Team Employee. If I was going to make a well-balanced decision about my next step, I didn’t need anyone cheerleading more loudly for one option than the other.

Rachel might have loved the new direction my patchwork had taken, but she wouldn’t have been so keen to discover that I was considering sacrificing a regular pay cheque to make a business out of it. She’d already called my sewing obsession a hobby since we’d

arrived and that confirmed that she would try to talk me out of taking it on full-time, so I hadn't planned on giving her the chance.

'You're a dark horse,' she continued, sounding happier than she had all day. 'And even though I feel bad for not knowing you'd interviewed, I'm absolutely thrilled for you and,' she added, 'I'm not going to lie, I'm relieved too.'

'Just because you need the security, Rach...' I started to say.

'It's not that so much...' she said, turning red.

'What then?' I asked.

She wriggled in her seat. 'I haven't said anything before,' she began, sounding cautious again, 'because I was going to use the holiday to think it through further.' That was beginning to sound incredibly familiar. 'Although actually, because you didn't currently have a job, I knew it wasn't really a feasible option, but now...'

'Oh, Rach,' I cut in as a knot began to form in the pit of my stomach. 'Will you please just spit it out?'

'All right,' she said, taking a deep breath. 'The thing is, a few weeks ago, Jeremy asked me to move in with him.'

The tiny knot turned into a huge one as I felt every last bit of oxygen leave my lungs. I knew Rachel absolutely loved Jeremy's two bedroomed flat and private balcony, which was just a stone's throw from Roundhay Park. She loved its proximity to the wonderful green space as much as its square footage and it was conveniently close to her school. It was just a shame that she seemed to love him, too.

'And even though I thought I really did want to move in with him,' she carried on, as I began to feel giddy, 'I didn't say yes straightaway because I didn't want to make a final decision when I was so tired out by the summer term, but also because I was

worried about how you'd cope financially after you were made redundant...'

'I see.' I swallowed.

'But,' she then cheerfully added, 'now you've got this new job, I don't need to worry about the financials, do I? You could manage it alone, or at least until you find another flatmate, so now I can focus solely on how I feel about the prospect of cohabiting with my boyfriend.'

I wasn't usually lost for words, but this had been the last thing (now I knew she wasn't pregnant), that I had expected her to come out with. If Jeremy got her living in his flat, then Tori and I would have an insurmountable struggle to get her out again.

'I've still not completely made up my mind,' she carried on, 'but this new job of yours has definitely given me a nudge in the right direction. And,' she added, sounding thrilled, 'if it turns out that you can afford to live in the flat on your own, you could turn my room into a designated space for your patchwork, couldn't you? That way, you wouldn't have to keep packing it away all the time. It would make the ideal hobby room.'

There was that word again and how thrilled she sounded to have it all worked out.

'That's true,' I croaked, looking out over the lake and blinking hard. 'What a great idea.'

'I'm guessing, this job was the secret you've come here with, wasn't it?' she nudged, her eyes shining. 'I'm sorry I've found it out, but it was down to Mum, not me.'

'It's fine,' I said, neither confirming or denying that it was my secret. 'And I don't mind you knowing if it helps you make up your mind about moving in with Jeremy.'

Obviously, that was a lie, but what else could I say? If I told her about my plans to set up my own business now, she'd most likely assume that I'd just come up with the idea and announced it to

stop her moving out because I didn't like Jeremy. From now on, I was going to be walking on even thinner eggshells where anything to do with him was concerned.

'You really are a true friend.' She beamed, pouring out the last of the wine. 'Let's drink to the future.'

'Yes,' I echoed shakily, holding my glass aloft. 'The future.'

Sadly, it didn't have quite the same ring to it now.

Chapter 10

As if my commitment to making a fresh start hadn't already been churned up enough, I could tell from the moment Alex arrived back from Manchester that he had something on his mind and surmised that he was gearing up to make a revelation too. However, rather than hit us with the details that evening, he waited until the next.

'You go,' Rachel insisted, when we spotted a handwritten note inviting us to join him at the lake for a campfire supper. 'And I'll come down in a little while. I need to check in with Jeremy at six first.'

'Okay,' I said lightly, swallowing down the words about a daily check-in not being a good habit to succumb to and especially one that I'd now discovered had to happen at a Jeremy specified time every day. 'We'll see you in a bit. Try not to be too long, if you can help it.'

I took my time walking through the woods and thought about what Rachel had said about moving in with Jeremy. It was just as well I hadn't already decided to start my own business, because her potential change of address was having a huge impact on my thoughts about it all.

Knowing Rachel as well as I did, I was horribly aware that if I told her now that I had decided to turn the job down, then she wouldn't leave because she would be worried about how I'd manage, even though she knew I had a bit of money put by and, even though her not moving in with Jeremy was the very thing I

wanted the most, it would be terrible if my actions stopped her going, because I could tell that she wanted to.

I was also worried that having not told her about my alternative plans when I had ample chance the day before, there was a very genuine possibility that she really might assume I had simply come up with the idea on a whim to sabotage her decision and that I hadn't properly thought it through at all. What a mess it all was.

Fortunately, what Alex had created at the lake distracted me from my tangled thoughts.

'Oh, wow,' I gasped as I reached the end of the canopied path and took in the transformation in front of me. 'This is amazing!'

Stepping into the dramatic lakeside vista was always a breathtaking moment, but what Alex had spent the afternoon setting up made it doubly so.

'You recognise it?' he asked, a smile lighting up his face as he turned to look at me.

He was wearing a dark sweater with a light shirt underneath, jeans and big boots and he looked every inch the classic romantic hero. Even his jaw was seductively stubbled. I knew he hadn't created that particular aesthetic on purpose, but the more I saw of him and the more I got used to the fact that he was part of mine and Rachel's party, the more attractive I found him.

It was wholly inconvenient. Falling for someone had never formed part of my summer plan and I had recently pledged not to, but I couldn't seem to stop myself.

'Of course, I recognise it,' I said, the words catching as I took in the details of what he'd so cleverly and painstakingly recreated. 'This is an exact replica of the big revelation scene in *Hope Falls*, isn't it?'

As soon as I said the words, I knew that I had been right about him coming back from Manchester with something on his mind

and that he had gone to great lengths to set the scene to share whatever it was with Rachel and I.

That would make two lakeside revelations in as many days. I wished I had spoken up when Rachel and I were talking and made it a triple, but it was too late now. In the face of what Rachel had shared, my own secret had the power to be horribly misinterpreted and I wasn't going to risk that.

'It is,' Alex said, ducking his head as his cheeks flushed. 'I was hoping you were going to get it.'

'How could I not?' I said admiringly, making him colour further. 'It's absolutely perfect.'

He'd set a campfire going in front of the bench and there were storm lanterns dotted around as well as an old tin bucket full of beers on ice. He'd even thought to carry down the blankets and throws Rachel and I had used during our lunch the previous day. There was something cooking on the fire too.

'Where's Rachel?' he asked, looking over my shoulder. 'Isn't she coming?'

'She'll be here in a few minutes,' I said, taking the chilled bottle of beer he scooped out of the ice bucket, wiped on a towel and offered me. 'She just had to make a quick call.'

I hoped it was going to be quick.

'Okay,' he said, raking a hand through his hair, before turning back to the fire. 'Good. That's great, because I really only want to have to do this once.'

'Well, I'd appreciate it if you did it every night.' I smiled, as he carefully lifted the lid on the enamel pot which was nestled next to the raked-out embers at the side of the fire. 'Because it all looks and smells amazing.'

'Sorry,' he said, stirring the pot and releasing more of the wonderful aroma, 'I meant, I only want to have to say what I'm

going to tell you and Rachel once.'

'Oh,' I said, taking a swig of the ice-cold beer. 'I see. That sounds intense.'

'It is,' he said. 'Intense but necessary, I think.'

I didn't know what to say to that.

'This is almost ready,' he said, saving me from having to find the words.

'What have you got cooking in there?' I asked, leaning in for a closer look.

'It's campfire stew,' he said, replacing the lid and straightening up before nudging the pot a little further away from the fire with the toe of his boot. 'It's always been a tradition in my family and made mostly from whatever happened to be left in the fridge the day we went camping.'

I already knew he was close to his parents and having now confirmed that he was an outdoorsy type, I found myself falling for him even harder. Kind, considerate and a bit rugged was a winning combination as far as I was concerned.

'This is the veggie option,' he added. 'And I commandeered the bread that was in the cupboard too. I hope that was okay?'

'If it tastes even half as good as it smells,' I told him, 'then going forward, please feel free to help yourself to whatever you fancy.'

Heat flooded my face and I became engrossed in the label on my beer.

'Crikey.' He grinned, making me feel even more embarrassed. 'I'll bear that in mind.'

While we waited for Rachel and made inroads into more of the beer, I filled him in about how I'd been fleeced in the shop, making him laugh with my description of the deceptive looking Mrs Timpson and he told me more about the project he was working on to rebrand the small restaurant chain in Manchester.

In spite of my gaff about helping himself to whatever he fancied, it was the most relaxed I'd felt in his presence, however, I wasn't sure he felt the same about being in mine.

He laughed and nodded in all the right places, but I could tell he was on edge. His eyes kept flicking back to the path while we waited for Rachel and a couple of times, he had to ask me to repeat what I'd said. I found myself hoping that his jitteriness wasn't down to us being alone but more about whatever it was he had decided to tell us.

'And Connor said he'd be more than thrilled to join us when he can,' I finished up as I heard Rachel's footsteps growing closer. 'So, you won't be outnumbered the whole time.'

'Well, that's something.' He smiled as my friend gasped in the same way I had when I'd first seen what he'd organised. 'Not that I mind being outnumbered now things are settled between us,' he carried on and when I looked at him, I found his eyes fixed on my face.

'Oh, Alex,' said Rachel, as she stuffed her phone in her pocket. 'This is amazing. I had no idea you'd gone to all this trouble. There's no doubting which scene this is. Have you got something to reveal to match it, or is it just a coincidence?'

'I have got something to tell you actually,' he told her, sounding tense again. 'But let's eat first.'

Rachel gave me a look as he turned back to the fire and I shrugged to let her know that I didn't know what it was he was gearing up to share.

'It smells amazing,' she told him. 'I was getting a waft right back along the path and hoped it was coming from down here.'

The veggie stew was a total triumph and all three of us enjoyed soaking up the last of the thick, rich smoky sauce with great chunks of bread. I could imagine Alex's family camping trips were

full-on Enid Blyton style adventures rather than glamping and gastro-pub dining affairs. That was another tick in his box.

‘The sticky bits on the bottom always taste the best, don’t they?’ said Rachel, dipping her bread back in. ‘That,’ she then laughed, as she pulled her soaked chunk out again, ‘is a weird sentence.’

Clearly, the beer had got to her.

‘That was outstanding, Alex,’ I told him, having practically licked my tin plate clean. ‘I hope you’ve got a few more family recipes tucked up your sleeve. Feel free to cook for us again during the next few weeks, won’t you?’

‘I will,’ he said. ‘Gladly.’

‘Yes,’ Rachel agreed, with a wink. ‘Please do if you can, just to keep Em out of the kitchen, Alex. You’ll be doing us all a favour.’

‘Hey.’ I pouted, embarrassed to have had my lack of culinary skills flagged up. ‘I’m not that bad. Those peas I boiled the day we arrived were wonderful.’

‘And remember, I’m no barbecue king,’ Alex laughed, ‘so we all have our own skills.’

We piled the dishes together, then Alex threw a couple of extra logs on the campfire and we settled back down with more beer. Rachel and I snuggled close on the bench and Alex perched on the edge of one of the chairs.

We fell into silence for what stretched into minutes and when I looked at Alex, I found he was staring so intently at the flames, that I began to think he’d changed his mind about sharing with us whatever it was he had so perfectly set the scene to say. But then, he struck up, making me jump.

‘Okay,’ he said loudly, as he sat back and gulped down the last of his beer. He took a breath before carrying on. ‘I can’t believe

I'm about to do this,' he said, shaking his head. 'But then, I still can't really believe that I'm here.'

Rachel and I exchanged a look and I wondered if the depth of concern showing on her face was also etched across mine.

'I always said that if I ended up here with other people,' Alex carried on, 'rather than on my own, then I would explain the real reason behind my *Hope Falls* journey, because it's so much more complicated than just being a fan of the book.'

'I think we established in the emails we exchanged that you're actually a superfan,' I reminded him, trying to ease some of the tension I could see building up in his shoulders.

He smiled at that, but didn't visibly relax.

'And you don't owe either of us any kind of explanation, Alex,' Rachel said kindly. 'Does he, Em?'

'No,' I said. 'Of course not. Whatever the reason behind your being here is completely your business. No one else's.'

That said, I was eager to know what had prompted his desire to stay and what had caused Catriona's discomfiture in the pub. It was clearly more than a firm fondness for the book and a desire to walk and sleep where the film was set.

'Well,' he said, thankfully not put off by mine and Rach's suggestion that he could keep it all to himself, 'I'm going to tell you. I need to, to be honest, although I'm doing it sooner than I expected to.'

'You're not doing it now because of our rocky start, are you?' I winced. 'Because if that's the case...'

'It's not that,' he said, holding up his hands.

'That's a relief,' I breathed.

'If anything, it's the opposite.' He carried on, 'I'm doing it now because we're over that and I feel comfortable with you both and

because, having spoken to Mum yesterday, she thought it would be good to get it off my chest.'

Knowing his mum had an opinion about whatever it was he was going to say made me feel rather guilty about being so privately but dreadfully keen to hear it.

'And,' he said, having closed his eyes for a moment, 'given the toll my first trip to the lake took on me, I know she's right. If I'm going to enjoy my time here, there's something you need to know because I can't possibly be my true self around you, if you don't.'

Rachel and I looked at one another again while he reached for the last of the beers and then handed them out. I couldn't have told you what she was thinking for all the patchwork commissions in the world and I daresay I looked every bit as confused as she did.

'Can you remember the first time you saw the film?' Alex asked, once everyone's bottle was open.

'Yes,' Rachel and I said in perfect synchronicity, which made us laugh.

That was a no-brainer. I knew we'd both spent our early teenage years repeatedly reading the book, so the arrival of the film was more eagerly anticipated than, well, anything.

'Well, I can't,' Alex shrugged and Rachel and I raised our eyebrows.

'I'm not sure that's something a superfan should admit to,' Rachel advised him.

'But I have a good reason,' he said, defending his admission.

'Go on,' I encouraged.

'I can't remember the first time, because once it came out on DVD it was *constantly* playing on a loop in our house.' That struck a chord. 'My older sister, Gracie' – at the mention of her name, he stopped to take a swig of beer – 'would literally finish

watching it, either in the sitting room or in her bedroom and then immediately start it again, or pick up the book.'

'That sounds right.' Rachel beamed, clinking her bottle against mine in solidarity. 'Holidays, weekends, after college, even before college,' she reeled off. 'Yes?'

'You got it,' Alex agreed.

I already liked the sound of Gracie.

'I felt like I'd seen all of the film in snatches, practically absorbed it by osmosis, but one day,' he reminisced, 'Gracie press-ganged me into sitting with her and watching the whole thing properly. From the opening scene to the closing credits.'

'And?' Rachel demanded, wide-eyed.

'And I was hooked of course.' Alex smiled. 'But I wasn't going to let Gracie know that. There was no way I was going to let her know she'd won. We were siblings after all. Competitive ones.'

I had cousins with a similar competitive streak and it used to drive me nuts. Neither of them was willing to come second in even the simplest of competitions and many family Christmas board game sessions had ended in a meltdown as a result.

'But,' Alex continued, 'she knew anyway. Within days of watching the film together she'd ordered me a copy of the book and even when we were apart, we'd spend hours on the phone reading passages aloud to each other or critiquing the film as we watched it in tandem, the miles between us not mattering at all.'

He blushed as he told us, clearly aware that it was an unusual thing for siblings to do.

'You're obviously close.' I smiled, to let him know I understood. The book had forged an even stronger link between me and Grandad and I knew the same could be said of Rachel and her nan, too. 'What a wonderful thing to bond over.'

‘So close.’ Alex nodded and then I realised Rachel wasn’t smiling like I was. What had I missed? ‘We made a pact that one day we would come here to Lakeside together. We had plans to do everything: see the locations, row on the lake, share a meal around the campfire, just like the three of us have done here tonight.’

My smile faltered and I felt a prickle of disquiet take its place.

‘Eventually we’d got it all booked.’ Alex swallowed, his voice losing some of its former strength. ‘We were packed, literally just a couple of weeks away from coming and then... we had to cancel.’

‘Why?’ I whispered, even though I didn’t think I wanted to know the answer.

‘Gracie was diagnosed with breast cancer,’ Alex choked. ‘And she needed immediate treatment.’

‘Oh, Alex,’ Rachel gasped beside me.

‘We made two more bookings to come here over the next three years,’ he carried on, the words sounding as though they were being ripped from him, ‘but we weren’t able to honour either of them. Each time Gracie had a setback and we had to let the trip go.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ I whispered, forcing the words out because the shock of what he was saying could have quite easily silenced me. ‘For you and for Gracie.’

Rachel didn’t say anything.

‘Before Gracie died,’ Alex then stoically said, confirming the outcome I had already guessed, ‘she made me promise that I would still come. She said that when I felt ready, I should come here and do all the things that we had planned to do together.’

I reached for Rachel’s hand and squeezed it. Had I known the circumstances as to why Alex had joined our party as opposed to coming with his own, I never would have reacted to his presence the way I did or stupidly sulked over who was sleeping where. No

wonder Catriona had coloured in the pub when she let slip that Alex had come to the cottage with more baggage than most.

‘To be honest,’ he further said, ‘I didn’t think I was ever going to be ready, but when Catriona emailed to say there was a short notice opportunity, I told myself I just had to go for it otherwise, I might never have made it here.’

‘I’m so pleased it was us, Alex,’ I said emotionally, thinking we were even more like the three thrown together characters in the book than I had initially realised. ‘I’m so pleased you were able to come here with us.’

‘I’m not sure your friend who couldn’t come would agree,’ he smiled ruefully, ‘but I appreciate that.’

‘She would,’ Rachel said kindly. ‘She would.’

‘What happened here at the lake that first day, Alex?’ I asked, knowing it was somehow connected to Gracie. ‘You were so sad after you’d come down here that first time.’

He looked at me, then away again. ‘Gracie also made me promise,’ he shudderingly said, ‘that when I did finally get here, I would scatter her ashes from the end of the jetty, out over the lake.’

I felt the tears I had so far managed to hold back start to fall as I imagined him standing alone looking into the deep, calm water and letting his sister go.

‘I hadn’t planned to do it so early in the trip,’ he swallowed, ‘but I realised that if I didn’t do it straightaway, I never would and she wouldn’t have forgiven me for that. Gracie always wanted to be here,’ he said, looking out over the lake. ‘And now, she is.’

‘And you’re here too,’ Rachel said thickly.

‘And the three of us are going to do your sister proud,’ I followed on. ‘We’re going to make this the most memorable visit to the cottage and Lakeside any group has ever had.’

Alex's gaze flicked to mine and he nodded. He looked absolutely forlorn, but there was a light in his eyes and an appreciation of our words. I hated myself for ruining the start of his stay and making him feel awkward, unwanted and out of place. He was already carrying the weight of intense grief when he arrived and I had made him feel even worse.

'I know what you're thinking, Emily,' he said, still looking at me. 'And it doesn't matter. We've made our peace now, haven't we? So, let's move forward from here on. Yes?'

'Yes,' I said simply. 'Yes.'

We were all quiet for a moment.

'So,' Alex finally said, with a smile I was grateful to see. 'Now you know why I was wearing a slightly too small hoodie when we watched the film.'

'It was Gracie's,' Rachel smiled back.

'Yep,' he nodded. 'You must have thought I was a total idiot, squeezing myself into it.'

'It wasn't that small,' I laughed, even though it had been a pretty tight fit.

'You wear that hoodie, and you sleep in that bed,' Alex said, counting on his fingers. 'They were just two of Gracie's stipulations. Thankfully it made sense for you two to share the twin room, so I didn't look too selfish bagsying the double, did I?'

Rachel squeezed my hand and I thanked every star in the cosmos that I hadn't gone to battle over that bedroom.

'You didn't look selfish at all,' I told him.

We sat by the lake, each of us lost in our own thoughts as it started to get dark and the fire burnt low, then Rachel and I each shared with Alex our own stories about how we'd been introduced to the book. I got teary again talking about Grandad and Rachel was the same when talking about her nanna.

‘To absent, but much-loved family,’ Alex smiled as he gave a toast before we carried everything back up to the cottage.

Once inside, Rachel and I sorted the dishes so he could go and call his parents. He’d promised that he’d let them know when he’d told us the tragic reason behind his coming to the cottage and as he set off in the near darkness along the path to the road, my heart broke for him and the sister he’d so dearly loved and tragically lost.

Chapter 11

It took me hours to get to sleep that night and I know Rachel couldn't nod off either because every time I turned over and thumped my pillows into a different shape, I could see she was staring at the ceiling with her eyes wide open.

Neither of us spoke, but it was obvious that we were both mulling over what Alex had revealed at the lake. Thoughts of Gracie's tragically early death pushed all thoughts of my potential new business idea or Rachel's announcement that she was seriously considering moving in with Jeremy, right out of my head.

Consequently, the early morning hollering which roused me after what had felt like no more than a handful of seconds of sleep was a shock to the system.

'Come on, you two!' Rachel shouted from somewhere in the cottage. 'It's time to get up and at 'em!'

She sounded absurdly chipper as I rolled over and pulled the duvet over my head. I could hear the rain drumming on the cottage roof, so why she thought it was necessary for any of us to be out of bed so early was beyond me.

'Come on!' she called again, her voice even louder because she'd flung open the bedroom door. 'I have coffee and warm pastries.'

I peeped out from under my cosy nest and discovered it was lighter than I had assumed it would be and therefore most likely later, and I knew Rachel wasn't lying about the coffee and pastries just to get me up – a ruse she'd tried once too often in the past –

because I could smell both and so, with a groan, I pushed back the warm duvet with my feet and swung my legs out of the bed.

‘Oh, for pity’s sake, look at the pair of you,’ Rachel sniggered as Alex and I appeared in our respective bedroom doorways at exactly the same moment.

He gave me a small wave and I nodded back, refusing to acknowledge how snuggly he looked as he tiredly rubbed his eyes.

‘Need I remind you,’ I said, my voice thick with sleep as I honed in on Rachel instead, ‘that we have been here just over a week?’

‘A week and a day, today,’ Alex yawned, confirming the fact.

‘And therefore, Rachel,’ I continued, ‘you should only now be coming out of your end of term coma. You should most definitely *not* be bouncing off the walls, bribing us with breakfast treats and looking wide awake, especially when I know for a fact that, like me, you barely slept a wink.’

Alex looked between us and I instantly regretted mentioning the lack of sleep.

‘Sorry,’ he mumbled. ‘That was my fault, wasn’t it? Do you think it would have been better if I had said something about Gracie in our emails? That way you could have processed it before we met. I’ve been thinking...’

‘Oh, be quiet, the pair of you,’ Rachel said in her trademark teacherly tone. ‘No more ifs, buts or maybes Alex, okay? In fact, don’t even answer that because I don’t want to hear another peep from either of you until you’ve eaten these pastries. They’re already on the cusp of turning soggy.’

I didn’t need telling twice and rushed over to the kitchen. Sitting side by side with Alex at the counter, Rachel plied the two of us with calories and caffeine until we were both looking and feeling more awake.

‘I like your hair like that.’ Alex smiled at me after he’d polished off his second croissant. ‘You should wear it like that more often.’

My hands flew to the nest on my head. My bed hair was legendary and whereas Alex’s own hair was attractively mussed up, I bet mine looked backcombed beyond redemption.

‘Leave it,’ said Rachel, batting my hand away. ‘It’s fine.’

Alex smirked and I stuck out my tongue, grabbing the last pain au chocolat before he had the chance.

‘Now then,’ Rachel said, coming to the heart of the matter once she considered us *compos mentis* enough to compute. ‘I don’t know about you two, but I can’t help thinking that the first few days here have been cathartic for all of us.’

I very nearly snorted pastry out of my nose when she said that. They’d certainly been intense, but cleansing? Purifying? I wasn’t so sure about that, not for me anyway. More like emotional and exhausting.

‘And,’ she carried on, as if she hadn’t noticed my reaction, ‘as a result, they’ve set us up for a thoroughly fabulous holiday.’

‘Really?’ Alex and I said in unison.

Without the benefit of a system full of beer, we both sounded doubtful and I felt annoyed with myself for feeling so absurdly lacklustre when I had waited so long to be sitting in this very spot. For years, I had put this adventure on a brightly polished pedestal and, as tired as I was and as unsettled about my feelings of attraction for Alex which were taking up far too much of my headspace, I knew that if I didn’t buck my ideas up, I was in danger of knocking the entire holiday even further off its perfect plinth.

‘Yes,’ Rachel firmly said and I could see her point even before she gave her explanation. ‘Really. We’ve got to know each other now and revealed our secrets early enough to be able to really focus

on the next five weeks without the preoccupation of worrying that we're going to blurt them out or not mention them at all.'

If only she knew.

'We have?' Alex frowned, looking between us.

'Yes,' Rachel said again. 'Let me bring you up to speed, Alex.'

'Okay,' he said, pouring himself more coffee.

He was going to be buzzing all day, especially if it carried on raining and we couldn't kick him out to burn off some energy.

'The day you were in Manchester,' Rachel began, 'I told Em that my boyfriend had asked me to move in with him and, thanks to her own bit of news, I know I might really be able to take him up on his offer now.'

'Congratulations,' Alex warmly smiled. 'That's wonderful.'

If only *he* knew!

'Thank you.' Rachel blushed and I swallowed down my reaction.

Talk of her moving in with Jeremy didn't sound any better second time around. In fact, it was beginning to sound like a *fait accompli*, which was even worse. My stomach twisted, not only because of the thought of that, but also because her words confirmed my fears for my business idea.

'So, Em,' said Rachel. 'Why don't you tell Alex your news and then we'll all be in the know about what's going on with each of us?'

I didn't want to have to discuss it, but in the spirit of the fresh start all three of us were supposed to be embracing I said the words out loud.

'I've been offered a new job,' I said, failing to inject any enthusiasm into my tone, not that I'd really put much effort into trying.

Alex looked at me and narrowed his eyes. 'So, you're not quite between jobs like you said then,' he frowned.

'I am,' I said, thinking back to our conversation the morning he'd been to the lake. My face flushed when I thought of what he had gone there to do. 'I've been offered another one but I haven't started it yet.'

'Another data analyst position?' he asked, wrinkling his nose and sounding as keen as I was.

'That's right,' I said lightly, glancing at Rachel. 'I'll be starting in September.'

'Isn't that wonderful?' said Rachel, clapping her hands.

'I guess.' Alex shrugged. 'But what would have been really wonderful was if you'd just told me you'd decided to—'

Given his glowing opinion of my patchwork skills, I knew exactly what he was going to say next and raised my voice to cut him off. 'And taking that job will mean Rachel won't have to worry if I'll be able to manage to pay the rent and keep the lights turned on,' I said meaningfully.

Understanding thankfully dawned in Alex's eyes as he looked from one of us to the other and the cogs whirled in his head as he realised that my taking the job would enable Rachel to do what she wanted.

'Oh, well, yes then,' he said, with a rather over-enthusiastic nod. 'That really is wonderful news. Congratulations to you, too.'

Rachel picked up the used mugs and plates and while she was distracted, I shook my head at Alex.

'You shouldn't be faffing about with graphs and statistics,' he said in a low voice. 'You should be focused on growing your patchwork business.'

Intuitive as well as attractive. He really had it all. Not that his intuition was going to be appreciated if it resulted in him putting

his foot in it.

‘I’m flattered you think so,’ I whispered back. ‘But this job will offer me some real security.’ I ignored the fact that I’d been made redundant from my last one. ‘And a regular income too. I’m going to need that when Rachel moves out.’

I felt a lump form in my throat as I realised I wasn’t just saying that to fob Alex off. It was the reality of the situation I now found myself in. The money I’d saved to support myself through the next year didn’t allow for Rachel’s missing contribution to the household budget and therefore, my plans to grow my patchwork business, as Alex had put it, really would have to go on hold.

Suddenly, I didn’t have to give myself time to think about what I was going to do because there was no choice. With my head planted firmly in the real world, I knew I had no alternative but to take the new job.

‘But you’re so talented, Em,’ said Alex, as Rachel walked to open the window in the sitting room and stepped further out of earshot as a result. ‘You could make your own sewing business work full-time. I know you could.’

‘Oh, Alex, you barely know me,’ I reminded him. ‘So, you can’t possibly know that. A week and a day, remember?’

‘That’s as maybe,’ he said, ‘but I know enough and I’ve seen your work. You really should think about setting up on your own.’

I shook my head.

‘I’m serious,’ he said and he certainly sounded it.

‘It’s just not feasible...’ I began.

‘I know you’re just saying that to try and help Rachel, and that’s admirable of you, but don’t waste any of the time you’ve got,’ he then urgently cut me off. ‘There’s precious little enough of it in a lifetime. Believe me. That much I do know. And yes,’ he said with a wry smile. ‘If playing the deceased sister card is what it

takes, then I'll bring Gracie's name out, whenever I need to, to make you see sense.'

My mouth opened and closed and he laughed.

'What?' he said challengingly, lifting his chin.

'You're mad,' I said, louder than I intended.

'Who's mad?' Rachel asked, picking that exact moment to come back over to the kitchen and bringing her beloved paperback copy of *Hope Falls* with her.

'According to Em,' Alex mischievously said, 'I am.'

'Don't you dare,' I said, my lips barely moving.

He had been clever enough to work out that my motives for keeping my patchwork as a hobby were for Rachel's benefit, but was he puckish enough to expose them? I hoped not.

'Why?' Rachel asked. 'What did you say?'

Alex looked at me and I silently pleaded with every atom of my being.

'I said a walk in the rain to the pub for a lunchtime pint would be worth it,' he blinked. 'But Em said it wouldn't be. She'd rather go in the car.'

I felt my shoulders drop and some of the tension which had been holding my spine rigid relax. It felt good to hear him call me Em. A little too good.

'Oh, Emily,' scolded Rachel, 'I won't tell Connor you said that. How about we go for a pint *and* some lunch? That'll justify a walk in the wet, won't it?'

'I suppose,' I said, slipping shakily off the stool. 'But I better see if I can do something with my hair first.'

'Good idea,' Alex winked, so I poked him in the ribs on my way by.

‘I reckon,’ said Alex as we turned the last bend in the road before we reached Lakeside, ‘that’s it’s rained every day since we arrived.’

I thought back over the last eight days. ‘I think you’re right,’ I agreed. ‘But if we’d wanted sun, we would have gone south rather than north west, right?’

‘We would,’ he said. ‘But we didn’t want sun, did we?’

‘No,’ I said, shaking out my umbrella and giving him a further soaking. ‘We wanted to embrace everything our book-based getaway had to offer!’

‘Hey!’ he protested, jumping out of reach. ‘Aren’t I wet enough?’

‘You are now!’ I laughed.

He carried on to the general store and Rachel and I ducked into the pub. She’d spent most of the walk lagging behind and glued to her phone as Jeremy had set a different time that day to touch base, but at least that meant she had missed what felt like a flirtatious shift in mine and Alex’s budding friendship. The last thing I needed was her radar picking up on the fact that I fancied the pants off him.

‘Everything all right?’ I nudged, when she didn’t even notice Siddy skipping around her feet in the pub doorway and looking for a fuss.

‘Yes,’ she said, sounding strained. ‘All good.’

We left our dripping coats hanging in the porch and headed further inside.

‘I wondered when I might see you two again.’ Connor beamed, his smile lighting the place up.

He’d got a fire burning in the inglenook and the wall lights were dimly glowing. Coupled with Connor’s cheerful greeting, it was a warm and cosy welcome after the wet walk. The pervading

smell of woodsmoke made the day feel more like autumn than high summer, but I didn't mind.

'Us three actually,' I told him. 'Alex will be along in a minute.'

'Even better.' He nodded. 'What can I get you, or do you want to wait for the third musketeer?'

'We'll wait,' said Rachel. 'But we'll grab a table if that's okay? We thought we'd stay for lunch.'

'Perfect,' said Connor. 'And I've got staff in today, so I might even join you as it's not too busy.'

For some reason, Rachel didn't look too sure about that but given that I'd asked him to make up the numbers with Alex, I wasn't about to object.

'Are you sure you're all right?' I frowned at Rachel as we slipped into one of the booths. 'You were full of the joys when you dragged Alex and I out of bed this morning.'

I'd taken the seat opposite her so I could easily see she didn't look anything like the sunny version of herself who had suggested we should eat out.

'I'm fine.' She smiled tightly. 'Might have a bit of a blister forming. I knew I should have spent longer breaking these new boots in.'

I was about to remind her that she'd been wearing them for weeks so that explanation didn't wash, when Alex stumbled through the door weighed down by not one, but two of Mrs Timpson's jute bags.

'She got me,' he said, staggering over and dripping all over Connor's flagged floor.

'What on earth have you got there?' I laughed, aware he'd only been gone a couple of minutes. 'I did try and warn you, didn't I?'

'She thought this might keep us amused if the rain keeps up,' he panted, pulling a thousand-piece jigsaw of a view of Lakeside

out of one of the bags.

‘There are jigsaws back at the cottage,’ I guffawed, laughing all the harder when he pulled out an ancient looking Ludo to go with it.

‘You must be Alex?’ said Connor as he wandered over with Siddy at his heels. ‘Or should I say Mrs T’s latest victim?’

‘Got it in one,’ Alex laughed. ‘And you’re Connor, right?’

‘I am,’ he said. ‘Do you want put that lot in the back room?’

‘That might not be a bad idea,’ he said, giving Connor one of the bags. ‘What can I get you two to drink?’ he asked Rachel and I.

We decided on bitter and the two men spent a while with their heads together at the bar while Connor poured our drinks. I could tell from the change of expression on the usually cheerful landlord’s face that Alex had most likely taken the plunge and filled him in on the details as to what had led him to Lakeside and the cottage.

‘Poor Alex,’ I sighed. ‘You can’t even begin to imagine what he’s been through, can you?’

‘No,’ said Rachel, following my gaze. ‘It must have been a hellish few years for him and his parents.’

He had told me, as we walked into the village, that Gracie had been gone almost two years now. If time really was a great healer, I would have hated to see how much he had suffered when she first died.

‘I’m so relieved I wound my neck in over the bedroom allocation,’ I said quietly, shifting along the seat as the two men came over, with Connor carrying the tray of drinks.

‘Yes,’ Rachel nodded. ‘Me too. Can you imagine how things might have played out if you hadn’t?’

I didn’t want to.

‘It would have been even worse,’ she added.

I ignored the reminder that I had got us off to an awkward start.

‘Are we going to order lunch?’ I asked, once the glasses had been distributed and Alex had taken the seat next to Rachel which put Connor next to me. ‘I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m famished. I reckon it must be all this extra fresh air I’m enjoying.’

‘That and the extra walks,’ Rachel smiled, reminding me that Alex had told her I had said I’d wanted to come out in the car, but he’d done it for a good reason. ‘I’m on my feet all day at work, but I’m never usually moving as much as I have been since I got here. My legs are aching today and we haven’t even had a decent hike yet.’

I couldn’t help thinking that she would cut down on at least half her daily steps if she didn’t now have to keep running up the road to find a phone signal, but I kept the uncharitable thought to myself knowing my silly muddle over the photo was the cause of it. She had told me she was sticking to messaging Jeremy once a day at his preordained time, but I was certain she’d been in touch with him more than that.

‘Talking of hikes,’ said Connor, as he beckoned over the guy serving behind the bar, ‘you should do the walk to Star Shine Falls tomorrow. The weather’s going to be perfect.’

‘What can I get you?’ the guy asked.

‘I’m going to have the goat’s cheese and warm beetroot salad,’ Connor smiled, ‘and if you three trust my judgement, you should too. The cheese comes from a farm just a couple of miles away and it is sublime and the crackers which complement it are made locally, too.’

With a recommendation like that we could hardly refuse.

‘So, I’d be up for that hike tomorrow,’ said Alex as the guy went to put our lunch order in at the kitchen. ‘What about you three?’

‘I can’t, I’m afraid,’ said Connor. ‘Saturdays are too busy, but I went a couple of years ago, so don’t put it off on my account and as I say, the weather will be perfect. You have to see it in the sunshine...’

‘Or by moonlight if you’re a real book and film aficionado,’ I corrected. ‘The place looked magical in the film with the moonlight catching the water.’

We all knew that the real waterfall called Star Shine Falls had been picked to represent Hope Falls and it was one of the most beautiful of all the outdoor settings. That said, had we been sitting in the rowing boat in the middle of the lake and admiring the full moon as in one of the other scenes, I daresay I would have claimed that as the most picturesque too.

‘We’ll still go and see the waterfall on a clear night,’ said Rachel. ‘Even if we do go in the sunshine tomorrow.’

‘Sadly, you won’t,’ sighed Connor.

‘Why not?’ Rachel frowned.

‘Because over the last year or so,’ he told us, ‘there have been a few too many night-time call outs for the emergency services, so the site is locked at sunset now.’

‘Oh no,’ I wailed. ‘I didn’t know that. Are you sure?’

‘I am,’ he said. ‘And as the falls are located on private property the owner has gone to great lengths to make sure no one can get in at any point around the boundary once the gates are locked at the end of the day.’

‘That’s such a shame,’ I huffed as I consigned the image of myself, rather than Heather, leaning out and running my hands through the moonlit flow of water to the ‘dream unfulfilled’ category in my head.

I didn't have too long to pout over the reclassification though because our lunch was served and feeling so famished, I dived straight in. The cheese was extremely creamy with a delicious tang and that of course made it the perfect partner for the sweet beetroot and seed coated crackers.

'This is amazing, Connor.' Rachel smiled and I was relieved to see her looking more relaxed than when we'd arrived.

She had been so tense earlier that I was worried that Jeremy's reaction to the photograph of her and the lovely landlord was still rumbling on.

'I'm pleased you approve,' he said, addressing us all but with his gaze fixed mostly on my friend. 'It's my aunt who makes the cheese at her farm up the road, but I didn't want to mention that until I knew what you thought of it.'

'It's wonderful,' I said, adding my own praise to Rachel's.

'How long has your aunt been making it?' Alex asked, as he pushed his empty plate away. 'I wonder if any of the cast or crew got to sample it when they were filming here?'

'She's been making it for as long as I can remember,' Connor explained. 'I used to visit here as a lad, many years before I had the chance to move here, and she was producing it then. And yes, they did. There are loads of photos hanging in the farm shop from when a couple of the actors visited. The connection is very good for business.'

'That's amazing,' I smiled.

'What a wonderfully lucrative endorsement for her goats!' Rachel laughed.

'You're not wrong,' he agreed as he carried our dishes out to the kitchen and then came back with Sidy and more drinks.

'You'd better give her a stroke this time,' I said to Rachel. 'You missed her when we came in.'

Rachel didn't comment, but slid out of the seat and gave the Labrador the overdue fuss that she loved.

'Now,' said Connor, rubbing his hands together, 'who fancies taking part in a quiz?'

'What sort of quiz?' I frowned.

It was a truth universally acknowledged that my general knowledge (unlike my cache of literary quotes) was woefully lacking and I had no desire to be shown up in front of Rachel who was a well-rounded clever clogs, or Alex, who I happened to fancy. A dual humiliation would be too much.

'A *Hope Falls* quiz,' Connor said, rushing back to the bar and returning with three sheets.

'Oh, goody,' I said, jiggling in my seat and knowing I'd fare far better if the book and the film were the specialist subjects. 'Count me in.'

If I was an expert on anything it was *Hope Falls*, but then I remembered, so were the others seated at the table...

'Where did you get them from?' Alex asked Connor.

'I made the questions up,' he told him. 'And I have to warn you, there are some really tricky ones. This sheet is designed to separate the fans from the superfans.'

'I should be all right then,' Alex grinned, pulling one of the pages towards him.

'When do you use them?' Rachel asked as Connor slid a sheet over to her and another to me.

'Whenever there's a *Hope Falls* coach tour party booked.' He smiled. 'They go down an absolute storm.'

'A coach party!' Rachel laughed.

'You'd be amazed by the number of fans who come here,' he said.

‘Given the book and film’s enduring popularity,’ I observed, ‘I think it’s pretty amazing that the place hasn’t been turned into some sort of theme park.’

‘We’d never allow that,’ Connor said seriously as he handed out some pencils. ‘Now, you’ve got half an hour to answer as many of these as you can.’

He walked back to the bar and Alex said he’d sit at another table so he had ‘more room’.

‘You don’t need to worry about me cheating,’ I told him, as he wrapped an arm around his paper like a schoolkid during a test. ‘I know everything there is to know.’

It turned out I didn’t, and neither did Rachel. Alex got the highest score but not even he was able to answer everything and claim the coveted superfan status. Connor refused to give us the missing answers but let us keep the sheets so that when we re-read the book and watched the film again, we could try and spot what we’d missed and if we found it, report back.

‘I think we should watch the film tonight,’ I suggested as we collected Alex’s shopping and set off back to the cottage in the, thankfully much lighter, rain.

‘Me too,’ the others agreed.

‘I’m getting withdrawal symptoms,’ said Alex, who hadn’t gloated when the ticks had been counted because he was so disappointed with himself for not getting everything right. At least none of us had got anything wrong. That would have been mortifying. ‘I’m reading the book at night again,’ he told us, ‘but it’s been days since we watched the film.’

‘You’re right,’ said Rachel. ‘This has to be the longest any of us has gone without seeing it.’

‘But,’ I said, in a singsong voice, ‘that’s because we’re actually living the dream.’

‘So we are,’ Alex laughed, joining in when Rachel began singing the theme tune.

The three of us ended up singing all the way home.

Chapter 12

Having re-watched the film together, skimmed through the book and found some, but not all, of the missing answers, we checked Connor's weather prediction and then agreed on an early night. We knew that with it being the weekend, and a sunny one too, the queue to visit Star Shine Falls the next day would be a long one, so a punctual start was required.

'Here you go, Rach,' I said, tossing the pack of blister plasters on to her bed as we settled down for the night.

'I don't need these,' she said, picking them up and frowning at the packet.

'Earlier in the pub, you said you had a blister forming,' I reminded her. 'You said that's what accounted for...'

'Oh, yeah,' she said, heading into the en suite, but not before I noticed she'd turned bright red. 'You're right. Thanks. I'll make sure to put one on before we leave tomorrow.'

I watched her close the door and cursed Jeremy under my breath. I would have bet all of my savings on him being the only blister blighting my friend's dream getaway.

We took our old jalopy the next day, to give it a run rather than because it was the perfect vehicle for uphill terrain, and the three of us were feeling suitably smug as we rushed to the Star Shine Fall estate gates and found ourselves at the head of the queue. In fact, looking properly around, we were the queue.

‘Connor was right about the weather,’ said Rachel, squinting up at the unusually cloud-free sky.

‘This is going to be perfect,’ I squealed excitedly, giving her a squeeze.

‘And we’re going to be first in too, which is a bonus,’ said Alex, who looked as ecstatic as I felt. ‘We’re going straight to the falls and then the gift shop after. Yes?’

‘That’s the plan.’ I nodded and Rachel gave him a double thumbs up.

I’d only been able to look at the website for the dream location en route because there was no Wi-Fi at the cottage and oddly enough, Catriona hadn’t included any info about it in the welcome pack. All of the other places available to visit on the *Hope Falls* trail were listed so its absence was a surprise but everything looked good online. I wondered if someone might have taken the info and it hadn’t been replaced. I resolved to pick up a few leaflets in the shop later and add them to the folder for future visitors.

‘Here we go,’ said Rachel, standing back so the security guard who was carrying a huge bunch of keys, could open the gate.

‘You three are keen,’ he grinned. ‘In you come, before the rush.’

‘Is it usually this quiet?’ I asked, looking over my shoulder and finding there were still no other cars or coaches in the car park.

‘It is at this time of day,’ he informed me, standing aside to let us through.

I assumed he meant because we were so early.

‘How much?’ I heard Rachel gasp, as the woman in the kiosk told her how much entry cost. ‘Is that for all of us?’

‘No,’ said the woman, sounding embarrassed. ‘It’s twenty-five each.’

‘My treat,’ I jumped in, taken aback by the cost, but not wanting anything to mar the magical moment. Funnily enough,

the entry price hadn't been listed online either.

'No,' said Alex, stepping up. 'Let me.'

In the end, we each paid for our own ticket and with a slow trickle of people starting to arrive, we rushed over to the gate which led to the path which would take us up to the wonderful waterfall.

'Are you absolutely sure you want to go up now?' asked the security guard who hadn't yet unlocked it. 'You only get to go up once per ticket.'

I thought it was a rather odd question, but didn't waste further time considering it.

'Yes,' Alex urged him.

'All right,' the guy shrugged. 'It's a one way only walk. You follow the trail to the top, take your snaps and come back down the other side. And watch your step. It's a bit slippery in places after all the rain we've had.'

He wasn't wrong. We slid along some parts of the muddy track and slipped around others, but it didn't deter us. We'd set off at such a pace that, getting on for twenty minutes later, we were all panting for breath. Fortunately, the summit was in sight by then and the sound of water crashing over rock spurred us on.

With the last corner ahead of us and no one behind, we took a moment to let our heart rates settle, knowing that a dream fulfilled was just a few short steps away. It was imperative that we were all at our physical best to take in the unique moment and I prepared myself to take a lasting mental snapshot of my first impression. I was so pleased Rachel had flagged the importance and significance of that the day we arrived at the cottage. I ducked between my two friends and took half a dozen smiling selfies in anticipation of the spectacle to come.

'Ready?' said Rachel, readjusting her sun hat.

‘Ready,’ Alex and I said together.

We let Alex go ahead, knowing the trip to see the falls had been on Gracie’s bucket list and therefore meant even more to him than it did us, then Rachel was next with me last. I took a deep breath, expecting to hear cheers and whoops ahead of me, but there was only the sound of the waterfall. I guessed the others had been stunned into awed silence.

I let my breath slowly release and stepped around the corner to join them. The viewing platform was narrower than I would have expected and it was a bit of a squeeze for three so I had to watch where I put my feet. Once we’d settled into the space, none of us spoke for quite a while.

‘I can’t believe it,’ Alex finally said, bending so far over the barrier that Rachel instinctively reached for the straps of his rucksack to stop him toppling over.

‘This can’t really be it, can it?’ I croaked, also shifting my position to get a better view. ‘We can’t have just parted with seventy-five quid for this.’

‘Is this how it looked on the website?’ Rachel asked.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Nothing like. But,’ I added, pointing out what looked like a path on the hill opposite the falls and which was directly above where the crashing water pooled, ‘I reckon the promotion photos used online were taken from over there.’

The inadequate platform we were standing on only offered a side-on view of the torrent and a very narrow one at that. Standing at the side of the cascading water, rather than face on, completely altered the perspective and there was nothing recognisable from the scene in the film at all. In all honesty, we could have been standing next to any waterfall in the world.

‘The sunlight isn’t even hitting it,’ Alex groaned. ‘There’s no sparkle.’

As one we looked up and realised that it would be quite a while before the sun would be in a high enough position to hit the water and make it magically shine as its name suggested.

‘No wonder no one was in a rush to get up here so early,’ Rachel sighed.

‘Not that anyone will see much whatever time they choose to come up,’ I huffed, wondering how the scene where Heather and then Rose had run their fingers through the flowing water had been filmed.

Had that close-up even happened here?

‘That security guy must have known,’ said Alex, sounding cross. ‘Why didn’t he give us a heads up?’

‘Probably wanted to stagger the stream of visitors,’ I charitably said. ‘Either that or not fall foul of his employer by putting people off and to be fair,’ I remembered, ‘he did ask if we were sure we wanted to come up now. This must have been why.’

I had noticed the gift shop and courtyard area in front of it was teeming with merchandise, so knew the estate were keen to cash in on what should have been a stunning setting. I daresay staff putting visitors off wouldn’t have gone down well at all.

‘So much for Connor’s reaction to your comment about not turning the area into a theme park,’ said Rachel, sounding bitter. I guessed she’d clocked the merch too. ‘He should have warned us about this place rather than recommended it.’

‘But didn’t he say,’ Alex pointed out, ‘that he’d visited here a couple of years ago? He must have had a very different experience to ours to suggest it.’

‘Yes,’ I said, clicking my fingers. ‘And now I think about it, he did say we’d want to see the falls in the sunshine, in lieu of the moon, didn’t he?’

‘Oh,’ said Rachel, sounding chastened. ‘In that case, I take it back. Sorry, Connor.’

‘You’re right,’ Alex sighed, agreeing with me. ‘He did say something about seeing it in the sun. That was why he suggested we came today.’

‘And in our rush to be first here to enjoy the so-called spectacle alone,’ I tutted, ‘we forgot that, didn’t we?’

‘We’d better give him an updated review of the place next time we see him,’ said Rachel. ‘If he’s suggesting people come here based on an experience he had before the changes, then he needs to be told what it’s like now, doesn’t he?’

‘Or come and see it for himself,’ I suggested. ‘Although I wouldn’t really want him to waste all that money just to tell his customers not to bother. To be honest, I’m surprised no one’s been back and told him it’s a sham.’

I wished I’d looked at some online reviews while we were en route, but I had been so sure that we were in for a treat, rather than a fleecing, I hadn’t bothered.

‘What a let-down,’ Alex said sadly. ‘Gracie would be devastated.’

That made it all even worse and we didn’t bother taking any further photos because there was nothing we wanted to remember. We walked dejectedly back down the hill and slipped even more because it was downhill all the way – mentally and physically – and harder to get a footing. We trudged along in near silence and I felt my frustration with the set-up bristle further when the path led us straight into the café and then through the tacky gift shop.

‘I might be gasping for a drink,’ said Rachel, shunning the packed shelves, ‘but I’m not falling for that old ploy.’

‘And my tummy’s rumbling,’ I put in. ‘But not for an amateurishly iced cookie.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Alex. ‘I’ve packed us a decent picnic so we can eat that and have a drink back at the car.’

‘How did you find it?’ asked the security guard when he spotted us stepping out of the shop and no doubt looking hot and bothered.

Given our glowering expressions, I was surprised he approached us let alone spoke.

‘It’s a total waste of money,’ Alex said forthrightly, making a few heads turn.

It was much busier than when we’d headed up the hill and I had the strongest urge to give the people poised to pay at the ticket kiosk a heads up about what they were really going to see versus what they imagined they were going to admire. Surely someone must have had a moan online? Or were other fans more easily pleased than we were?

‘You can’t see bugger all, can you?’ said the guard in a near whisper.

‘You could have told us that before we parted with so much money,’ Rachel scowled.

‘More than my job’s worth, my love,’ he sighed, looking fed up. ‘You used to view the falls from a path directly opposite them and it was magical.’ His face took on a dreamy expression I wouldn’t have thought it capable of and I realised he was referring to the path I’d spotted. ‘But the footfall took its toll,’ he further explained. ‘And rather than pay the bill to repair it, my boss – who quite recently inherited the estate – took the cheaper option and moved it. He reckons we can get twice as many visitors through the gate now.’

If the path we’d walked was considered safer, then the other one must have been treacherous.

‘And shaft the *Hope Falls* fanbase in the process,’ I grumbled. ‘He’s not even updated the photos on the website so you get a

proper idea of what you're actually parting with all that money to see. Or not see.' I scathingly added.

'Em,' said Rachel.

'Well, I'm right, aren't I?'

'That you are,' agreed the guard, looking around nervously. 'Not that you heard me say that if anyone asks. Given the enduring popularity of the book and the film, the new estate owner reckoned folk would still pay to come wherever the path led them and that's all he cares about.'

I felt relieved that no one else we'd encountered seemed to hold the same opinion when it came to making money out of fans, but wondered why none of them had intervened. Connor might not have known about the altered path, but someone in the vicinity must have heard a grumble from at least one disgruntled fan.

'If I were you,' the guard then quietly confided, 'I'd pass on the gift shop and head straight over to Archer's Force. That'll fulfil your waterfall fantasy. My other half makes me drive her there all the time.'

'Hey, Charlie!' someone shouted, making us all jump. 'Are you coming, or not?'

'Where's Archer's Force?' Alex asked.

'Google it,' said the guard, now identified as Charlie, as he backed away. 'It'll come up and it's totally worth the drive.'

Back in the car park, which by then was more than half full, we didn't waste time berating the Star Shine Falls experience any longer, even though I could tell all three of us were bitterly disappointed that our first trip further than the cottage, lake and pub had been a colossal, and expensive, let-down.

So much for running my fingers through the icy falls and in the magical moment imagining myself as Heather. I hadn't even properly seen the falls, let alone got close enough to touch them.

‘I thought we agreed to turn notifications off,’ Rachel tutted from the driver’s seat when my phone pinged with an incoming message as we sat in the car and considered the rest of our day while Alex did battle with the dodgy catch and fetched the picnic from the boot.

‘Sorry,’ I said, pulling the phone out of my pocket and feeling bad because I had moaned about her constant screen checking. ‘I thought I had.’

In truth, I hadn’t bothered turning mine off because I hadn’t been expecting any messages.

‘I’ll do it now,’ I told her.

‘You might as well check it first, now it’s gone off,’ she said generously as Alex climbed back in and handed her a wrapped packet of sandwiches.

‘Yes,’ he said slyly, when he spotted my phone in my hand as he passed me a packet too. ‘It might be another commission request and you wouldn’t want to miss out on that, would you?’

I didn’t answer him, but he was right.

‘It’s a message from Hugh,’ I said, unwrapping the cheese and chutney filled sandwich while waiting for the accompanying image to download.

At least my and Alex’s extravagant purchases from Mrs Timpson’s expensive deli range had been put to good use. The sarnie was delicious.

‘Who?’ Rachel frowned.

‘No,’ I quipped. ‘Hugh.’

‘Ha, ha,’ she said, rolling her eyes.

‘Hugh’s the guy who wanted the anniversary picture for his wife,’ I elaborated. ‘Oh, wow,’ I gasped as the image finally popped up. ‘Look at this.’

I held my phone up so we could all see the ecstatic expression which my work, and Hugh's thoughtful gesture in commissioning it, had prompted. The smile on his wife's face was, according to the message, even wider than it had been on their wedding day and two guests at their party had asked if I would also consider making something for them. One was for a milestone birthday and the other to commemorate a christening.

'Crikey, Em,' said Rachel, sounding properly pleased. 'That's phenomenal. Congratulations!'

'Thank you,' I said, trying to take it in. 'I wasn't expecting that.'

'Well, maybe you should have been,' Alex said astutely. 'We've both already told you how exquisite we thought that piece of work was and there's no better form of advertising than word of mouth. You only have to look at that woman's face to see the impact your picture had.'

'As you liked the picture so much, you should see the clothes Em makes,' Rachel kindly told him. 'They're exquisite too and every bit as bespoke as the pictures. That's where I reckon the real money is, Em. You could make a fortune from those clothes.'

'Steady on, Rachel,' Alex stopped her. 'At this rate you'll be putting ideas in her head and she'll be thinking about turning down that new job and starting her own business.'

'Yes,' she said, biting her lip as a frown knitted her brows. 'You're right, Alex. Sorry, Em. I guess with me thinking about moving out, that's the last thing you should be considering, isn't it? That would be far too risky, in the current economic climate and with the cost of living still soaring.'

Alex didn't look at all happy that his tongue-in-cheek comment had backfired and her words meant I couldn't even take comfort in the fact that she had said she was still thinking about moving out rather than having completely decided to do it.

‘It is,’ I agreed, acknowledging that she was right and Alex was wrong.

‘Well,’ Alex doggedly carried on, as I sent a message thanking Hugh and saying that I’d be in touch for further details after my holiday. ‘If you keep pulling the commissions in at this rate, you won’t have to worry about the cost of living, will you? There’ll be more than enough work for you to make ends meet.’

I ignored him, but could tell Rachel had taken on what he had said.

‘So,’ I quickly asked. ‘As I’m on my phone, shall I have a quick search for this Archer’s Force place, the guard suggested?’

‘No need,’ said Alex, holding up his own phone. ‘I’ve found it and it looks spectacular.’

‘More spectacular than Star Shine Falls?’ Rachel mockingly asked.

‘Anything would be more spectacular than Star Shine Falls.’ Alex frowned.

‘You’re not wrong,’ she sighed. ‘What a gargantuan let-down that was.’

‘Let’s not dwell on it,’ I said stoically, in an effort to save the day. ‘How far is it to this Archer’s Force, Alex?’

‘About forty minutes by car,’ he said. ‘And there looks to be some pretty spectacular scenery on the way. What do you think?’

I was keen, but Rachel was a bit dubious. ‘Let me have a look at it first,’ she said, trying to catch a glimpse of the images on Alex’s phone.

‘No way,’ he said, turning it away. ‘I’ve read some reviews and double-checked the views, so I’ll vouch for it. If we do decide to go, I want your first sighting to be a surprise. A good one,’ he hastily added before Rachel said she’d already had one too many.

‘All right,’ she finally agreed. ‘We’ll go, but only if you drive. I’m not used to these narrow roads and twists and turns.’

‘What makes you think I am?’ Alex asked, sounding apprehensive.

Alex was right about the scenery. The closer we got to Archer’s Force, the more rugged and dramatic it became and I found myself breathing in every time we passed another vehicle or turned a corner and found the road blocked with sheep. I was amused to remember that the tight roads hadn’t bothered me at all when I stayed with Nanna and Grandad and I guessed the whole world had looked different to me then.

‘Did you know your knuckles could go that white, Alex?’ I asked, after a particularly close encounter with a woman in an off-road vehicle who refused to put so much as the edge of a tyre on the verge.

‘I didn’t,’ he said, eyeing the drystone walls which lined the way. ‘And I didn’t know I could hold my breath for so long either.’

‘Are you sure it’s around here?’ Rachel asked, after we’d squeezed along another mile or so. ‘There aren’t any signposts and it doesn’t exactly look like the usual tourist hotspot, does it?’

Alex pulled over and checked his phone. ‘I’m pretty certain we’re heading in the right direction,’ he told us as the signal flickered in and out. ‘It’s not far now and I promise it’ll be worth it.’

The only indication that there was anything magical or otherwise carved out of the hillside was a wonky wooden sign that we would have missed had we not had two pairs of eyes trained solely on looking out for it.

‘There!’ I shouted from the back, making Rachel jump and Alex stop sharply. ‘You’ll need to back up a few yards, but I definitely saw it.’

He carefully manoeuvred the car back and there was the sign.

‘I can’t believe I missed that.’ Rachel blushed, from her vantage point in the front.

‘No harm done,’ said Alex, sounding relieved we’d finally arrived. ‘We’re here now.’

The car didn’t sound all that happy about the steep ascent and when we pulled in to the car park, there were only two other cars.

‘I hope this isn’t a wild goose chase,’ Alex cringed, suddenly full of doubt.

‘Well,’ I said, opening the back door and jumping out. ‘You’re the one who has seen the photos and said you’d vouch for it, so this is all on you, my friend.’

‘Don’t wind him up,’ said Rachel. ‘Not when he’s gone through all of that dramatic driving to get us here!’

We put on our jackets and rucksacks – complete with the obligatory Kendal mint cake which we all admitted we didn’t like but felt was a necessary component to any Lakeland trek – and set off again.

‘Afternoon!’ said a smiling couple who were coming back down the hill and most likely accounted for one of the other cars in the car park.

‘Is it worth the climb?’ I asked them, already starting to feel out of breath.

‘I should say so,’ grinned the woman. ‘Keep going. You’re almost there.’

We reached the summit and descended into woodland neither Rachel or I expected to find on the other side and Alex said he only knew it was there because he’d seen it online. The firs quickly gave way to more native trees, and a fern lined path – not all that dissimilar to the one back at the cottage – took us the rest of the

way. There was no sign of anyone else and it felt as if we'd stepped into another time.

'I don't know what to say.' I swallowed, mesmerised by the sheer perfection of the view in front of me as we rounded the final corner to the falls.

'Me neither,' said Rachel, reaching for my hand.

'It's a twenty metre drop into that pool, according to the internet,' said Alex, coming to stand next to me.

The water looked crystal clear and the sound of it pouring over the precipice above was intense and yet the water in the vast pool below was calm and still. There were verdant overhanging branches and moss and lichen of every shade which contrasted beautifully with the granite rocks and boulders they grew on.

'Oh, my goodness,' Rachel gasped as the sun broke through the cloud and overhanging canopy and hit the water as it plunged down to the pool.

'This,' I said, unable to stop a tear escaping as the water sparkled in the rays, 'is Star Shine Falls.'

'No, it's not.' Rachel sniffed. 'It's Archer's Force.'

We both giggled.

'You know what I mean.' I nudged her.

'It's perfect,' said Alex, sounding every bit as moved as we were. 'This is what Star Shine Falls should have looked like, isn't it?'

'It is,' I agreed, reaching for his hand too and squeezing it without overthinking whether or not I should.

He gripped mine tightly and the three of us stood for ages just looking around and taking it in. Mindful again of Rachel's comments about first impressions I wanted to take as many mental pictures as possible before we started to explore.

‘Keep your eyes peeled for any movement in the trees,’ said Alex who, compared to me and Rachel, was quite the expert on the place. ‘Apparently there are red squirrels in the area.’

Sadly, we didn’t get to see my childhood favourite, Squirrel Nutkin or Old Brown, but the fact that there wasn’t another person in the vicinity was a bonus. Our time at the Force felt all the more magical because we had the entire place to ourselves.

Time seemed to stand still as we climbed to the top and looked down, then climbed back down and looked up. There were a million and one photo opportunities and I snapped loads on my phone, including lots of Rachel and Alex when they weren’t looking.

It was late in the afternoon before we settled on a rock to eat a few chunks of the mint cake and drain the dregs of our drinks to give us enough energy for the hike back to the car.

‘I don’t want to go,’ I admitted. ‘I’m so pleased you insisted we came, Alex, and that you didn’t let us see the photos before we arrived.’

‘It’s quite something, isn’t it?’ he said wistfully. ‘Gracie would have hated this morning but she would have loved this every bit as much as we have.’

‘I think we would have got along with Gracie very well, don’t you, Em?’ Rachel smiled.

‘Without a doubt,’ I agreed.

Alex nodded.

‘And I’m so grateful to Charlie the guard for suggesting this place.’ I further said.

‘Yes,’ said Rachel. ‘He totally saved our day.’

‘And our humour,’ Alex added.

The walk back to the car seemed to take far less time than the scramble up to Archer’s Force and I didn’t think it was entirely

due to the downhill terrain. My head was full of distracting thoughts of what I'd seen and how my memories were going to inspire me for a long time to come.

Rachel opted to sit in the back for the return journey and was asleep almost before Alex had pulled out of the car park.

'What a wonderful day,' I sighed, twisting around for one last look at the hill which held such a precious secret just over its summit. 'If you'd told me after the travesty of this morning that I'd end the day feeling like this, I never would have believed you.'

'I know what you mean,' Alex agreed, as I turned back and made myself comfortable in the seat next to him again.

'But then,' I thoughtfully added, 'perhaps I shouldn't be all that surprised.'

'Why's that?' he asked, laughing at my sudden and contradictory change of heart.

'Because if this holiday is teaching me anything, it's that shocks and unexpected twists and turns can have the loveliest outcomes.'

'Oh.' He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing as his eyes fixed more intently on the road ahead. 'Is that right?'

'Yes,' I dreamily sighed. 'It is.'

Chapter 13

The next day, after taking care of a few domestic chores, I was still feeling inspired by our wonderful trip to Archer's Force and as a result, set about designing a calf-length full skirt which would incorporate the wonderful green cotton fabrics I had accumulated and thankfully decided to bring with me in one of my many bags of material bundles.

The sparkling water as it rushed over the falls had been beautiful, but it was the lush greenery I most wanted to emulate as I mulled over how I could make the patchwork pieces look like unfurling fern fronds, starting at the hem and appearing to grow upwards, just as they did in the natural world. I had plain as well as patterned scraps and a few ends of rolls to work with and could see the finished garment clearly in my mind's eye, so hopefully I would be able to turn the idea into reality.

'Are you going to want to measure me?' Rachel asked as she pulled the bed linen out of the dryer and I began to match up the different fabrics to create my vision.

'Not today,' I told her. 'But it would be a great help if you could measure me.'

She dropped the sheet she was folding back into the basket. 'You're actually making something for yourself?' she gasped.

'I am,' I confirmed.

'Well, I never!' She beamed. 'About time.'

She was always telling me I should be wearing my own designs but the truth was, having started making the clothes and putting

the memory pictures together while working full-time, I hadn't had the opportunity. Not that I really minded. I knew how lucky I was to have people waiting for me to make something for them and the clothing orders had quite quickly racked up after a work colleague wore a dress to the office that I had creatively patched up after she'd torn it. Thinking back, that had been what had prompted the move into garments. It had been my very own Kintsugi moment.

'What are you going to make?' Rachel asked, leaning over the counter for a closer look.

'A skirt,' I told her. 'Inspired by our trip yesterday. I'm going to make it a full one with the patched sections resembling those wonderful fern fronds I took so many photos of.'

'How wonderful,' she beamed. 'You're going to have to tell me how to do the measuring though, because I've only ever been on the receiving end of the tape measure...'

Our conversation was interrupted by Alex who came bursting out of his bedroom looking flustered.

'Whatever's up with you?' Rachel frowned, picking the sheet up again.

'I'm late,' he said, pulling on his jacket.

'Where are you off to in such a rush?' I asked, not that it was any of my business.

'I'm heading to The Drover's,' he puffed. 'Connor invited me for lunch when we were there on Friday and I said yes. I thought I could fill him in on the state of the Star Shine Falls attraction, or lack of, while I'm there too.'

'Good idea.' I nodded. 'He really needs to stop recommending that place to his customers or he might find his own business ends up suffering as a result.'

I had briefly wondered if we'd had too high expectations about the attraction, but we hadn't. It really was a commercial rip-off.

'Quite,' said Alex, almost upsetting a chair as he flew about.

'You need to slow down,' Rachel said soothingly. 'I'm sure Connor won't mind if you're not there on the dot. He's a pretty chilled guy. He's not going to hold a few minutes' tardiness against you.'

'I know,' said Alex, still rushing around like a tornado in human form. 'But it's rude, isn't it? Not being on time when you've been given a time.'

He didn't give us time to respond.

'Also, I had another look at the list Gracie left me relating to this trip last night and there's something else I want to book us on. I thought I could take advantage of Connor's Wi-Fi to find it. Are you two up for another adventure tomorrow if I can find what I want at such short notice?'

He stopped for a whole three seconds to take in our reaction to his suggestion.

'If it's as wonderful as the adventure we ended up having yesterday, then count me in,' I was quick to say, lest I held him up.

'And me,' Rachel keenly added. 'The forecast looks pretty good, so...'

'Oh, you won't need to worry about the weather,' Alex waved her comment away, which rather tweaked my curiosity. 'I'll see you both later.'

He banged out the door and Rachel and I let out a breath in the silence that followed.

'Goodness,' she laughed. 'That was intense. What do you think he meant about the weather?'

'Must be something we can do inside,' I shrugged, thinking that was the most obvious explanation. 'Now,' I added. 'Let's get

measuring.'

I was standing on a chair – to save Rachel having to kneel down – in my slightly too short T-shirt and a pair of cotton knickers when Alex came bursting back into the cottage.

'Keys!' he shouted. 'I got all the way to the car and realised I hadn't got...'

His words trailed off as I yelped and awkwardly jumped down, but not before he'd seen me. I ineffectively covered myself with the cushion Rachel had grabbed off the sofa and hurled in my direction. I don't know who was reddest, him or me.

'Sorry,' he mumbled, bumping into the table and wincing from the resultant pain. 'I didn't realise you'd be...'

'Half-dressed,' Rachel unhelpfully giggled and I threw her a thin-lipped look. 'Almost naked,' she infuriatingly carried on. 'Practically in the raw.'

'Rachel was just...' I began to gabble.

'Found them!' he yelled, jangling the keys to prove the point before heading back out with one hand practically covering the side of his face closest to where I was cringing and curling in on myself.

Rachel started to properly laugh and fell onto the sofa in a happy heap as I swatted her with the cushion and Alex disappeared back up the path. That time, hopefully for good.

'Damn,' I swore, feeling mortified as I watched him practically pelt away. 'Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn.'

Rachel wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater and sat back up.

'You're only cussing because he saw you in your Sunday pants,' she teased, holding her stomach.

‘I’m bloody not,’ I said, biting my lip to stop my mouth curling into a smile.

It wasn’t funny. It was crushing. Though she was right about the undies scenario. They were definitely not my best.

‘Come on,’ I said, throwing her the tape measure. ‘Let’s get this done quickly in case he comes back for something else.’

‘Like a second look, you mean,’ she giggled again, twirling the tape around.

‘Don’t be so stupid,’ I said, suddenly unable to hold the laughter back. ‘I mean it,’ I tried to sternly say. ‘Come on.’

It was so late by the time Alex came back to the cottage that I had begun to wonder if he was going to come back at all. I hadn’t dared comment about the time to Rachel for fear of being on the receiving end of further teasing, but I was getting a bit concerned when evening had almost turned to night and there was still no sign of him.

‘Can I come in?’ he called when he eventually returned, having made a rousing rumpus on the veranda before peeping around the door with his eyes tightly closed. ‘Are you decent, Em? Have I stayed away long enough?’

I rolled my eyes, which he, of course, couldn’t see, and which turned Rachel’s laugh into more of a snort. I couldn’t believe he was going to brazen the moment out by making me the butt of the joke. I would have been far happier if he’d just ignored it.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘You can come in and yes, I am decent.’

‘Sure?’

‘Oh, for pity’s sake,’ I said, wishing he’d just come in, ‘don’t set Rachel off again. She’s only stopped going on about it in the last five minutes.’

He came in, sniggering, and hung his jacket by the door.

‘I thought you might fancy these,’ he said, putting an insulated bag down on the kitchen counter. ‘Assuming it’s not too late to eat. I didn’t expect to stay so long, but Connor’s a good bloke to talk to.’

I wondered if he’d spent more time talking to him about Gracie.

‘What are these?’ Rachel asked, eyeing the bag.

‘Two portions of sticky toffee pudding that Connor had left over,’ Alex temptingly revealed. ‘They’re cold, but the custard is still warm.’

‘Oh yum,’ said Rachel, diving in. ‘My favourite. Thank you.’

I grabbed us a couple of spoons and, moving to sit on the sofa, gratefully tucked in. I was appreciative because not only was the sweet treat absolutely delicious, eating it was also a distraction from wondering if Alex was thinking about me standing in front of him in my pants. Well, it should have been a distraction. It was a great way to make up for embarrassing me again, anyway.

‘So,’ said Rachel, as she speedily polished off her serving of the scrumptious pudding, ‘How did Connor take the news about the not quite star attraction?’

I smiled at the almost pun.

‘He was gutted,’ Alex told us and I wasn’t surprised. ‘He wanted to compensate us for the amount we’d spent to get in, but I wouldn’t let him.’

‘Did you suggest he recommended Archer’s Force from now on instead?’ I asked.

Alex shook his head. ‘I almost did,’ he said, ‘and then I felt a bit guilty that I hadn’t, but I’d hate the thought of being potentially responsible for making it too popular. Some of its appeal was wrapped up in its wonderful solitude, wasn’t it?’

‘It was,’ Rachel agreed.

‘Well, I wouldn’t worry,’ I said, scraping out the last bits of sponge from the pot. ‘Connor’s a local. I’m sure he already knows about the place so he can decide whether or not to suggest it to *Hope Falls* fans, can’t he?’

‘That’s true,’ said Alex, sounding happier.

‘And how did you get on booking tomorrow’s adventure?’ Rachel asked him.

‘Very well,’ he said, unfolding three sheets of paper which had been in his jeans back pocket. ‘We’re all set. It’ll be another early start, but totally worth it.’

I took one of the sheets and handed the other to Rachel. I didn’t look at mine, but noticed the colour draining from Rachel’s face as she read hers. What on earth had he booked for us to do?

‘Everything all right?’ Alex asked, also aware of her peaky pallor.

‘No,’ she said shakily. ‘I can’t do this, Alex. I’m sorry, but this isn’t for me.’

I abandoned the last mouthful of my pudding and perused the sheet in front of me.

‘What even is ghyll scrambling?’ I frowned, skimming the details, but still not getting the gist because there was no explanation.

‘Throwing yourself off waterfalls.’ Rachel shuddered. ‘Sliding down fast flowing rocky river paths, that kind of adrenaline junkie stuff.’

‘What?’ I frowned, looking at the paper again. ‘You’re kidding.’ She shook her head. ‘You’re winding me up, right?’

‘I’m not,’ she said, her pastiness suggesting she wasn’t fooling around. ‘I’m all for swimming in the lake, should it miraculously heat up twenty degrees in the next few weeks, but this stuff, no way. Sorry, Alex, but I had a near-death experience on one of these

so-called adventures during a team-building exercise with some staff from my school and I swore then, never again.'

'Near death?' Alex gasped.

'It was not near death,' I cut in, halting the drama. 'It was a momentary scare.'

'Which had a lasting impact,' she said, handing Alex back the booking sheet. 'If you're so blasé about it, Emily, you can do it.'

I didn't want to do it either. No way was I going to go bowling down waterfalls into the freezing pools below.

'It's perfectly safe,' Alex said to me, picking up on my hesitation.

The fact that he wasn't including Rachel in the pep talk told me he knew he'd lost her and I was his last hope for a wild water companion.

'It's more of a splash and a slide than a full body immersion,' he not so temptingly carried on. 'Unless you want a full body immersion.' I vehemently shook my head. 'Kids do it,' he said, as if that would be the clincher. 'The place I've booked us in with even allows seven-year-olds to take part.'

Maybe he could borrow a willing child to accompany him because I wasn't going to do it. Full body, with armbands or otherwise.

'Gracie loved this sort of thing,' he carried on, letting the implication hang in the air.

'Are you pulling the—'

'No,' he said, cutting me off. 'I'm not. Absolutely not. I'd just rather not do it alone but if I have to, I will.'

There was no denying the disappointment in his tone and I could see from the bill that he'd already shelled out a hefty amount, even though it was listed as a last-minute bargain. Given the money we'd wasted at Star Shine Falls the day before, he would

have been better off emptying his wallet into an obliging well and making a few wishes. Then I remembered why he was doing the wet and wild adventure in the first place along with what he'd most likely wish for if he did find a well.

'No wonder you said the weather isn't going to matter,' I tutted. 'I'm going to get soaked, aren't I?'

'You'll do it?' he shouted, jumping up.

'You're not serious,' Rachel gasped.

'I can hardly let him do it on his own, can I?' I grimaced.

'I would,' she said, with no hint of remorse.

'Well, I can't,' I said. 'How bad can it be?'

Alex pulled me to my feet and into a hug. The feel of his firm body pressed close to mine sent a shockwave of pleasure coursing through me and I reluctantly eased myself away.

'Really bad,' Rachel warned me. 'It could be really, really bad.'

Around fourteen hours later, Rachel's prediction had come horribly true.

'You're going to have to let go!' yelled the instructor. 'You're holding everyone up!'

'I can't,' I screeched, hanging on to the slippery rocks either side of me as if my life depended on them. Which it quite possibly did.

'Just fold your arms over your chest and relax into it,' Alex yelled from below.

He and Connor, who had happily stepped in to take Rachel's place, were having a fine old time of it. They'd already thrown themselves into the icy water with abandon and high-fived each other when they resurfaced. I, on the other hand, was terrified that I wouldn't resurface. The massive helmet kept slipping down over

my forehead, my hands were scratched to hell from where I kept trying to cling on to the rocks and I was already thoroughly soaked, in spite of the fact that I hadn't gone for full immersion.

I looked up at the visitor centre where I could see Rachel watching out of the floor to ceiling window and nursing a mug of steaming coffee. She was dry, warm and completely safe. She gave me a thumbs up with her free hand and as I went to flip her the bird, my other hand lost its grip and I plunged down the rock face into the icy pool below where Connor hauled me to my feet and Alex whooped and cheered.

'Come on,' he said, dragging me along. 'It's a longer drop next.'

I would love to say I had some sort of life-changing epiphany halfway through the experience. If I could have had my way, I would have been transformed from terrified, squealing woman into a rampaging water warrior, complete with a powerful, guttural roar.

But the only sounds I made were terrified shrieks and my throat was soon so hoarse, that I gave up on even making those. I had always considered myself reasonably fit, but on the back of the double hike the day before, my legs shook like not quite set jelly and if at any point I did have an adrenaline rush, it must have been a really, really small one.

'That's it,' shouted Connor. 'You're getting the hang of it.'

I wasn't getting the hang of anything. I was just flinging myself down the last few drops to get it over with as quickly as possible.

'Go you!' Connor called, as I spluttered my way to the surface unaided.

'Go you,' I muttered back, when I had enough breath.

Had I known Alex had arranged to meet him at the centre after Rachel had backed out, I would have paid Alex for my share of the so-called fun and could have been enjoying coffee with my so-called friend, but I'd already been suited up and lashed to a rope

for the first descent by the time Connor arrived and there was no going back then.

‘This is the last one!’ yelled another fresh-faced instructor. ‘And it’s a biggie. Brace yourselves, guys!’

I submitted to my fate and threw myself off the edge before the other two had even moved. The drop was far further than I expected and I did indeed manage complete immersion. It was some minutes before I had pulled in enough oxygen to speak, but that was fine because if what I was thinking had actually come out of my mouth, I don’t think Alex, Connor or anyone else present would have had a very high opinion of me.

‘Oh my god!’ cried Rachel, when I finally emerged from the changing rooms, already aching all over. ‘How the hell did you do that?’

Neither Alex or Connor were in sight so I didn’t feel like I had to pretend I’d had the time of my life as she helped my limp shell of a body into a chair and did up my shirt buttons for me because my hands were shaking so much. I couldn’t decide if that was because I’d caught a pernicious chill or was still terrified. Time would tell, I supposed.

‘Here,’ said Rachel, ‘eat this. I bet your blood sugar has dropped like a stone.’

‘I dropped like a stone,’ I bleated as I crammed the chocolate and raspberry muffin into my mouth, barely chewing before I swallowed it down.

‘And drink this,’ she said, helping me bring the mug of hot chocolate to my lips without spilling too much of it.

‘You can laugh,’ I said tiredly as the last iota of energy upped and left before the sugar rush had a chance to hit. ‘I must have looked a total twit.’

‘I’m not laughing,’ said Rachel and she really wasn’t. ‘I honestly have no idea how you did that. I couldn’t have even made

it down the baby drop.'

'But you've had a near death experience at one of these things,' I sarcastically reminded her.

'Hardly,' she conceded. 'You were bloody brilliant.'

I hadn't felt bloody brilliant. I still didn't feel bloody brilliant but at least I knew ghyll scrambling was something I would never, ever have to do again.

'At least I got changed before Alex and Connor,' I weakly smiled, looking around.

'Sorry, my love,' said Rachel, pointing towards the adventure centre lobby. 'But you didn't. They came out ages ago.'

As if they knew we were talking about them they turned and gave us a cheery wave. I couldn't lift my hand to wave back. Not even one finger.

'You're changed,' Alex beamed, as they rushed over. 'Look what we've found,' he excitedly added, shoving a leaflet under my nose with the word canyoning in large font across the top. 'They've got vacancies for next week, if you fancy it.'

I pressed my lips together and reached out to Rachel who helped me to my feet.

'Em?' Connor called after me as I shuffled away.

'She said she'll think about it,' said Rachel, keeping me moving. 'We'll meet you at the car.'

Chapter 14

Not surprisingly, I went out like a light that night and slept long into the following day. If there was any justice in the world, my (naïve) willingness to literally throw myself into the activity should have been rewarded with a warm glow, a heightened sense of well-being and the satisfaction of an act of kindness well done, but there was no reward, only a world of pain like I'd never experienced before.

'Rachel!' I screeched, a few seconds after I'd woken up. 'Rach!'

'Whatever's wrong?' she gasped, pounding through the cottage and into our room.

'I can't move,' I sobbed. 'I think I must have broken every bone in my body.'

Her shoulders dropped and she let out a long breath.

'What are you doing?' I protested. 'Why are you relaxing? Did you not hear what I just said? Call a doctor. I need help!'

She came and sat on the edge of the bed. Even just the slight movement of her sitting down caused me to wince.

'You haven't broken anything, you numpty,' she said with a sympathetic smile. 'Your muscles are just a bit stiff from the ghyll scrambling, that's all.'

'If you use the words *just a bit*, or *that's all* again,' I sobbed, 'I swear, I'll swing for you. I'm in agony here.'

'So, how are you going to muster the energy to do me such monumental harm with your little broken body?' she asked, a

mischievous smile lighting up her face and a twinkle sparkling in her eye.

‘Why are you not taking this seriously?’ I cried, because my voice was the only physical thing I had at my disposal with an iota of strength left in it. ‘It really hurts.’

I would have turned on the waterworks but held the tears back in fear that the effort might cause further pain.

‘I’m actually not surprised it hurts,’ she then said, reaching for my hand which slightly improved her previously appalling bedside manner. ‘I’ve watched the video this morning and I still can’t believe that you’re the person in that yellow suit with the slightly too big red helmet bobbing along the rapids.’

‘The kids’ helmets were too small,’ I sniffed, before her words sank in, ‘and the adults a tad too big.’ I wondered for a moment if I had an odd sized noggin. ‘But hang on,’ I then gasped, gingerly inching myself into a more upright position and worrying that the activity of the day before had somehow impaired my processing skills. ‘What video is this?’

Rachel looked to the door and lowered her voice.

‘Alex paid extra to have the whole thing recorded,’ she told me. ‘I knew you hadn’t taken that in when we were talking about it on the journey back from the activity centre.’

Not to be too melodramatic, but I was pretty certain I’d spent most of the journey home drifting in and out of consciousness and I had absolutely no recollection as to how I’d made it from the car, down the long path and into my bed at all.

‘Why would he do that?’ I groaned, horrified to think that there was actual recorded evidence of what I’d been through. ‘Why on earth would he think I’d want a memento of such a traumatic and humiliating experience?’

‘He didn’t do it for you,’ she said quietly. ‘He wants it so he can show his parents that he’d ticked something spectacular off

Gracie's list after the disappointment of Star Shine Falls.'

'Oh.' I swallowed, as I heard Alex come out of his room. 'Right. Of course.'

'And between you and me,' Rachel whispered, 'you don't look either traumatised or humiliated in that recording. You look like a total bad-ass.'

'You said you couldn't believe it was me.' I pouted.

'Only because I know you and it's the last sort of thing I would ever expect to see you doing,' she laughed. 'Not because you looked like a—'

She cut off whatever choice adjective she was going to end her sentence with as Alex knocked on the door.

'How's my ghyll scrambling companion feeling this morning?' he asked, looking around the frame. 'Afternoon actually,' he added, checking his watch.

'Marvellous,' I said, then continued, with an attempted smile for fear that I might have come across as sarcastic, 'Or I will be when I can move again.'

'Oh dear,' he grimaced.

'I'm pretty sure I'm pinned to this bed.'

'I'm feeling it a bit myself today,' he admitted. 'But another bath has helped.'

'I think it's going to take more than a bath to help me,' I joked, although I wasn't actually joking.

'But how about a hot bath filled with Epsom salts courtesy of Mrs Timpson?' he suggested.

'Mrs Timpson actually stocks Epsom salts?' I laughed, though the pain around my ribs soon put a stop to that.

'I can't believe you're even asking that, Em.' Alex grinned. 'You should know by now that she stocks *everything* as I was reminded

when I went down there earlier looking for something to relieve the aches and pains.'

'But even so,' I said. 'Epsom salts?'

'Apparently,' he informed me, 'we aren't the first adrenaline junkies around here...'

'I'm not an adrenaline junkie,' I quickly countered.

I suddenly remembered the word canyoning coming up the day before and there was no way I was getting roped into anything high octane again, by either him or Connor.

'Well, we're not the first visitors to overdo it on the outdoor pursuits front apparently,' he carried on, 'and she saw a gap in the market and got a suitable stock of products in to ease our collective pain.'

'She's the ultimate data analyst,' Rachel giggled. 'She reads the terrain, puts in the orders, then pounces.'

'You're right,' I laughed. 'I should get the firm taking me on to employ her.'

'But then you'd do yourself out of a job,' Rachel nudged.

'Might not be a bad thing,' said Alex, steering us towards tricky territory.

'What else did Mrs Timpson have?' I asked him. 'I bet she didn't stop at a few bags of salt, did she?'

'Radox Muscle Soak,' he reeled off. 'Freeze sleeves in various sizes and every painkiller on the legal market along with their gel form counterparts.'

'Covering all bases then?' Rachel snorted.

'Very much so,' Alex said, rubbing his wet hair with a towel and making it stand up on end. 'And I for one am feeling grateful for that today.'

The ease with which he rubbed his hair suggested that he had far more movement in his muscles and limbs than I had in mine. I wondered if the fact that I'd been as tense as a tightrope throughout the experience was partly behind the uncomfortable consequences. I knew I had more readily thrown myself into it, to get it over with, towards the end but the damage had most likely been done by then.

'How about I run you a bath?' Rachel offered.

'I was going to suggest that too,' said Alex. 'Feel free to take advantage of my terrific tub and the extra Epsom salts I picked up to come to your aid, in case you needed them.'

'And then we could settle down and watch the video of your outdoor adventure together,' Rachel smilingly added.

'And I have something planned for the three of us for later tonight,' Alex finished up as if that was the clincher which would prise me out of my bed.

'Oh no,' I said, gingerly shaking my head. 'I've had enough of your plans to last me a lifetime, thank you very much.'

'You'll love this one, I promise,' he said, looking at me so intently, I felt my heart skip. 'It won't raise your heart rate at all.'

Given the tattoo that was currently beating in my chest, I didn't believe that for a second.

As well as running the bath, I got Rachel to help me into it and she even came back halfway through with a mug of soothing chamomile tea and topped the water up.

'If it gets too cool,' she said, in a mumsy tone, 'that could be counterproductive, so you'll have to get out soon.'

Laying in the water, and doing my best not to feel bitter about the fact that the beautiful bathroom with its view of the woods

wasn't my usual wash spot, I couldn't tell if the salts were having any impact at all.

But then I remembered I had once worked with a woman who had gone through a few hours' labour in a birthing pool and hadn't thought the water was doing anything until she climbed out and had a contraction with one leg cocked over the side. I hoped I would feel a longer lasting benefit than that when I eventually got out, otherwise I was going to take up residence in Alex's bath and no doubt turn into a prune as a result.

'Better?' Rachel asked, when I later emerged, wrapped in my fluffy towelling robe, softest pyjamas and fleecy bed socks.

'Heaps.' I nodded. 'But be warned Alex,' I said to the back of his head when I spotted him sitting on the sofa, 'if I start to tense up again, I'm diving straight back in.'

'You would be more than welcome,' he said, twisting round and giving me a heart-warming smile.

Rachel caught my eye and winked.

'I've resolved to do the same myself,' he said, turning away again.

'Then we'd better not need it at the same time, had we?'

'Oh, I don't know,' he pondered. 'I'm pretty sure that tub's big enough for two.'

Rachel didn't wink that time, but she couldn't have done even if she'd wanted to because her eyes were like saucers. I didn't say anything but I could feel my face had gone bright red.

'I think I'll just get dressed.' I swallowed.

'No, don't,' said Alex. 'Stay as you are. You look comfy, and besides, I can't wait any longer for you to watch this.'

'And I'm making bacon, halloumi and salad sandwiches and they're so much nicer eaten warm,' Rachel recovered enough to say.

‘Oh yum,’ I said. ‘My favourite.’

‘Sit down then,’ she urged. ‘And I’ll put them on a lap tray.’

‘And don’t forget that fig relish Mrs Timpson sent me back with,’ Alex piped up.

‘I had a feeling you wouldn’t have got away with just buying salts,’ I laughed. ‘But I’m very grateful that you got enough of them to include a bath for me.’

I might have initially been reluctant to watch, but Rachel was right about the recording of my once in a lifetime ghyll scrambling experience. Fortunately, whoever was filming hadn’t been able to get close enough to zoom in on my abject terror and the noise of the crashing water meant the sound of my terrified screams was barely noticeable at all.

That said, I could see there was a definite difference between how I went into the first drop compared to the last few and Alex picked up on that too.

‘Look at you,’ he said, flicking my arm with the kitchen towel Rachel had supplied us with while we ate her delicious sandwiches. ‘You’re really going for it on that last drop.’

‘I think she just really, really wanted it to be over,’ Rachel corrected him.

‘I admit there was a certain element of that written into my technique,’ I laughed. ‘But watching this now, I am pleased I did it. Not,’ I severely added, ‘that that’s any sort of hint that I’d like to do it, or anything like it, ever again.’

‘Noted,’ Alex grinned, rewinding again to the last drop. ‘Fuck, that was a long way down,’ he whistled, making me splutter and Rachel choke.

‘Right?’ I said, that time swiping him.

‘The instructor guy did say it was a long one, but it did take me a bit by surprise, especially given how willingly you’d seemed to

launch yourself off.'

'Believe me,' I told him, 'I was not willing and it was as much of a surprise to me as it was to you!'

Having watched our watery escapade at least half a dozen times, Alex and I offered to do the dishes as Rachel had cooked and I was relieved to find that my muscles were still feeling much soothed when I stood up from where I'd been curled up on the sofa.

'Are you all set for tomorrow?' I asked Alex.

It was Wednesday the next day so he would be driving down to Manchester to work.

'Yes,' he said. 'I think so. I'm meeting the new client to sound out my initial ideas for their rebrand. I'm really looking forward to it.'

'You're obviously excited about the prospect.'

'I am.' He nodded. 'It's quite a radical change that I'm thinking of, which will reflect the alterations they're making to their menus.'

'Sounds good,' I said. 'And it's lovely to hear you sounding so enthusiastic about your work.'

'Likewise,' he said. 'About your patchwork anyway. I haven't heard you waxing lyrical over your new data analyst role since Rachel flagged it up.'

I really didn't want to talk about that.

'I guess it's easier to be excited about something when you don't have to rely on it to pay the rent,' I therefore said.

'I wouldn't say that,' he objected and given that his job did pay his salary I couldn't contradict him. 'But I'll let you off the hook because I have a feeling that you've got something more to do with your lucrative sideline going on in your head.'

I kept my lips locked, neither confirming or denying that he was right.

‘And I’m excited to show Mum and Dad the recording, of course,’ he told me. ‘I’ll be seeing them at the end of the day and filling them in. Although I might not mention the whole Star Shine Falls travesty,’ he added, with a shake of his head.

‘I don’t blame you,’ I agreed. ‘But Archer’s Force and even yesterday’s adventure more than made up for that, so just tell them the good bits.’

‘I will,’ he grinned.

‘So,’ I said. ‘Tell me what’s on the new menu at this restaurant you’re working with.’

‘I only know the opening taster menu, but you’ll have to wait to find out what’s on it.’ He winked. ‘I’m planning to invite you and Rach over to Manchester, and your other friend, if she’d like to come, for the grand unveiling and the meal which will follow it.’

‘Oh wow,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘It will be something to look forward to when the time comes to leave here, won’t it?’ I rather liked the thought of seeing him for longer than just the next few weeks, but I felt the words catch as I said them.

‘Oh, don’t,’ Alex responded, also sounding choked. ‘I can’t even bear to think about not being here.’

‘Me neither.’ I nodded, grateful that we still had more time ahead of us than behind.

‘I’m having such a wonderful time,’ he further said. ‘And even though some if it is, not surprisingly, tinged with sadness, you and Rachel are making it so much better than it might have been.’

‘Even after our rocky start?’

‘Even after that,’ he said softly, his eyes finding mine. ‘I couldn’t have been thrown together with two better people to honour my promise to my sister.’

‘Oh, Alex,’ I said, swallowing hard. ‘That’s so kind.’

‘I don’t know what I expected to find when I came here, Em,’ he tenderly said, ‘but it wasn’t...’

‘Aren’t you two finished yet?’ Rachel frowned as she came back in from where she’d been sitting on the veranda.

Alex and I instantly sprang apart. I hadn’t realised how close we’d got during our heart to heart and I can’t in all honesty say what might have happened if Rachel hadn’t walked in when she did. I could feel her eyes on the pair of us and so turned away to dry the last of the dishes.

‘Almost,’ said Alex, coming across as far more composed than I felt as he leant to look out of the window. ‘And looking at the sky, it won’t be long before I can treat you both to the next part of my water-based plan.’

‘Oh goodness,’ I groaned, feeling thoroughly doused. ‘Not more water.’

Chapter 15

Alex refused to share what it was that he had lined up for us to do that night, but he did promise most sincerely that it would be worth going out in the dark for and that it didn't involve us dipping even so much as a toe in the water. Rachel and I were all for that. Or we were until she came back from her unusually late daily roadside chat with Jeremy and told us she'd got a raging headache.

'You two should still go,' she insisted when I suggested putting the excursion off. 'I'm just going to take some tablets, drink plenty of water and call it a night. I'll be fine.'

'Are you sure?' I frowned, frustrated the phone call had had an impact on Rachel's health and Alex's efforts.

'Absolutely,' she said again.

'We really don't have to do it today,' Alex kindly joined in. 'There's still plenty of time for what I have in mind.'

'No, please don't put it off,' she begged. 'Not when you've gone to the trouble of arranging something, Alex. You pair carry on, otherwise I'll feel guilty about scuppering the plan and that won't help clear my head at all, will it?'

Alex looked at me and raised his eyebrows. 'Do you think we should?' he asked, wrinkling his nose.

'I think it will annoy her if we don't,' I answered, resolutely trying not to notice how scrunching up his nose also made his eyes attractively crinkle at the corners.

‘It most definitely will,’ Rachel confirmed.

‘Come on then,’ I said, before I gave in to temptation and asked her if there was anything in particular that had sparked the headache. ‘Let’s go. Do I need to bring anything?’

‘Just a warm jumper,’ Alex told me. ‘Nothing else.’

He had already snuck out to do something which was connected to his plan while Rachel was on the phone and it was still just about light and he had also packed a bag for whatever it was that he’d got in mind, which he then picked up. The second the two of us stepped off the veranda, I realised we were heading into the woods and therefore most likely down to the lake.

As we walked among the trees, our path through them lit by the torch usually kept in the cottage, I couldn’t help wondering if Rachel really did have a headache triggered by something that cock-weasel had said.

She did look a little pale so she most likely was suffering, but I pondered, if she wasn’t, had she feigned the pain after walking in on mine and Alex’s earlier ‘almost but not quite something’ moment, to give us some more time alone?

‘Are you okay?’ Alex asked, twisting around to look at me.

‘I’m good,’ I said.

‘Only you just let out a *really* long breath,’ he said, ‘And in my experience that often means a woman is feeling anything but good.’

I had to laugh at that.

‘But you’re okay?’ he asked again. ‘Legs not aching too much now?’

‘My legs are fine and I am good,’ I repeated, then lunged forward to grab him as he tripped over a tree root because he was eyeing me and not the path. ‘And I’ll be even better when you start watching where you’re walking again.’

He bypassed the lakeside benches and chairs when we arrived on the pebbled shore and headed straight for the jetty.

‘You did say we were going to stay dry,’ I said, stopping a few paces behind him. ‘You’re not going to spring skinny-dipping on me, are you?’

‘No way,’ he laughed. ‘You can trust me, Em. I always keep my word and I promise, you are going to be staying dry tonight.’

I put my faith in him and followed him along the jetty to where the little wooden rowing boat was moored. I could see there were a couple of pillows already arranged, along with a hurricane lamp and some blankets.

‘What’s all this?’ I asked. ‘I’m not sure there’s going to be room in there for us and all this stuff.’

It would have been a really tight squeeze if it had ended up being the three of us.

‘Yes, there is,’ Alex said, confidently climbing down, depositing the bag and holding out his hand for me to join him. ‘Come on.’ He smiled. ‘It’s completely safe.’

The boat might have been watertight, but as far as the good ship Alex was concerned, I was in danger of being sunk. My defences were fast being breached and the feel of his fingers securely holding mine as I cautiously stepped down were all the proof I needed that if someone didn’t throw me a life jacket soon, I was going to slip under.

Had we been in any other setting at any other time, that would have been fine but there was no way I was going to let our relationship shift beyond the friend zone. I had set a specific agenda for this holiday, along with a definite idea about how it was all going to pan out and a holiday fling with a man who also had precise ideas about what the retreat should include as well as his own trauma to work through, was not a part of the plan.

‘Steady,’ he said, his other hand coming to rest lightly on my waist for the briefest moment as he stilled me while I found my sea, or should that be, lake legs.

The lake was as calm as a millpond, but I felt heady enough to be riding the waves in a force five gale as he held me.

‘All right?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I said again, only this time breathlessly. ‘I’m good.’

‘Okay.’ He nodded.

I could still feel the warmth of his touch, his fingers resting on my waist, even though they weren’t there anymore.

‘Now,’ he said. ‘You make yourself comfortable on the blankets up that end and I’ll work out how to start this thing.’

I must have looked stricken.

‘I’m kidding,’ he laughed. ‘I’ve rowed before. Dozens of times. Relax, Em. The last thing you need is to tense up and start aching again.’

I sat as instructed and as I watched him competently ready the oars and untie the rope, I did begin to relax. He clearly did know what he was doing and as he slowly, calmly and steadily set our course for the middle of the lake, I admired the view. Not the one of the surrounding landscape because it was too dark to see it, but the one directly in front of me, softly lit by a solar hurricane lantern.

It was headily hypnotic watching Alex sweep the oars back and forth, the muscles in his arms and chest flexing with each stroke. At one point, his gaze met mine. I cleared my throat and looked towards the pinpricks of light coming from the cottages along the hillside.

After a while, there was a gentle thud against the side of the boat and we came alongside what Alex told me was the mooring

buoy. He secured the boat to it using the rope which had previously attached it to the jetty.

‘It will stop us drifting while we watch,’ he said.

‘Watch what?’

He pointed to the sky and I looked up.

‘Oh, Alex,’ I gasped.

I had never seen the sky so beautifully lit. There were myriad stars and countless constellations. Having been so distracted by his perfect strokes, I hadn’t noticed the sky as he rowed across the lake and on other nights it had been too cloudy to really see anything beyond the occasional twinkling glimpse.

‘It’s stunning,’ I sighed.

‘And it’s going to get even better,’ he said, smiling at my reaction.

‘What do you mean?’

‘We’re going have a drink and then we’re going to lay down,’ he told me. ‘And then you’ll see.’

I shot him a look. I wasn’t sure that sounded like a good idea when my defences had already been weakened.

‘Trust me,’ he said again and my senses tingled with more than the evening chill.

After pouring us each a coffee, which was deliciously laced with a little rum, and moving the bag and blankets to make more space, we shuffled around until we were able to comfortably lay side by side.

It took more fidgeting on my part than it probably needed to but that was because I was keen not to let any part of me touch any part of him and that wasn’t easy in the confined space of a small rowing boat. As I wriggled to get more comfortable, I couldn’t make up my mind if I felt relieved or exasperated that Rachel

wasn't with us. Had she been present Alex and I could go have gone top to toe.

'Gracie taught me,' said Alex, as he turned off the lamp and plunged us into inky darkness, 'that when it comes to stargazing for any length of time, this is the best way to avoid a stiff neck and aching shoulders.'

'Wise, Gracie,' I praised, as my eyes tracked from left to right and scanned the skies. 'I can see even more stars now you've turned the lamp off. It's incredible.'

'That's one of the real treasures of this area,' Alex sighed. 'No light pollution.'

I had admired the stars here with Nanna and Grandad in the past but certainly not while reclining in a boat in the middle of a lake. It was by far the most spectacular outing anyone had ever arranged for me and I hastily reminded myself that this wasn't some sort of romantic liaison or sweet seduction. After all, Rachel was supposed to be here too and that put a very different complexion on things. That should have made me feel better, given the talking to I'd earlier given myself but annoyingly, it didn't.

'I hope this makes up for what I put you through yesterday,' Alex said and I could tell he was smiling.

'It most definitely does.' I smiled back. 'But please don't ask me to go ghyll scrambling again. Or anything remotely like it,' I hastily added. 'Even if this sort of spectacular reward is likely to come after it.'

'I won't,' he laughed.

'Was stargazing on Gracie's list for this trip, too?' I asked, after a second had passed.

'No,' he said. 'This is my idea, inspired by the full moon scene in the book.'

‘Well,’ I said, feeling it was even more special because it was something he’d arranged. ‘Thank you. I love it. And Rachel would love it too..’

‘Can I ask you something, Em?’ Alex then asked and my heart began to race.

‘Of course,’ I said, turning my head a little so I could see his face.

I could just make out his profile in the darkness but no distinguishing features which, given the intimate proximity, was probably just as well. Had those kind eyes been discernible I don’t know what I would have done.

‘What’s the deal with this Jeremy guy?’ he asked, still staring skywards.

‘What do you mean?’ I swallowed, trying not to feel disappointed that it wasn’t the sort of question I had been both longing for and dreading.

‘What is it about him that you don’t like?’

Absolutely everything, I wanted to blurt out, but didn’t.

‘What makes you think I don’t like him?’ I asked instead.

Alex turned his head to look at me and I shifted my gaze back up to the stars.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘Whenever his name comes up, your shoulders stiffen and you look like you’re chewing a wasp.’

I laughed out loud at the mental image that conjured. It sounded louder in the silence of the lake than it would have done inside the cottage and I felt my cheeks flush.

‘I’m sure that’s not true,’ I said, in a whisper to make up for my noisy outburst.

So much for making my dislike of Jeremy less obvious. Clearly, I hadn’t dialled my reaction to any mention of him down

anywhere near enough and if Alex had noticed, then Rachel was bound to have picked up on my continued dislike too.

But then, given that Jeremy had been such a knob over the photo of her and Connor, and was now impacting on her days out with his demands to be in touch at specified times, it was hardly surprising that I hadn't changed my mind about him and offered to help her pack for the probable move to his flat, was it?

'I promise you it absolutely is true,' Alex said sincerely. 'I'll take a photo next time if you like, so can see your face for yourself.'

'I'd rather you didn't,' I sighed, knowing I wouldn't really like to see that expression written on my features, even if the thought of it had momentarily amused me.

'So,' Alex nudged. 'What's going on? Why is the idea of Rachel moving in with this guy so abhorrent to you?'

Abhorrent was a very strong word, but in this instance, Alex was right to use it.

'Because he's not good for her,' I said on an out breath, then found I couldn't stop. 'And not good enough for her. He's controlling and manipulative and she just can't see it. She's always making excuses for his behaviour and when Tori or I flag up some over-the-top reaction he's had, or how he's deliberately sabotaged something we've planned, she just cuts us off.'

'What sort of over-the-top reaction?' Alex asked, sounding concerned.

I gave him the lowdown on the near bar brawl and Alex whistled under his breath.

'So, he's physically *and* mentally abusive.'

It turned my stomach when he put it like that. I was pretty certain that it was all mind stuff where Rachel was concerned, but that was sickening enough.

‘He even went nuts about a photo I sent him of me, Rach and Connor by mistake,’ I said, as tears filled my eyes. ‘It was supposed to go to Tori’s phone, but I was distracted and sent it to his instead. That’s why Rachel’s now speaking to him every day. Originally, they weren’t going to have much contact during this holiday at all.’

‘So as far as he’s concerned,’ Alex surmised, ‘Rachel isn’t supposed to even be in the vicinity of other guys, let alone have male friends?’

‘You’ve got it.’ I swallowed, swiping away a tear. ‘And I just know that if she moves in with him, it’s going to get even worse. I’m so angry with myself for sending that photo because I thought being apart from him would help give her some perspective.’

‘But it was an accident,’ Alex reminded me.

‘An accident which has caused further damage,’ I shot back. ‘I had hoped that being away from Jeremy and getting to know Connor, who clearly isn’t a self-centred, gaslighting prick, might make her see Jeremy for what he really is, but my mistake has given him the leverage to keep her wrapped up in him right when she had the chance to distance herself.’

The words had tumbled out in a rush and I stopped to draw breath. I hadn’t expected to say even half of what I’d blurted out, but it was said now and I couldn’t take it back. Not that I wanted to.

‘So, maybe,’ Alex slowly said, ‘you shouldn’t accept this new job offer. When you told me about it before, you implied that it would enable Rachel’s move, so maybe you should pull the plug on it?’

‘But that would make me every bit as manipulative as Jeremy, wouldn’t it?’

‘Perhaps,’ Alex pondered. ‘But with a completely different motive.’

‘But if Rachel guessed why I’d done it, or worse, Jeremy did,’ I said, voicing my fears about being found out, ‘then I’d most likely end up losing her friendship anyway, because he would use it to turn me into the bad person.’

‘He does sound like the kind of guy who would enjoy twisting the situation to suit him,’ Alex said astutely.

Alex hadn’t even met Jeremy and yet he’d already got the measure of him. Oh, how I wished Rachel could see the situation for what it really was too.

‘Exactly,’ I sighed.

‘And you’re going to need to be there for her when this relationship goes really wrong, aren’t you? From what you’ve told me, I’m pretty sure it will at some point.’

‘I’m sure it will, too,’ I agreed, acknowledging that I had thought the exact same thing just a few days ago.

I focused my attention back on the stars, wishing that when the end came for Rachel and Jeremy’s twisted relationship, I would still be considered enough of a friend to be allowed to help her pick up the pieces and move on.

‘And you’re really not thinking about turning your passion for patchwork, which should totally be your business name by the way, into a career?’ Alex then asked.

He had completely turned the conversational tables and right at the point when I was least expecting it.

‘No,’ I said firmly, but nonetheless loving his clever name idea. ‘Absolutely not.’

There was no lie in that. I might have come away with the intention of seriously considering it, but Rachel’s bombshell had put an end to that. I might still mull it over at some point, but my immediate future was now filled with more pressing preoccupations.

‘Well,’ said Alex, ‘I think that’s a shame.’

‘I know you do.’

‘And I’m also sorry that I haven’t got a solution for dealing with Jeremy.’

‘I didn’t expect you would have,’ I told him. ‘But I do appreciate the listening ear. I know I said far more than you bargained on hearing, but sometimes we just need to vent, don’t we? I’d usually talk to Tori about it, but she’s got her own stuff going on and given my recent track record I’d most likely make the call to her, holler for half an hour and then realise I’d picked up Rach’s phone and dialled Jeremy’s number.’

‘I guess that would be one way of taking action and dealing directly with the situation.’ Alex laughed. ‘And at least he’d be in no doubt about how you felt after that.’

I laughed myself then, imagining Jeremy puce and dumbstruck on the end of the line. Perhaps it wasn’t such a bad idea should a dramatic intervention become necessary.

‘Don’t tempt me,’ I nudged. ‘It might end up coming to that.’

‘I’m sure it won’t,’ Alex said. ‘You’re doing the right thing, just quietly being there for Rachel and I totally get it about the listening ear. After Gracie died, even before then actually, people were always encouraging me to talk, which was great but then they kept trying to come up with strategies to fix me and lessen my grief and guilt, but that’s not what I needed. I just wanted someone to listen while I was going through it.’

‘I understand that.’ I swallowed.

Sometimes we all needed to get things out of our system without a solution or advice being offered, even if it was well-meant.

‘In that case,’ Alex nudged, ‘I shouldn’t have apologised about not having a solution for dealing with Jeremy. But here’s a

thought, do you think he knows I'm a bloke? Do you think Rachel's told him I'm a guy?'

'Absolutely not,' I said, feeling my stomach twist as I imagined his reaction. 'There's no way he knows you're a bloke. If he knew Rachel was sharing the cottage with another man, he would have talked her into leaving by now or come and picked her up on some trumped up pretence himself.'

'Well,' Alex said. 'Let's hope he never finds out.'

'Yes,' I said, chewing my lip. 'No more photo faux pas from me, that's for sure. Had I taken that damn photo of Rachel and Connor on my phone then the mix-up wouldn't have happened.'

'You're telling me Jeremy isn't one of your contacts?' asked Alex, pretending to be shocked, and I laughed.

We were quiet for a few seconds then as we looked back at the stars.

'Can I ask you something else?' he then asked. 'It's about your patchwork.'

'Oh, Alex,' I grimaced, feeling frustrated.

'I'm not going to nag you about taking it more seriously again,' he promised, putting up his hands in a gesture of surrender, which looked a little strange given that he was laying down. 'It's a commission request, actually.'

'Oh?'

He sat up and shifted around so he could look down at me. My stomach stopped twisting and flipped completely over as my brain began to think of him looking down at me from that angle in a very different scenario. I put a hasty stop to it.

'What sort of commission?' I asked, just about regrouping.

'I was wondering if you would consider making a memory picture for my parents using some of Gracie's things connected to *Hope Falls*,' he said softly. 'I know they'd love to have something

they could keep close by like that and having seen that anniversary...’

‘Oh, Alex,’ I said again, shifting up on to my elbows and even though we were now inches closer, I was so taken aback by what he’d requested that all sensual thoughts were entirely banished. ‘I’m not sure if I could. It would be such a huge responsibility. I’d be so worried about getting it wrong.’

‘You wouldn’t get it wrong,’ he insisted, moving closer still. ‘You couldn’t.’

‘Well...’ I faltered.

‘Don’t give me an answer now,’ he pleaded. ‘Think about it for a few days and then let me know. No pressure, but it would be wonderful to be able to give them something like that for Christmas. We’ve all promised to make more of an effort for it this year, and one of your pictures would be perfect.’

I was about to further object when something over his shoulder caught my eye.

‘What was that?’ I gasped.

Alex twisted around and the boat rocked a little. Given the intensity of what we’d been talking about I’d almost forgotten we were in the middle of the lake.

‘What?’ he asked. ‘Where?’

‘In the sky,’ I said. ‘I thought I saw a shooting star, but I must have imagined it.’

‘No, you didn’t,’ he said, laying back down. ‘That’s what we’re really here for,’ he told me as he got comfy again. ‘It’s almost the peak time for the Perseid meteor shower. I thought this would be the most wonderful place to watch it and fingers crossed we’re going to strike lucky.’

‘I’ve never seen a shooting star before,’ I told him as I also laid down properly again. ‘I can’t believe it.’

‘Look!’ he said, as another sparkling trail blazed across the sky above our heads. ‘And there’s another!’

‘This is amazing!’ I gasped, as I watched them whizz over us.

‘I hope you’ve got enough wishes to make on all of these, Em,’ he said, reaching for my hand.

I laced my fingers through his, my insides lighting up as brightly as the night sky. I’d never shared something so spectacular with anyone, not even my two best friends.

‘I’m pretty certain I can come up with something,’ I told him.

Chapter 16

Alex had already set off for his day's work in Manchester by the time I was gushing to Rachel about our night-time trip to the lake. I knew he had taken the recording of our ghyll scrambling experience to show his parents and wondered what they would make of it.

'There's still plenty of time for you to see the meteor shower for yourself.' I beamed at my friend, having described practically every piece of cosmic dust and debris which had blazed a sparkling streak across the sky. 'And you absolutely must. It's utterly mesmerising.'

I stopped to flick the kettle on and draw breath and realised she hadn't said a word or made a sound since I had started the retelling of mine and Alex's ultimate night out, however, when I turned to look at her after arranging mugs for our morning coffee, I found her gaze fixed firmly on my face.

'I'm sorry,' I grimaced. 'I forgot about your headache. How is it this morning? I shouldn't have got so carried away. You know I always get shouty when I'm excited about something.'

Rachel shook her head and smiled.

'It's fine,' she said. 'I woke briefly in the early hours and it was already feeling much better by then.'

'What is it then?' I asked, spooning coffee and splashing milk. 'Why are you so quiet this morning? You're freaking me out. Is it just because I haven't let you get a word in edgeways?'

‘It is,’ she laughed. ‘I’m enjoying hearing you talk about last night and I’m so happy for you!’

‘What do you mean, you’re happy for me?’ I queried, sliding one of the mugs over to her and reaching into the bread bin.

‘You know exactly what I mean,’ she said, with a wicked grin.

‘No, I really don’t,’ I maintained, as I dropped bread into the toaster.

I did though and I wished I’d never got so carried away describing the effort that Alex had gone to, to make the evening such a success and the boat so comfortable. I had told Rachel it was Gracie’s genius idea to stargaze laying down, but the soppy expression on my friend’s face told me that she believed that every bit of it was all Alex.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anything so romantic,’ she said dreamily. ‘Apart from when Jeremy turned up at work last December and whisked me off on that trip to the Christmas market in Nuremberg. Do you remember?’

How could I forget? It would have been a truly romantic getaway had it not coincidentally started on the very evening that Rachel and her colleagues had finished term and were planning to let their hair down and have a wild night out in the city.

Knowing the crowd she worked with, it wouldn’t really have been anywhere near wild, but Jeremy had put paid to Rachel participating in it by turning up at the school gate and presenting her with a luxury trip to Europe the moment the bell rang at three fifteen.

I also couldn’t forget how just a couple of weeks before the event, when Rachel had reeled off the names of everyone she was planning to party with, a certain history teacher had been mentioned and Jeremy’s back had stiffened and his brow had furrowed.

Rachel had graduated with Kevin Cunningham and they'd been firm friends since and Jeremy couldn't stand their association. It didn't take a genius to work out that the impromptu romantic getaway had been organised to ensure Rachel's end of term blow-out, with Kevin among the party, never happened.

Tori had bravely suggested as much to Rachel when she arrived back from Germany weighed down with bags of festive trinkets and Lebkuchen, and had been told she was both deluded and paranoid. Apparently, Jeremy had only been able to get away that weekend and so that was when they had to go. Rachel was one of the most intelligent people I knew and yet he'd somehow managed to do a real number on her.

'Of course, I remember.' I smiled, determined not to look, thanks to Alex's flagging, like I was chewing a wasp. 'But this wasn't a romantic thing with Alex. It was planned for both you and me, remember?'

Rachel shook her head, a look of disbelief written across her face.

'Well, whatever.' She shrugged, sipping the still hot coffee as the toast popped up. 'Whoever it was organised for, I can tell it won you over. You're totally smitten.'

'That's absurd,' I shot back, hotly denying her astute observation.

'It is not,' she countered, thickly buttering the hot toast. 'I've known something was brewing between you for days and then yesterday when I walked in and interrupted what I can only assume was going to be a first kiss, I knew it wouldn't be long before you properly got together.'

I shoved two more slices of bread into the toaster with more force than was necessary.

'I can't believe you're saying this,' I snapped, feeling aggrieved.

But of course, I could believe it because I had already predicted it was exactly the conclusion she would jump to. I felt my face flush as I remembered that Alex had started to tell me that he had found something unexpected on the trip and even though Rachel was right, and I was smitten, I hoped his discovery was to do with coming to terms with losing Gracie and nothing to do with me.

I might have liked him more than I should, but it would be hugely inconvenient if he liked me back and our mutual attraction ended up turning the holiday into something different to what I had planned for or worse, if it didn't work out, something horrid that none of us would want to remember.

I could just about keep my feelings in check if I knew they weren't reciprocated and given that Alex hadn't said anything further in all the time we were alone on the lake, they had to be, didn't they? If he was falling for me then surely, he wouldn't have wasted that opportunity to tell me?

'You're kidding?' Rachel laughed.

'No,' I said, picking up my mug in an attempt to hide behind it. 'I'm not.'

'Well, in that case,' she grinned, 'you'd better tread carefully because it's more than obvious that he's falling for you.'

Alex arrived back at the cottage extremely late that night and laid in bed long into the next morning which meant I was able to avoid him for practically the entire day. I wasn't sure making myself scarce was the right course of action, but I didn't know what else to do until I'd processed what Rachel had said, drawn my own conclusions and come up with a plan.

'Hey, Emily,' Connor said welcomingly when I turned up at the pub for lunch. 'Where's the rest of the clan?'

'Alex is recovering from a long day in Manchester yesterday,' I told him, bending to fuss Siddy who was as effusive in her

welcome as always, 'and Rachel's gone for a walk down to the lake.'

'Is she okay?' Connor frowned.

'As far as I know.' I shrugged, having not given her solo wander any deep thought. 'Unless you know different.'

Connor suddenly became very interested in polishing the pumps with the tea towel he always had thrown over his shoulder and which were already spotless.

'Connor?'

'It's probably none of my business,' he said, clearly trying not to make a thing of it. 'And she hasn't said anything specific, but...'

'But?'

'I can tell there's something going on with her,' he sighed, sounding sad. 'You're her best friend, I assumed you'd know.'

I felt a prickle of unease creep across the back of my neck because, headache aside, from what I'd been able to work out, she was on cloud nine and looking forward to moving in with Jeremy. However, Connor's look of concern suggested otherwise.

'When have you spoken to her long enough to have got this feeling?' I asked, because as far as I was aware Rachel hadn't seen Connor since the ghyll scrambling debacle and she'd been too busy nursing me to have a deep and meaningful with him then.

'She's been here a few evenings over the last couple of weeks,' Connor told me, making my stomach drop. 'Didn't you know?'

'No.' I swallowed.

'Didn't you miss her at the cottage?' he asked, sounding surprised. 'Or do you all do your own thing in the evenings?'

'Yeah,' I said, not entirely truthfully. 'We tend to do our own thing after supper.'

The thing I had assumed Rachel had been doing was spending hours on the side of the road talking to Jeremy, but what she'd actually been doing, for some of that time at least, was chatting to Connor in the pub. It was a bit of a shock and one which elicited mixed emotions.

'Has she been glued to her phone when she's been here?' I asked, trying to get a clearer picture of what was really going on.

'I've never seen her with it,' Connor said, shocking me further. 'She comes in and has a drink. Then we chat for a bit and she heads off again.'

'That sounds like what I'd expect every customer to do,' I pointed out. 'What is it about Rachel's visits that makes you think there's something wrong?'

Apart from not telling her best friend about them, I thought, but didn't say.

'Call it my landlord's sixth sense,' Connor said with a wry smile. 'You kind of get a feel for these things. You, for example—' he started to say.

'Never mind me,' I said, holding up a hand to stop him. 'I'm just here for a glass of Coke and a seafood sandwich.'

'In that case,' he laughed, 'grab yourself a table and I'll bring it over.'

'Thanks.'

I made myself comfortable and turned my phone on. It had been ages since I'd been in touch with Tori so I fired off a message to apologise and ask how she was adapting to life back home. I felt bad that Rachel and I had all but abandoned her since we'd arrived in Lakeside and moved into the cottage, even though she had told us that she was happy for us to do exactly that.

'This looks great,' I said as Connor carried over my lunch. 'Thank you.'

‘You’re welcome.’ He smiled, then nodded at my phone as it pinged with an incoming message. ‘Don’t spend the whole time on that thing. You’re on holiday, remember?’

He was right. I was on holiday, but a holiday with a mission which had gone completely awry since Rachel had told me about Jeremy’s invitation for her to move in with him. Was I really going to set my dream aside because of that? For Rachel’s sake, I most likely was, and it would doubtless be something else I would end up resenting Jeremy for.

I took a bite of the delicious sandwich and unlocked my phone again. Along with a flurry of emails, there was a message from Tori and it turned out it was just me who hadn’t been in touch, because Rachel had apparently been messaging her every few days.

Our ditzy friend admitted she wasn’t much further forward with her New Life Plan but she had worked out a few things about her life – she didn’t specify what – and was confident that she’d get into her stride soon. I kept my return message upbeat and breezy and when she asked how I was doing, I didn’t mention that Rachel had said Alex was falling for me or that I’d discovered there was something mysteriously amiss with her.

I later left the pub having placed an order for metres of cotton fabric to be delivered to the cottage thanks to an unexpected word of mouth dress commission – which had unhelpfully ended up in my spam folder and which meant it was now a rush order – and thinking I needed to get my getaway back on track.

I might not need to further consider setting up my own business, not in the immediate future anyway, but I did need to make the dress in double quick time *and* find out what was going on with my best friend. I also needed to keep a closer eye on my relationship with Alex and make sure it didn’t shift any further out of the friend zone.

‘Here she is!’ Rachel called out when I arrived back at the cottage.

So much for making a discreet entrance and sloping off for a nap.

‘Where have you been?’ she practically demanded.

‘To the pub for lunch,’ I told her, thinking she looked and sounded so much like her usual self that Connor’s landlord’s intuition must have been off. ‘I didn’t realise we had to account for our comings and goings,’ I added with emphasis, but she didn’t bite.

‘Look what I’ve found for us to do tomorrow.’ She beamed, pulling me into the kitchen the second I had slipped my plimsolls off. ‘I’ve no idea if I’ll be any good at it, but it should be a laugh. I’ve booked each of us a place for the whole day.’

Knowing that she’d booked the three of us to do something together made me feel thankful for the unexpected dress order. At least I wouldn’t have to lie to get out of spending time with Alex. Whether Rachel had been right about his changing feelings for me or not, I didn’t think it would do any harm for us to spend a few more hours apart.

‘Oh, Rach,’ I therefore said. ‘I’m really sorry, but I can’t do anything tomorrow.’

‘What?’ she said, looking at me with such dismay I was almost tempted to change my plan. ‘Why not?’

‘Has Rachel told you we’re going to be treading the boards tomorrow?’ Alex asked as he came out of his room. ‘It’s not my thing at all, but if you were willing to throw yourself down a waterfall for me, then I suppose the least I can do is recite a few lines in the dry.’

‘I was most definitely not willing,’ I reminded him and he grinned.

I looked away.

‘What do you mean you can’t do it?’ Rachel asked, tugging at my sleeve.

‘I checked my emails while I was at the pub,’ I told her, ‘and there was an order for a dress, complete with all the measurements I need, stuck in my spam folder. I’ve got a parcel of fabric coming first thing and then I’ll need to make it and get it sent off as quickly as possible to make up for the lost time.’

‘No way,’ Rachel pleaded. ‘Just tell them you’re on holiday and can’t do it.’

‘I can’t,’ I said. ‘I’ve already confirmed and I can’t go back on my word.’

‘Of course, you can’t,’ Alex said kindly. ‘You have a reputation to build and if the clothing line is going to become the main part of what you do, then you want to see as many people walking about in your garments as possible, don’t you?’

‘Exactly,’ I said, grateful for his support.

‘I didn’t realise building a reputation was such a priority right now.’ Rachel frowned. ‘Surely you’re going to be too busy settling into your new job to seriously think about more sewing?’

‘Well,’ I said. ‘I’m not settling into my new job right now, am I? And I have promised to get this dress made and delivered within the next few days. It’s for a wedding.’

Rachel still didn’t look impressed. ‘But guests have outfits arranged months in advance of a wedding,’ she said, wrinkling her nose.

‘I know, but this person has changed their mind about what they’ve already picked out,’ I explained. ‘And they’d seen the first dress I made because they’re a friend of the person I made it for, so they know my design is just what they’re after.’

‘Oh, well,’ Rachel sighed. ‘I suppose if it’s for a wedding then you really can’t back out, can you?’

‘And you never know,’ said Alex, ‘if the wedding photos get shared online, then you might get even more business from it as a result.’

‘That’s true,’ I said.

If he was right, and I did get more commissions on the back of it, then I was going to be working every hour because there was no way I’d turn them down.

‘If I start early in the morning, as soon as the fabric arrives,’ I told Rachel who still looked upset, ‘I could have it ready to post first thing the next day and then I’ll be back on the holiday track.’

‘I suppose,’ she sighed.

‘So,’ I said. ‘What exactly are you two going to be doing tomorrow?’

She picked up a leaflet and a printed sheet and handed both to me. ‘I bumped into this woman while I was walking around the lake,’ she explained, some of her former enthusiasm returning. ‘We got chatting and I told her we were here on the *Hope Falls* journey of discovery and she told me that she’s a drama teacher and a huge fan of the book and that she’s running some themed workshops over the summer, based on it.’

The leaflet featured the Little Lakeside Theatre which was located just a couple of miles away from the cottage. We had considered watching a performance there during our stay, but the opportunity to take part in any workshops had never come up.

‘We’re going to read through some of the book and compare the passages to how they were adapted for the film, then read aloud the scenes as if we’re acting them out in a pre-filming read through,’ Rachel said excitedly, properly back up to speed.

‘A table read,’ Alex knowledgeably interjected.

‘And then she’ll cast us in the roles and we get to act them out on stage in costume.’

‘Oh my god,’ I breathed, looking back to the sheet.

It sounded amazing. The ultimate book-based holiday experience and exactly the sort of thing I would have loved to do, but I couldn’t back out of making the dress now.

‘And the best part is...’ Alex encouraged Rachel to carry on.

‘Oh, yes,’ she squeaked, ‘I almost forgot. There are actual props from the film for us to use at the theatre. I don’t know what they are yet but there’s every possibility that by this time tomorrow, I might well have sat in another of the chairs that the women curled up in to make one of those all-important life-changing decisions.’

‘Wow.’ I smiled, feeling jealous as hell. ‘That’s going to be amazing.’

I could have done with more time doing exactly the same thing myself.

Chapter 17

Rather than wait for the arrival of the main dress fabric the next morning, I made a start on planning the panels that evening and had made good progress while Rachel and Alex chatted away about their itinerary for the following day. In fact, I was so organised by bedtime, having tacked the pieces together using the patchwork material I already had, I thought that if I ended up completing the dress sooner than expected, then I would be able to use Rachel's absence to finish her surprise. I was very much looking forward to presenting it to her before the end of our holiday, which her Mum had given me her blessing to do.

'Hey, Alex,' I said, purposefully slipping out to the veranda the second I heard Rachel singing in the shower early the next morning.

'Hey,' he said, looking up from the book he was reading and taking off a pair of dark framed glasses which my traitorous heart would have very much liked him to keep on. 'How's it going? Do you need me to try something on to check the fit?'

I rolled my eyes. 'Best not,' I said. 'I don't think your broad frame would do much for my seam allowance.'

Cue more blushing.

'Fair enough.' He smiled.

'What are you reading?' I asked, as if I couldn't guess.

He held up Gracie's tatty *Hope Falls* paperback. It was a wonderfully well-worn copy, complete with cracked spine and more than its share of creased pages.

‘Just as I suspected.’ I smiled. ‘It couldn’t possibly have been anything else, could it?’

‘I just wanted to run through a few lines,’ he explained, ‘and it felt fitting to read from Gracie’s copy today. As you’ve seen, mine’s in better condition.’

‘Which one will you take with you today?’ I asked.

‘Mine,’ he immediately said. ‘I couldn’t risk anything happening to this.’

‘Would Gracie have been keen to take part in the workshop?’

‘Oh, yes,’ he nodded, with a wry smile. ‘She would have absolutely loved it. She was quite the drama queen herself.’

‘And which role do you fancy yourself in?’ I asked.

‘I’m going to try for Laurie,’ he said, with another smile. ‘Assuming the wig fits.’

‘You’ll make a great Laurie,’ I told him, thinking of their matching his and hers fresh starts and just about managing to keep a straight face. ‘And I wish I was going to be there to see you rise to the challenge.’

‘Me too,’ he said, looking deep into my eyes and I realised I had allowed us to stray into dangerous territory again. Given that just the day before, I had been committed to keeping my distance, this sort of thing was most definitely not allowed. ‘But this commission is important for you,’ he added. ‘I get that.’

‘It is.’ I swallowed.

Mindful of Rachel’s four-minute shower rule, I dismissed the banter and headed for what it was I had really come out to say.

‘I’ve actually disturbed you because I wanted to ask you a favour,’ I said, sitting in the rattan chair opposite the sofa he was stretched out on.

‘Oh,’ he said, putting the book and glasses down properly.

‘It’s about the other night on the lake.’

‘That was such a great night,’ he said, his voice as thick as honey and a faraway look in his eyes.

‘It was,’ I sighed, also thinking back to the enthralling spectacle. ‘It was perfect and again, thank you so much for arranging it.’

‘You want to go again?’ he asked hopefully, his gaze coming back into focus. ‘I really want to row Rachel out there at some point, so I hope you’ll come along too.’

The thought of a repeat performance was most appealing and perfectly proper if it was going to be the three of us.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘that would be wonderful. We shouldn’t waste the opportunity to see it again, should we?’

‘No,’ he agreed. ‘We shouldn’t. So, was that what you wanted to ask me about?’ he quizzed, his eyebrows raised.

‘No,’ I said, full of frustration that I’d got side-tracked yet again. ‘No,’ I repeated. ‘It wasn’t that. It was actually to do with what I said to you’ – I lowered my voice and leaned in closer – ‘about Rachel’s partner, Jeremy.’

‘Okay,’

‘You remember what I said about him being—’

‘A total dick.’

‘Yes.’

‘What about it?’

‘I just wanted to ask you not to say anything to Rachel about any of that.’

‘What?’ He frowned, sitting back.

‘I’d rather you didn’t mention anything we’d said about him while we were out on the lake,’ I expanded.

Alex's face took on an appearance I hadn't seen it wear before. It was a mixture of bewilderment, disappointment and anger. I couldn't really accept that it could contort into any of those expressions.

'I can't believe you thought that I would,' he frowned, making me feel awful. 'Why on earth would you think that I would even bring it up, let alone repeat it verbatim?'

'I just wanted to be certain that you understand...'

'Of course, I understand,' he said, sounding hurt. 'What you said was shared in confidence. I'm not a total imbecile.'

'I didn't mean to offend you,' I said, as my hands started to sweat. 'It's just that there's something more going on with Rachel and until I work out...'

'It's fine,' he said, dismissing my bungled explanation, but it clearly wasn't. 'I get it.'

'I only meant...'

'I know what you meant,' he shot back. 'You don't know me particularly well and you wanted to make sure I wouldn't blab.'

'No,' I said. 'That's not how I meant it. It's not that at all.' I choked. 'How could it be after everything we've shared during these last couple of weeks?'

'I don't know,' he said, sounding more sad than cross which in turn made me feel even worse. 'Maybe I've been reading things wrong between us, Em.'

'Hey, Alex!' Rachel called from the house. 'Are you all set? I'm almost ready.'

'Coming now!' he called back, standing up and pocketing the glasses and reverently picking up the book. 'I'll see you later.'

I kissed Rachel on the cheek at the door and the two of them went off to enjoy what I knew would be a truly memorable experience. At least, I hoped it would be. I hoped I hadn't blighted

it for Alex. One thing I was certain of, given how keen he was to get away, was that I had sent him off thinking that I didn't know him at all and, as a result, had probably got him thinking that he didn't know me either.

Once the fabric – which I waited at the roadside for in case the delivery driver didn't fancy the walk down to the cottage and dumped it on the damp verge instead – was safely delivered, I focused on making up the dress as quickly, but as professionally as possible and having wrapped it ready to send, I set about completing Rachel's after a very late lunch.

As the weather was mild, the earlier gusty wind had dropped and I was in no danger of her catching me at work, I set myself up to pin and stitch outside until I needed to use the sewing machine. The dress was perfect and I knew my friend would be a vision wearing it.

'Beautiful,' I sighed, holding it up before I headed back into the cottage to turn the individual pieces into one complete garment. 'Quite beautiful.'

As the day wore on and I continued to stitch and sew, completely immersed, the full force of my passion for my craft again hit me with the impact of a ten-tonne truck. I was more than competent, my skills were exemplary and the finished results, faultless. I didn't think I was being arrogant in thinking that, because the dress I was holding was proof that I deserved each and every one of those accolades.

Ever since Rachel had told me that she was considering moving in with Jeremy and that it was a relief to know that I had a job waiting to pay a monthly salary into my bank, I had done everything in my power to convince myself that taking it was the right thing to do. The *only* thing to do if I didn't want her assuming I had turned it down to stop her moving on with her life because I didn't like her boyfriend.

And for a while, that had been enough for me to set my dreams aside and confine sewing to the hobby compartment she had also wedged it into, but as I considered the two completed dresses, I knew it wasn't going to work in the long term. My star was genuinely rising and there was increased interest in my work and that had to be too good an opportunity to let pass by, hadn't it?

Towards the end of the afternoon, I walked down to the post office and, as Rachel and Alex still weren't home by the time I arrived back, I completed my fern skirt which was a verdant vision. The pair had talked of having dinner with the other workshop participants if the day went well so, to make myself feel better about missing out on such a wonderful experience, I slipped on the skirt and ate my supper sitting next to the lake.

The skirt had turned out even better than I hoped. I loved the way the weight of it swished around my legs as I walked and I knew I would certainly be adding more of them to my repertoire. I later drifted off to sleep with my current favourite fantasy, which involved potential branding and website ideas, whirring around my head. However, there was a new twist to my dream and it involved Alex. I imagined myself asking him to design my branding for my empire which I, of course, had named Passion for Patchwork. It was a wholly satisfying way to nod off.

'Let's see this dress then,' Rachel yawned late the next morning, when she joined me on the veranda.

For a moment I thought she'd somehow worked out that I was making one for her, but then realised she was talking about the wedding outfit.

'You can't,' I told her. 'I've already put it in the post.'

'Crikey,' she said, sounding impressed. 'You must have got a wriggle on. That has to be your speediest make yet.'

‘It was,’ I agreed, still thinking about how I was going to explain that I might well be making them even faster once Passion for Patchwork was up and running. ‘Now come on,’ I added, knowing it all needed further thought and shouldn’t be rushed, ‘I want to hear all about how you got on at the theatre.’

She flopped down on the sofa and let out a long breath. ‘Oh, Em,’ she said. ‘It was amazing. I really did feel like Heather up on that stage.’

I smiled to myself as I again imagined Alex as Laurie.

‘I wish you’d been there.’

‘I wish I’d been there, too.’ I swallowed. ‘What were the props?’

By the time she’d finished telling me, I wished I’d never asked.

‘I’ve already signed up to do it again,’ she said excitedly.

‘Before we go home?’

‘Sadly not,’ she said. ‘But Sophie, that’s the woman who ran the workshop, gave me a heads up about another session happening in November and I’ve signed you, me and Tori up for that.’

‘Oh, that’s great!’ I said, feeling slightly better. ‘Thank you.’

‘Consider it an early Christmas present.’ She winked. ‘We’ll come up for the whole weekend and stay at an Airbnb or something.’

‘Will that mean keeping hold of the car?’

‘We’ll decide about that once Tori’s sorted,’ she laughed. ‘You never know, she might get to keep the Range Rover, after all.’

She stood up again and stretched out her back and I wondered if Jeremy would allow her out of his sight again so soon. At least knowing that she’d booked the workshop already meant she hadn’t spent time worrying about what he would think of the idea.

‘I need coffee,’ she said.

‘What about Alex?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said, looking through the window. ‘I’ll ask him when he gets up.’

‘No,’ I giggled. ‘I meant, has he signed up for the workshop, too?’

‘Oh,’ she laughed. ‘No, but he’s going to do it today. He wasn’t going to, but then when we stopped at the pub and told Connor about it, Alex said he’d enjoyed it in spite of the fact that he’d been the only bloke there and Connor said he’d go with him next time to balance the numbers, so they’ll both be treading the boards.’

I would look forward to seeing that.

‘Sophie will be thrilled,’ Rachel said happily. ‘She told us the workshops often lacked a male perspective.’

‘They’ll be extra popular then.’

‘Oh,’ she said, flopping back down and abandoning her desire for caffeine. ‘I can’t believe I almost forgot to tell you!’

‘Forgot to tell me what?’

‘We’re all set for a great night out tomorrow.’ She beamed. ‘It won’t be the usual Friday night drinks with Tori, but it’s going to be brilliant nonetheless.’

‘It is?’

‘Yep,’ she explained. ‘Connor has a book-lovers’ coach tour booked in for supper so he’s doing the quiz *and*,’ she said, ‘you’ll love this, Em.’ Here she paused for dramatic effect and I held my breath. ‘He’s also organising a soundtrack karaoke and cosplay competition.’

I couldn’t stop a groan escaping. The quiz and cosplay I was totally up for, but not the karaoke.

‘You’re going to sing, aren’t you?’ I grimaced, cradling my head at the thought.

‘Of course, I am,’ she said, slapping my leg a little too hard in her excitement. ‘When have I ever let not being able to hold a note stop me singing along to the soundtrack? And this time,’ she added as if it made the unappealing prospect more palatable, ‘I’ll have a microphone.’

That was what I was afraid of.

Chapter 18

I had, meanly I know, hoped that Rachel's theatrical exertions at the drama workshop might have impacted on her voice to such an extent that it would stop her singing by the time Saturday dawned, but my hopes were dashed when I woke to her crooning – if you could call it that – in the cottage kitchen.

She never sounded quite so bad when she was in the shower because the din was muffled by a door, a shower screen and running water, but unfiltered it was almost painful. Think Bridget Jones at the office Christmas party combined with nails on a blackboard and you've almost got the gist. And what made it worse, or perhaps better depending on your disposition and how many drinks you'd downed, was that she didn't give a flying fig.

I did, however, and I hastily squashed my pillow over my ears determined to drown her out for at least a few more hours.

'I think I'm getting better,' she said, bounding in, wrenching the pillow away and shoving a mug of hot coffee under my nose. 'Come on,' she said, 'we've got chores to do and then we need to start getting ready.'

It was eight o'clock in the morning.

'Why don't you go and rouse Alex,' I suggested, 'and then come back to me?'

'I can't,' she told me as she set the coffee down on the nightstand. 'Because he's already gone out. He left about seven after he'd cleaned his room and watered all the pots on the veranda, but said he'd be back in time for tonight.'

‘Where’s he gone?’ I asked, pushing myself up on my elbows.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, flouncing out jauntily, ‘I’m not his keeper.’

I collapsed back down and pulled the duvet over my head, shutting Rachel’s reedy notes out again and closing my eyes. Alex and I had barely spoken since I’d upset him the morning before and I couldn’t deny, I didn’t mind that he’d gone out for the day because I had no idea how to make amends. I’d already tried to apologise but I don’t think he’d accepted it and I didn’t know what else I could do.

‘Come on!’ Rachel called. ‘Drink that coffee and get your butt in gear. We’ve got makeovers to attend to.’

‘I really don’t mind driving us in,’ I listened to Alex say for the hundredth time early that evening while I was putting the finishing touches to my outfit in the bedroom.

He’d been back a while and we’d exchanged a few stilted words, but nothing beyond pleasantries.

‘I hear you,’ Rachel responded, also on a loop. ‘But if you do, you won’t be able to have a drink and Connor has promised some truly killer themed cocktails tonight, so as the weather’s all right, we might as well walk and he’s arranged for us to have a lift back.’

I heard Alex sigh, even though I wasn’t in the same room.

‘And you’re going to walk all the way there in those heels, are you?’ he rather sceptically asked. ‘I might as well take my car and leave it there.’

That sounded good to me.

‘Of course, I’m not walking in these,’ Rachel tutted. ‘I’m going to go in my trainers and change into the heels when we arrive. I appreciate the offer of the car, but there’s limited parking in the

village and Em and I have been indoors all day, so we could do with the fresh air.'

She had a point.

Our outfits were based on those featured in one of the night out scenes in the film and I was pleased we'd decided to bring them with us. Not that packing them was ever really in question. Even if Connor hadn't been putting on an event, we still would have worn them at some point, even if only to curl up in the window seat and read the book or sit on the sofa and watch the film.

Rachel was wearing a red sleeveless satin top with plunging neckline (think Farrah Fawcett) and mid-length shorts with a tie waist which showed off her tanned legs and I was dressed in a soft pink satin cami, which made the most of my paler complexion, and blue jeans. I had made the silk tops in the style of those in the film and loved the way mine draped and felt cool against my skin. Teamed with three necklaces of different lengths, it was perfect, but I wasn't sure about not wearing a bra.

'You have great boobs,' Rachel had insisted when we were getting dressed, 'and you'll ruin the look if you wear a bra because you'll see the straps.'

Once she'd gone out, I turned this way and that in front of the mirror and then pulled the top back over my head. It was no good. I'd never relax if I was worrying about my nipples being on display all night. I had a gorgeous lace triangle bra from La Redoute which would make on show straps look perfectly pretty and more importantly, make me feel comfortable.

'Rach!' I screeched as she came bowling back into the bedroom, leaving my near nakedness exposed to the entire cottage.

'Sorry,' she said, quickly closing the door. 'I just came to see what's taking you so long.'

'I'm almost done,' I said, slipping the bra on.

‘Alex nearly got a look at the top to marry up with his view of the bottom then, didn’t he?’ she giggled.

‘Not funny,’ I hissed. ‘I’m going to wear this.’

I knew she wasn’t wearing anything under her top and I had no issue with that at all, but the no bra rule wasn’t for me.

‘Oh, that’s cute,’ Rachel said, cocking her head to one side. ‘That works and I know you’ll feel better wearing it. And you’re going to faint when you see what Alex is wearing,’ she added in a mischievous whisper.

I gave her a look and pulled the silk top over my head, then she teased the curls she’d spent ages styling for me back into place. She kissed my cheek and we looked in the mirror, gauging how we appeared standing side by side.

‘I think you’re definitely going to pull tonight,’ she giggled again.

‘I think you’re definitely going to pull tonight,’ I said straight back and we both laughed.

It was something we had been saying since the very first Friday night drinks session getting on for a decade ago. She wrapped her arms around my waist and rested her head on my shoulder.

‘Sometimes,’ she said dreamily, ‘I still can’t believe we’re actually here, can you?’

‘I know,’ I said, blinking hard to rid myself of the sudden rush of tears which could easily threaten my mascara and liner. ‘It’s amazing, isn’t it?’

She nodded and blinked too.

‘Come on then,’ I said. ‘Let’s go before Connor runs out of those killer cocktails you’ve been banging on about all day.’

Alex was already waiting by the open cottage door when we came out of the bedroom and Rachel was right, I did almost pass

out when I got my first glimpse of him. I fussed about, picking up our jackets and checking our bags until I recovered.

‘You okay, Alex?’ Rachel asked, pulling my attention back towards him and finding he was looking at me.

‘Yeah,’ he said, closing his mouth and opening it again. ‘Great.’

Rachel gave me a nudge.

‘You two look amazing.’ He swallowed. ‘For a second there I thought the real Heather and Rose had just walked out of the bedroom.’

‘You didn’t say that when you saw me earlier,’ Rachel teased him and I nudged her back.

‘Well,’ he blushed, ‘it was seeing the pair of you together that really did it.’

‘Thank you, Alex,’ I said, not wanting to give Rachel further opportunity to rib him, especially when I was so keen for us to fall back into step. ‘You look great, too.’

‘Thanks,’ he said, blushing deeper. ‘But just to be clear,’ he qualified, ‘I would never in real life wear my shirt unbuttoned this low.’

I felt my own face flame as I thought that was a shame, about the shirt anyway, because the extra open buttons gave the world a glimpse of the broad, firm chest that I had only previously guessed at when he had rowed me across the lake. Coupled with his toned arms, it made for quite a tantalising tableau.

‘Shame.’ Rachel winked, embarrassingly echoing my thoughts. ‘Because you look hot. Doesn’t he, Em?’

‘You’re incorrigible,’ I tutted, rolling my eyes.

‘What?’ she objected. ‘I’m simply stating a fact.’

‘Well,’ said Alex. ‘I think we all look hot and the sooner we get to the pub, the better.’

‘Amen to that,’ I agreed, digging Rachel in the ribs again and following Alex out of the door. ‘But just for the record, Alex, you really do look great.’

The pub was heaving by the time we arrived and lots of people were wearing outfits similar to ours. There were a few floaty, floral frocks too, though, and I wondered if *Hope Falls* had been responsible for inspiring me in ways I hadn’t really considered before.

‘At least there’s no chance of me losing you two,’ said Alex, his voice close to my ear as Rachel clung to my arm while she slipped into her heels.

I had decided not to bother with mine. I was most likely going to be spending most of the evening on my feet, so my faithful plimsolls would comfortably suffice.

‘Very funny,’ I said, leaning back so he could hear me and almost falling into him as a result.

‘I wasn’t being funny,’ he said, putting his hand on the small of my back to steady me. ‘No one else in here is wearing the look quite like you two.’

His warm palm felt reassuring and my heart thumped hard in response to the feel of it through the thin fabric of my top. I twisted around to check his expression and, finding he was genuinely in earnest, experienced a rush of relief surge through me because it felt like we really were back on an even keel again.

‘I mean it,’ he said, his warm, woody aftershave caressing my senses and making me feel like I’d already drunk a cocktail or three.

What was wrong with me?

‘That’s because Em made the tops,’ Rachel said, straightening back up and smoothing hers down. ‘And she spared no expense on the fabric.’

I didn't point out that I'd packed her top in the case with mine so it wouldn't be irreparably creased by the time we arrived at the cottage.

'I should have known.' Alex smiled, his kind brown eyes fixed on mine.

In that moment, my awareness of him cranked up yet another notch and I realised I was going to need to keep a check on the number of cocktails I downed, because it wouldn't take many to completely send my inhibitions and reservations packing.

'I never skimp where fabric is concerned,' I said throatily and then burst out laughing because it had to be the most unseductive few words I had ever uttered. 'I can't believe I just said that.'

'Me neither,' Rachel guffawed. 'I take back what I said about you pulling tonight. There's no hope.'

'Well, I can believe it,' Alex said, then hastily added, 'Not that you won't pull, but about the fabrics. I can't imagine you'd ever skimp on material, Em because it's something you feel so passionate about.'

'That's very noble of you, Alex,' said Rachel, before I could respond. 'At least we know she's passionate about something.'

I was suddenly feeling passionate about a whole lot more than swatches, bolts and fat quarters. I put it down to the outfit. I must have been directly channelling carefree Rose rather than more cautious where romance was concerned Heather.

'Hey!' Connor called from behind the packed bar, thankfully coming to my rescue before I made even more of a twit of myself. 'I was beginning to wonder where you three had gone to. I don't suppose any of you know how to pull a pint or mix a cocktail, do you? One of my bar team has called in sick.'

Alex and I both shook our heads, but Rachel keenly hopped around the counter and up behind the bar.

‘I know how to pull a pint,’ she said, looking along the length of the pumps. ‘Or at least, I used to know. One of my first jobs was working in a bar.’

‘My saviour,’ said Connor, kissing her cheek and making my eyebrows shoot up.

‘Don’t get too excited yet,’ I warned him. ‘Rachel’s time pulling pints is a very long way behind her.’

‘It’s like riding a bike,’ he told me, with a grin. ‘You never forget.’

Alex and I left him running through everything Rachel was going to need to know and bagged ourselves the last available booth which, looking around, I could see was also pretty much the last available seat anywhere.

‘This is amazing,’ Alex said, raising his voice above the level of excited chat as everyone exchanged bookshop and cinema memories and resultant real-life related anecdotes.

‘It is,’ I agreed, also looking around and listening in.

Our words dried up then and I had to resist the urge to turn on my phone and scroll rather than acknowledge that things felt a little awkward.

‘Can I just say again,’ I quickly plucked up the courage to say before I could change my mind, ‘that I’m truly sorry for what I said before you and Rachel went out yesterday?’

‘No,’ Alex vehemently said, shaking his head and for an awful moment making me think that I’d kicked the row back off again. ‘You can’t.’

‘But...’

‘You can’t say it because you’ve got nothing to apologise for,’ he said firmly. ‘I shouldn’t have reacted the way I did. I should have known that you were just trying to ensure that I wasn’t going

to let anything slip and make things difficult between you and Rachel. I can understand where you were coming from now.'

I wilted with relief and wondered what, if anything, had prompted the change of heart.

'That was exactly what I was trying to do,' I said, feeling thankful that he now understood. 'I'm so desperate to keep her close because I think she's really going to need me, and Tori, before too long.'

'I agree.' Alex nodded.

'That's also why I've stopped saying anything to her about Jeremy,' I further said. 'I don't want to say or do anything which will push her further into his grasp and pull her out of our friendship.'

'I get that,' he said.

'Did she say anything about him yesterday?' I asked, checking she was still behind the bar.

Alex looked too. She was lining up glasses and looked like she didn't have a care in the world. It was a joy to see because she hadn't looked like that all too often of late. Not even when we were at the cottage. She'd successfully shrugged off the end of term exhaustion, but taking in her carefree expression then, I realised that something else had snuck in and replaced it.

'During one of the improv sessions, we fell to talking about relationships,' Alex told me, 'and pretty much everything she said backed up your concerns.'

I groaned in response.

'But don't fret,' he said, before I could ask for details. 'With so many friends in her corner, and I count myself as one of them now, she's going to be fine. No harm's going to come to her when we've all got her back.'

That sounded like fighting talk to me and I loved it. Tori and I might not have so far been able to make an effective frontline assault, but knowing that we now had Alex on the team and that we were all alert in the wings and primed for action was reassuring. When the time inevitably came, I knew we'd be able to count on Connor, too.

'Cocktails!' Rachel excitedly announced, as she arrived at our table with a packed tray.

'These can't all be for us?' I gawped as she began to line them up.

'They are,' she said. 'Connor gave me a quick crash course and I've made you one of each.' Which added up to four for Alex and four for me. 'But I have made them a little stronger than he suggested because I don't know when I'll be able to get back to you.'

'You're not joining us?' I frowned, taking in the queue at the bar.

'Connor needs me.' She smiled as she walked away. 'But I'll stop serving when the singing starts.'

'Heaven help us,' Alex and I said together, then collapsed into giggles.

'You know then?' I asked.

'Of course, I know,' he said, pushing the first cocktail in the line towards me. 'Your bathroom wall backs on to my bedroom. I've heard her murdering the film soundtrack in there more times than I care to mention.'

'Come on then,' I laughed again, as I raised my glass and tinkled it against his. 'We better get these down us to help dull the pain.'

We knocked back the first one almost without it touching the sides.

‘There was definitely gin in that,’ Alex said appraisingly, smacking his lips.

‘And some sort of soft fruit?’ I suggested. ‘Strawberry, perhaps?’

‘And mint,’ he finished up. ‘Next!’

The next one was a classic Negroni and within a couple of minutes of finishing it, I knew Rachel had made it more than double strength.

‘I think,’ Alex lazily smiled, ‘that we should have something to eat before sampling the rest, don’t you?’

‘Definitely.’ I nodded, feeling the full strength of the alcoholic hit. ‘I think food would be a very good idea.’

We each polished off a classic burger and fries as also featured in the book and Rachel joined us in time for pudding. The black forest chocolate mousse was to die for but it didn’t have much impact on soaking up all the alcohol units we had downed in the rest of the cocktails. Rachel was pleasantly merry, but Alex and I had tipped over the edge of that as our later vociferous objection to coming third in the quiz proved.

‘I need air,’ I said, slipping out of the booth, once our answers had been counted again and our third place conclusively confirmed.

‘And I need to come with you,’ said Alex, sliding along the seat.

‘No, no,’ I said, grabbing his arm. ‘You stay here and keep our seats because I don’t think I can stand for the rest of the night or hoist myself up on one of those stools if we lose the booth.’

‘Hey,’ Alex laughed. ‘That rhymes.’

‘I know,’ I giggled, stumbling but only very slightly.

‘I’m definitely coming with you,’ Alex laughed again.

‘You’re such a gent,’ I said, familiarly slipping my arm through his. ‘Just going to get some air!’ I yelled to Rachel, but I’m not sure she heard me.

The fresh air made me feel more awake, but no less tipsy. Although I couldn’t have been that gone, because I had sense enough to realise that I didn’t have the added stress of trying to walk along the uneven road in heels.

‘Come on,’ I said to Alex, pulling him along with me.

‘Where are we going?’

‘No idea.’

We stopped at the gated entrance of the field which signified the end of the tiny village of Lakeside and where the more rugged landscape once again took over.

‘I think it’s the Perseid peak tonight,’ Alex said, leaning on the gate and tipping his head back to look at the stars.

‘That sounds a bit rude,’ I giggled.

My sober self would have cringed.

‘There, look!’ he said, pointing to the sky, but by the time I’d spun around, I’d missed the starry spectacle.

‘Do you think we should lay down?’ I suggested, looking about us for a suitable spot.

‘Absolutely not,’ he said. ‘It’s way too damp and... there... look. Another one.’

I missed that one too. Alex stopped looking up and looked at me instead.

‘If you keep looking at me,’ he laughed, as he realised I was staring, ‘you’re going to miss everything.’

I carried on gazing, but not at the constellations. In that moment, *he* felt like everything and I didn’t think it was just Rachel’s fully loaded cocktails which were making me believe that.

I stepped in front of him, leaning in between his legs which he'd positioned slightly apart to balance himself while he was looking up.

'What are you doing?' he asked, his Adam's apple dipping as he swallowed, his eyes taking the whole of me in.

'I'm not sure,' I said softly.

'In that case,' he said, the words catching in his throat as I inched closer, 'you definitely shouldn't do it. Em...'

'Don't say anything,' I begged as the silk of my top pressed against his chest and my hips pushed against his.

We were so close I could feel his breath and his heart beating as fast as mine as the heat from his body met the bare skin of my chest and arms. He rested his hands lightly on my waist to try and ease me away but I resisted.

'If you really don't know what you're doing,' he began, 'then you really shouldn't be...'

'It's all right,' I brazenly said, brushing my lips lightly against the side of his neck and feathering his tanned skin with soft, butterfly kisses. 'I'm getting surer with every second.'

He let out a sultry moan and his hands held my waist more firmly, pulling me closer and making my own breath catch. Desire pulsed through me as a warm and longing ache began to build. I drew away for the briefest moment to reposition myself and he pulled me straight back. Our eyes locked and then my mouth was on his.

His lips were soft and full and the kiss, which was tentative to begin with, quickly intensified as I dipped my tongue into his mouth and he groaned again. He spun me around so my back was against the gate and then his mouth was on my collarbone and throat as he leaned into me.

'Don't stop,' I begged, pulling him closer. 'Don't stop.'

With his eyes on mine again and his chest rapidly rising and falling, he slipped his hand under the silk of my top. He brushed the lacy cup of my bra, making me gasp and my nipples harden. His touch was tantalisingly light and it fuelled my desire. I pushed myself into him feeling his want match mine.

‘Kiss me again,’ I breathed and he did.

Harder that time and the strength of his caress matched it. I was crazy with desire, arching against him as his mouth tracked lower.

‘Oh, Alex.’

A sudden shaft of light illuminated the road back towards the village and we sprang apart, chests heaving and sweat pooling.

‘Fuck,’ I groaned as the sound of heels met my ears.

‘Em!’ came Rachel’s voice. ‘Alex! Are you out here?’

‘Yes!’ I called back, albeit a little shakily. ‘We’re here.’

I couldn’t look at Alex. I couldn’t bear to see the desire I couldn’t quench in his eyes or worse, the regret that he had succumbed to my tipsy seduction.

‘What are you doing all the way up here?’ Rachel asked, when she finally reached us. ‘It’s freezing.’

I didn’t think it was cold at all.

‘Perseid reaches its peak tonight,’ said Alex, pointing at the sky.

‘Sounds a bit rude.’ Rachel grinned and I burst out laughing. ‘What?’ She blinked.

‘Nothing,’ I said, linking her arm through mine.

‘You haven’t really come down here to avoid my singing, have you?’ She pretended to pout.

‘Of course not,’ I said. ‘I’m looking forward to it.’

‘Come on then,’ she said, pulling me back towards the pub.
‘It’s about to start.’

I caught Alex’s hand and we walked along in a wobbly line.

‘And I’ve put you two down for the duet,’ she said. ‘You’re singing “Love Will Find a Way”.’

‘It bloody better,’ Alex whispered, squeezing my fingers and I laughed again.

‘What was that?’ she asked.

‘I was just saying,’ he cleverly replied, ‘that will be the perfect end to the day.’

Chapter 19

More of Rachel's double strength cocktails, coupled with a few hours' karaoke, did not make for a passionate end to the day and love, or perhaps more accurately lust, most definitely did not find a way.

It was a miracle that we even made it back to the cottage because the taxi driver Connor had booked didn't want to take us anywhere when he realised we were all a little worse for wear.

'No one's going to hurl, Tony,' Connor reassured him. 'They're not that far gone, but here are a couple of carrier bags just in case.'

Connor had been right, none of us did hurl but, lying in bed staring at the ceiling a few hours later, cursing the strength of the light peeping around the curtains and not at all impressed by the layer of fuzz coating my tongue, I thought I might then.

The rolling sensation in my stomach had little to do with the killer cocktail combo though. The nausea was almost entirely the result of guilt and regret, which was a wholly different sort of concoction.

I had shamelessly thrown myself at Alex and of course, given the amount he had also drunk, he had responded. It would have taken a will of iron for him not to. Had he not been three sheets to the wind I knew he would have stepped away because he was a stand-up guy but he, like me, had been the wrong side of a few of the killer brew combos by then and both our inhibitions had been flattened in the alcoholic stampede.

Not that I was using that as an excuse or justification for my bad behaviour which had shamelessly continued in the pub after Rachel had dragged us back inside. A sultry rendition of 'Love Will Find a Way' followed by some hedonistic dirty dancing had cranked things between us up even further, but the drive back had tamped the flames down again.

The journey back to the cottage, with the car windows down and the chilly breeze stopping us from falling asleep, had gifted me with the sense to head straight to my own room rather than Alex's and I was relieved he hadn't questioned that. The last I'd seen of him before I closed the bedroom door, he was sensibly downing a pint of water in the kitchen.

As my head pounded, I released a long, drawn-out breath and wished I'd had the wherewithal to do the same.

'Are you dying?' came Rachel's muffled voice from her side of the room. 'Because I am.'

I didn't answer.

'Are you even there?' she croaked, shifting under her duvet. 'Or are you loved up and enjoying some pre-breakfast sex in the bed next door?'

'Of course, I'm here,' I mumbled. 'And I am dying, but I don't think from quite the same affliction as you.'

I rolled on to my side to face her and suppressed an unexpected smile.

'What?' She frowned.

'The Alice Cooper look suits you.'

'Shit,' she groaned. 'I didn't wash my make up off, did I?'

'Nope,' I said, feeling virtuous in that department at least. 'I told you to. I even offered to do it for you, but you wouldn't let me. You pretty much passed out as soon as your head hit the pillow.'

‘Call yourself a friend,’ she said, easing her head off the bed and sighing at the sight of the mascara-streaked pillowcase. ‘I’ll have to wash this quick. It’s vintage Laura Ashley for crying out loud. You should have slapped a wipe over my face when I flaked out.’

‘You’re a big girl,’ I told her. ‘And besides, you were face down to begin with.’

‘How’s Alex this morning?’ she asked, gingerly lowering her head back down.

‘No idea,’ I said lightly. ‘I haven’t been up yet. I can’t imagine he’s any more alive than we are though.’

But I was wrong about that. When I found the courage to get out of bed and the ground didn’t sway beneath my bare feet, I found him at the cottage front door, pulling on his trainers.

He looked remarkably sprightly and I found myself hoping that it was the pint of pre-sleep water which was responsible for his chipper demeanour rather than my wanton behaviour and the implications of what he thought might end up happening between us as a result of it.

‘Good morning.’ He grinned.

‘Hey.’ I weakly waved.

‘I’ve poured you and Rach a pint of water apiece, lined up some painkillers and there’s tea in the pot,’ he reeled off.

‘Thank you.’ I nodded. ‘I think that’s about all either of us can handle right now.’

‘I thought it might be,’ he laughed.

‘I can’t believe you’re so Pollyanna though,’ I said enviously, then added in case our embrace was the reason behind his chipper demeanour and knowing I needed to face it straightaway. ‘Look Alex,’ I sighed. ‘About last night...’

‘Wasn’t it fantastic?’ he happily reminisced after a moment’s hesitation. ‘Let’s talk about it when I get back.’

‘From where?’ I frowned. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Just up to the road,’ he told me. ‘Connor promised he’d drop off some of his famous hangover helper breakfast rolls at eight.’ He glanced over at the kitchen clock. ‘So, I better get going. It’s almost five to now. You’ll manage one of those, won’t you?’

‘I daresay by the time you get back, I’ll be capable of mainlining some protein and carbs.’

‘What about Rachel?’

‘I’m sure she will too.’

‘Great,’ he said, pulling open the door. ‘I’ll be back in a bit.’

I watched him jog up the path, the rolling sensation in my tummy fast turning into a tight knot.

‘You’re going to break his heart, aren’t you?’ came Rachel’s voice behind me and I jumped.

I turned to find her standing in the doorway, *still* wearing last night’s make-up, although not in any of the right places, and wrapped in the duvet from her bed.

‘What are you talking about?’ I sighed, peeling a false eyelash from her forehead before walking over to the kitchen and finding everything set out as Alex had said it was.

‘I know I interrupted something when I came to find the two of you,’ she said, her tone suggesting she wished she’d left us to it.

‘Only our stargazing,’ I lightly said back, handing her one of the glasses of water and two painkillers.

‘Don’t lie,’ she tutted, downing both and handing the glass back again.

‘I’m not.’

‘Yes, you are.’

‘We were watching the meteor shower,’ I said, turning away and swilling her glass out before pouring the tea.

‘Your top would not have got creased like that from watching the bloody stars,’ she pointed out.

She’d got me there. It was pretty ruffled.

‘Your necklaces were tangled too and your curls were definitely dishevelled,’ she carried on in a sing-song voice. ‘That sort of disarray only comes from close contact.’

I felt my traitorous cheeks flush.

‘Skin to skin contact,’ she sexily added.

‘All right,’ I said, putting up my hands.

‘Ha!’

‘I admit it, I did kiss him.’

‘*You* kissed *him*?’

‘Yes,’ I confessed. ‘It was definitely all me. Poor Alex didn’t stand a chance.’

‘Poor Alex my arse,’ Rachel said crudely. ‘I bet he wasn’t thinking poor Alex or anything like it. I bet he couldn’t believe his luck. Haven’t I been saying...’

‘Yes,’ I loudly responded. ‘But can you please stop?’

She looked as if I’d slapped her.

‘Sorry,’ I said, shaking my head and making it thump. ‘I didn’t mean to snap.’

‘What’s going on?’ she asked, then immediately said, ‘Oh god, you really are going to break his heart, aren’t you? I was kidding before, but that’s what you’re going to do, isn’t it?’

‘That kiss was a mistake,’ I sighed. ‘One which I most definitely will not be making again and one,’ I perhaps unfairly added, ‘that I blame you and your triple strength bloody cocktails for.’

‘They were double strength actually,’ she corrected. ‘And, for what it’s worth, I don’t think it was a mistake.’

‘It was.’

‘No,’ she said, as if she knew my mind better than I did. ‘It wasn’t. You’re so well suited. You’re both creative, you have so many common interests and you look great together...’

‘I get what you’re saying,’ I conceded, because I couldn’t contradict her on any of those points, ‘but I haven’t come on this break with the intention of either starting a relationship or having a fling.’

‘I appreciate that,’ she carried on, ‘but neither of us were expecting to share it with Alex either, were we? Not this Alex, anyway. Him being who he is has been a total game changer. You have to admit that.’

‘I just haven’t got the headspace for a relationship right now,’ I told her. ‘I’ve got other things on my mind and I’ve come here with the sole intention of making sense of them.’

‘What things?’

‘And I can’t afford to get side-tracked,’ I more calmly said, knowing I’d regret it if I blurted out what I had been considering just to stop her going on about Alex. ‘We’ve already got a third of our time here behind us and I’m not about to go off-piste and waste what’s left.’

Rachel looked shocked. ‘Starting a relationship with Alex would not be a waste of anything,’ she said crossly.

‘You know I didn’t mean it like that,’ I tutted. ‘I just need to keep focused and he would be... a distraction.’

‘So, what exactly is it that you need to be so focused on?’ she directly asked. ‘I thought you’d made up your mind about the new job. Is it something else or are you still not sure about that?’

‘It’s not that,’ I quietly told her. ‘That’s all settled.’

That was partly true. Thanks to my alone time in the cottage and the opportunity to completely immerse myself in my work

and the resultant joy that sprang from it, I had suddenly settled on a decision. Just not the one she thought. What a moment to conclusively realise it!

I didn't know how I was going to convince her that I could manage on the financial front when she moved in with Jeremy, but I wasn't going to let that put me off making the leap. Perhaps I could work both jobs part-time and gradually increase the hours working on my business until it became my entire working week? That way, I'd calm Rachel's worries *and* have a safety net.

'Em?' Rachel said sharply. 'Are you listening?'

'Yes,' I said, coming to. 'Of course, I am.'

'Well, that's a relief,' she huffed. 'About the job, I mean, but it doesn't alter the fact that you're going to break Alex's heart, does it?'

'What?'

'You're going to break his heart and send him spiralling right back to where he was at the start of the holiday.'

'That's not fair,' I said indignantly.

This was exactly the sort of drama I had been wanting to avoid.

'And it's not true,' I carried on, but with less conviction than I would have liked. 'I'm putting the brakes on things before they get out of hand and I'm putting us firmly back on track. I want us to go back to being three friends enjoying their book-lovers' getaway, just like we'd always planned, with no strings and no complications and long before anyone's heart is in danger of being damaged.'

'I think you might find it's too late for that,' she said as we heard Alex bounding back up the path and full of beans that I was still hoping our embrace wasn't responsible for. 'You've crossed a line, Em, and there's no going back now.'

She accepted the fully loaded breakfast roll Connor had so kindly supplied and then retreated back to bed.

‘Is she really feeling that bad?’ Alex asked once she’d closed the door. ‘Or is she trying to give us some space?’

I had just picked my roll up, but his canny comment curbed my fledgling appetite and I put it down again. It was a shame because it had looked and smelled so delicious when he offered it to me.

‘Aren’t you going to eat that?’ he asked, already tucking into his.

‘In a minute,’ I said, sitting back on the sofa. ‘Perhaps. How was Connor?’

‘Full of the joys.’ Alex smiled. ‘I think his theme nights are good for business.’

‘They’re certainly good for emptying out his optics,’ I said, rubbing my temples.

‘Are you still feeling rough?’ He frowned. ‘I read somewhere that rubbing your neck and shoulders is better than your temples, for relieving a headache.’

Having experienced a little of his technique last night, I’d bet the whole of my savings that Alex was a dab hand at giving neck and shoulder massages.

‘I’m feeling a lot of things right now,’ I told him, forcing myself to stop thinking about his hands and trying to find the words to let him down gently. ‘Alex...’

‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘You don’t need to say it.’

I looked at him and he unwaveringly met my gaze. Somehow, I knew that he knew exactly what I was about to say.

‘That’s as maybe,’ I softly said, ‘but I still want to. Is that all right?’

‘I suppose.’ He shrugged. ‘I was just trying to spare you.’

‘You really have read my mind, haven’t you?’

‘Yeah,’ he sighed. ‘I have. But it wasn’t until this morning that realisation dawned. I went to bed thinking we were going to pick up where we’d left off at that field gate, but when I saw you before I went to meet Connor, I knew.’

‘How?’

He put the remains of his roll down on the paper bag it had come wrapped in and also sat back.

‘Well, let’s put it this way,’ he ruefully smiled. ‘You don’t say to someone you’ve been passionately kissing “About last night” the next time you see them if you’re still pumped up with lust for them, do you?’

I dropped my gaze to my lap as my face flared.

‘If you’re really still feeling it when you first clap eyes on them again,’ he carried on, ‘you leap straight on them, don’t you?’

I knew he was trying to make light of it and was grateful for that.

‘And right now,’ he carried on, ‘you don’t look inclined to leap in my direction at all.’

‘Oh, Alex,’ I said. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘Don’t be,’ he said. ‘It’s fine. I thought about it while I was waiting for Connor and it’s probably for the best. We’ve both come here with baggage, so it’s hardly the ideal time to be starting something up, is it? Even if that kiss was...’

‘Unforgettable,’ I breathed.

‘Oh.’ He shrugged, funnily feigning nonchalance. ‘I was going to say all right, but if you want to put an ego boosting label on it.’

I picked up one of the sofa cushions and threw it at him. He caught it and grinned.

‘We got carried away in the moment,’ he said kindly. ‘After three too many cocktails.’

‘I think we’d only had two at that point,’ I cut in.

‘That’s not helpful,’ he laughed. ‘And you’re wrong. Given Rachel’s ridiculous measures it was actually more like six.’

‘Fair point,’ I conceded.

‘It was a moment of holiday madness,’ he said, and I wondered if he really believed that. ‘That should definitely not be repeated.’

I didn’t say anything because I wasn’t sure if his willingness to pretend it hadn’t meant anything was making me feel better or worse. I didn’t think I would have minded if he’d fought for us the tiniest bit, which I know was a complete contradiction.

‘Not that I don’t like you,’ he carried on when I didn’t say anything, ‘because I really do and if this had been any other time, I wouldn’t be feeling anywhere near as willing to give you or that unforgettable kiss up.’

That went some way to making me feel a bit better.

‘But...’

‘But,’ I said, picking up the thread he’d started to pull, ‘we’re on a once in a lifetime holiday with loads to see and do and get straight and no desire to overshadow the real purpose behind our trip with a romantic complication.’

‘Exactly.’ He nodded along. ‘Although to be honest, I was just hoping for three weeks’ amazing no strings sex and a wave goodbye at the end of it.’

‘I don’t believe that for a second,’ I said, picking my roll back up. ‘If there’s one thing you’re not, Alex, it’s that guy.’

Our eyes met for a moment.

‘Very true,’ he said, screwing his serviette into a tiny tight ball. ‘I am most definitely not that guy.’

Chapter 20

Ultimately it was a relief that Alex was so willing for the two of us to slip back into the friend zone because it meant there was no ill feeling between Rachel and me and we were all able to carry on in the groove that we'd so comfortably started to slip into before cocktail-gate.

As a result, we spent more time at the lake, plenty of time in the pub and also enjoyed the peace and quiet at the cottage where Alex worked on his restaurant branding, Rachel read all the novels she didn't have time for during term-time and I designed two more skirts, thanks to the extra fabric I'd ordered, and completed the second picture I needed to send off to the eager recipient.

The peace and settled atmosphere gave me plenty of time to further consider the possibility of a part-time soft launch which, I hoped, wouldn't jeopardise either Rachel's plans or our friendship. On paper, it looked like the ideal compromise and I hoped the reality would live up to the planning and I could find a position in my field which offered the twenty or so hours I thought would be the perfect fit.

Even though I was extremely curious and mildly concerned, I hadn't tackled Rachel about the time she had recently been spending alone in the pub. Time I had thought she was messaging Jeremy during his strictly prescribed schedule. We'd come through me letting Alex down unscathed and I didn't want to risk upsetting the apple cart. And to be honest, even though she had kept her trips to The Drover's to herself, any time she wasn't

messaging Jeremy was warmly welcomed whether I was privy to the details of them or not.

We were getting closer to the mid-point of our getaway when Alex set off for his office in Manchester that week and, even though I didn't like to dwell on how I was going to feel when there was more of the trip behind than ahead of us, I was feeling optimistic and in a celebratory mood when I got back from posting off the second picture commission.

'You've been gone ages,' Rachel pointed out when I arrived back late into the afternoon. 'Did Mrs Timpson collar you again?'

'Of course, she did,' I laughed, placing my shopping bag down on the counter.

Considering I had only walked to Lakeside with the intention of emptying it, it was very heavy and very full for the walk back, but I didn't mind because it was packed with ingredients I could utilise to, hopefully, cook us a special dinner. In that carefree Rose-inspired moment, I didn't even mind that I'd blown my weekly food budget on it.

'Well, you don't sound too upset,' Rachel said, peering into the bag, before I could whisk it away. 'You haven't forgotten Alex is bringing a shop back with him, have you?'

'I'm not upset,' I told her. 'And no, I haven't forgotten.'

'What's going on then?' she asked, catching my upbeat mood.

'I popped into the pub for a lemonade when I got to Lakeside because I was feeling hot,' I told her, 'and my phone updated while I was chatting to Connor.'

'Good news?'

'Just a bit.' I grinned.

'Go on,' she said. 'Don't leave me in suspenders!'

'Well,' I slowly said, savouring the magical moment. 'As well as those two picture commissions I got off the back of the

anniversary present for Hugh's wife, I've now had orders for three more dresses as well.'

'That's amazing!' Rachel gasped, her eyes every bit as wide as mine had been when I read the emails. 'Who are they from?'

'It's another friend of a friend recommendation,' I explained. 'And even though I can't make the body of the dresses up now because I haven't got the measurements, I can start putting the patchwork panels together in the colours the client has asked for.'

'Get you,' said Rachel. 'Clients! How professional does that sound?'

'I know,' I said. 'It's just as well I registered my earnings with HMRC, isn't it?'

'Surely you haven't already earnt enough to pay tax on what you've been doing?'

'No,' I said. 'Well, I don't think so, but you still have to declare it as a second income.'

At least having some basic knowledge about that side of things would be a help when I got going properly.

'Crikey,' said Rachel. 'I didn't know that. At this rate, you'll be jacking in the day job and expanding this sideline in no time.'

'About that...' I began, thinking there would be no better opportunity to explain what I was planning, but there was a knock on the door and the opportunity was lost.

'Hello Catriona,' said Rachel, when she answered it. 'Come in.'

'I'm not stopping,' she said, having a quick look around, 'but I was passing and thought I'd just pop down and make sure everything's okay? As you know, I don't intrude as a rule, but as you're here for such a long time...'

'Everything's absolutely wonderful,' I told her, feeling relieved that Rachel's mascara hadn't done any lasting damage to the

pillowcase. 'Although you might need to employ some heavy-handed tactics to turf us out when the time comes.'

'Em's right,' Rachel laughed. 'This place is beginning to feel more like home than home.'

'I knew you'd feel like that.' Catriona smiled. 'I've hardly had any visits that have lasted as long as yours. I could get used to it though. It's rather nice not to have the tight turnaround of a weekly or fortnightly handover.'

'I can believe that,' Rachel said.

'Have you time for tea?' I asked. 'I was just about to make a pot.'

'No, no,' she said. 'As I said, I just wanted to check in and as everything's ticking over okay, I'll leave you to it.'

Rachel walked back up to the road with her and I filled the fridge with some of the treats I'd picked up in the village as a way to distract myself. Catriona's visit had prompted me to think about the time constraints of our trip again and I really didn't want to get caught up counting down the days as opposed to living in the magnificent moment.

By the time Rachel got back, I'd changed my mind again about mentioning my business plan. That could be something special for the future. For now, I would remain focused on the present.

'So,' she said, sounding a little perturbed as she eased her feet out of her Converse without fully untying the laces. 'What's on the menu for tonight?'

'Something tried and tested that I can't get wrong,' I reassured her, knowing her cautionary tone was the result of some of my more disastrous culinary experiments.

'Beans on toast?'

'No,' I said, swatting her with a tea towel. 'Risotto.'

'Oh, yum.'

‘And I’m using some lovely ingredients courtesy of Mrs T to make it extra special.’

‘Such as?’ Rachel asked, her eyes shining because she knew she was safe with my risotto.

‘Well,’ I said. ‘There’s pecorino to stir through it from Connor’s aunt, who keeps sheep as well as goats, and some smoked pork lardons and also fresh peas to pop in right at the end.’

‘My mouth’s watering already,’ said Rachel, licking her lips. ‘Sweet, salty and savoury. I can practically taste it and you must let me pay half. Connor’s given me some cash for my stint in the bar the other night.’

‘No,’ I insisted. ‘This is my treat and I’m not going to start it too early, so snack now if you need to. I’m going to try and time it so it will be ready for when Alex gets back and we can all eat together.’

‘He’s been a good sport about everything, hasn’t he?’ she said, broaching the subject we’d both previously been avoiding.

‘The best,’ I said, ‘but then I knew he would be. We both agreed we didn’t want to plunge ourselves into a relationship, not even a short one, when we were supposed to be making the most of our book-based retreat.’

I didn’t mention our extra baggage, but hoped she would be accepting about me putting a halt on things now she knew for certain that he was as onside about it all as I was. Her nod suggested she was.

‘What time is he usually back?’ she asked.

‘Not much before eight,’ I said, suddenly aware that I was very in tune with his weekly comings and goings, ‘but he said it’ll definitely be nearer seven tonight.’

‘I’m not sure I’ll last until then,’ she grimaced, clutching her stomach.

‘That’s why I said you should snack,’ I laughed, presenting her with a box of cream cakes. ‘And that’s why I picked up these. They should tide us over for a while.’

The risotto was timed to perfection for Alex’s arrival around seven, but unfortunately, he didn’t appear.

‘I think we should get on and have ours,’ said Rachel as she lit the scented candles which I had dotted about the room and her tummy, in spite of the earlier cakes, gave the loudest rumble. ‘I’d hate for it to spoil,’ she added, giving the air an appreciative sniff.

‘You’re right,’ I said, turning off the heat and sliding two small warm baguettes out of the oven before breaking them apart and generously buttering them. ‘I hope he’s okay.’

‘I daresay he got held up in the office or maybe stuck in traffic coming out of the city,’ Rachel suggested, eagerly passing me two bowls.

‘You’re probably right,’ I agreed. ‘It’s a shame though.’

I had thoroughly enjoyed cooking the risotto. It was a simple dish but one I knew well and always took my time over. I knew some people added all the liquid at the beginning, but I liked to stir and tend right from the moment I added the rice to the melted butter, then poured in a glass of wine. Once that had been absorbed, I patiently added a ladle of stock at a time, stirring all the while.

I didn’t have many recipes in my repertoire but this was a favourite and definitely the most soothing to follow. Not that I was feeling all that soothed as the peas began to lose their fresh green colour and Alex still wasn’t back.

‘Are you fed up?’ Rachel asked, as she poured the wine I’d already opened to cook with, into two glasses.

‘I am a bit,’ I said. ‘But not with Alex because I know it won’t be his fault. I just don’t want his dinner to spoil.’

It had turned chilly as the afternoon gave way to early evening so we had lit the wood-burner again. It wasn’t something we had really been expecting to use much when we made the booking for the height of summer but the close proximity of the trees and the geographical location kept the cottage cool on cloudy days, so it was a justified treat.

Rachel curled up in the armchair, balancing her bowl on a cushion.

‘Pecorino?’ I offered, holding out a dish of the grated salty cheese. ‘There’s plenty stirred through, but would you like some on top, too?’

‘Yes, please,’ she said, holding the bowl out Oliver-style so I could sprinkle another helping on top.

I gave my own portion the same garnish and sat cross-legged on the sofa, my bowl wrapped in a tea towel because it was hot to the touch.

‘*Bon appétit.*’ I smiled. ‘I hope it tastes as good as it looks.’

‘And smells.’ Rachel appreciatively sniffed again. ‘And don’t you mean, *buon appetito* as it’s risotto?’

‘Probably,’ I laughed. ‘Anyway, enjoy.’

We each took a first taste and then nodded at each other as we chewed, savoured and swallowed.

‘Oh, yeah,’ said Rachel.

‘Good?’

‘Perfect,’ she said, appreciatively diving back in.

We didn’t speak as we ate but the yummy noises we made and the nods and smiles spoke volumes.

‘Best ever,’ said Rachel, wiping the last of the crusty buttered bread around the inside of her bowl to soak up every last morsel.

‘It’s probably arrogant to agree,’ I admitted as I reached for my wine, ‘but yeah, best ever, for sure.’

‘Cheers.’

‘Don’t you mean, *saluti*?’ I winked.

‘Yes,’ she laughed. ‘That too. Is there any more?’

‘Wine or risotto?’

‘Risotto.’ She grinned.

‘I’m sure I could find you another half ladle,’ I said, holding out my hand for her bowl.

‘Don’t leave Alex short though,’ she said, stretching out in the chair as I walked back to the kitchen.

‘I won’t,’ I promised. ‘But he’s missed out on a full glass of the wine and all of the bread.’

‘What’s that noise?’ Rachel then asked. ‘Is it raining?’

The heavens instantly answered as the rain began to drum down, drowning out the sound of everything else.

‘Just a bit,’ I laughed, but as I listened more intently, I thought I could hear something else too. ‘And thundering, maybe,’ I added, straining to separate the rumble from the rain.

It wasn’t thunder though, it was the sound of pounding feet. I was just about to say as much when the cottage door was flung open and Alex fell inside laughing and soaked through, closely followed by a sopping wet, but equally amused, Tori.

Chapter 21

Time seemed to stand still for a second, then Rachel sprang out of the armchair and ran, squealing, over to the door.

‘Oh my god!’ she shrieked. ‘What are you doing here?’

She pulled our friend in for a hug, receiving a soaking in the process.

‘I can’t believe it!’ she said, giving Tori a shake by the shoulders. ‘Can you believe it, Em?’

I was still standing in the kitchen with the risotto-filled ladle in my hand poised somewhere between Rachel’s bowl and the pan. I put it back down, wiped my hands on the towel and joined the three of them at the door.

‘No,’ I said, trying to sound excited as Alex pulled off his jacket and gave it a shake, soaking us all with freezing droplets of rain. ‘I can’t.’

‘I’ve come to stay.’ Tori beamed, still looking beautiful in spite of the fact that her hair was plastered to her head.

‘She’s come to stay,’ Alex echoed, pulling off his boots.

‘I’m here for the holiday,’ she said, looking from Rachel to me.

‘She’s here for the holiday,’ Alex repeated, then giggled.

‘Are you drunk?’ I frowned, as he swayed towards the doorframe.

‘A little,’ he said, holding up his forefinger and thumb to demonstrate the size of his inebriation.

He was way off, as men so often are with their measurements. Rachel looked at me and raised her eyebrows. Clearly, she was as taken aback by the unexpected turn of events and surprise guest as I was, but far better at pulling the shock off. And not for the first time since we'd arrived at the cottage.

'Well, come in, the pair of you,' she said, encouraging Tori out of her dripping coat. 'I have a feeling this is a meet-cute I'm going to want to hear all about.'

I turned back to the kitchen feeling irrationally giggled by Rachel's choice of words, but then remembered my manners.

'Would you like some dinner while you fill us in?' I offered, thinking I might be able to stretch what was left to two if they weren't that hungry.

'What's on the menu?' Alex asked, wandering over and leaning so far across the counter he was right in my face. 'It smells amazing.'

He drew the word out but I didn't feel the same glow of satisfaction hearing him say it as I had experienced when Rachel had pointed out the delicious aroma.

'Risotto,' I told him, feeling further surprised that his piercing dark, but somewhat unfocused gaze no longer reached me in quite the same way as it recently had.

'Oh, yum,' said Tori, pulling off what I could see looked like brand-new Dubarry boots. The Barbour she had been wearing looked fresh out of the box too. 'Em's risotto is legendary.'

'It's got bacon in it,' I said, for some reason unable to acknowledge the compliment.

'Oh no,' she said. 'I can't have it then. I'm vegetarian,' she added for Alex's benefit.

'Had I known you were coming,' I swallowed, 'I would have left it out.'

‘It’s fine.’ She shrugged. ‘We ate in the pub anyway. What a find The Drover’s is and that Connor is an Irish hunk and a half, isn’t he?’

It was a classic Tori slash Rose comment, but it rankled with me as did the fact that they’d already eaten. It shouldn’t have annoyed me because Alex hadn’t known I was making something special, but it did.

‘Did you have a big meal in the pub?’ I asked him, while Tori made herself at home in front of the fire and in my usual spot on the sofa.

‘I did.’ He frowned. ‘I didn’t know you were going to cook.’

‘I know you didn’t,’ I said, trying to smile. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘But I could definitely go for some of that risotto, if there’s enough left.’ He smiled, making me feel a bit better. ‘Now I’ve smelt it, I can’t resist.’

‘Give him all of it,’ Rachel insisted. ‘I don’t think I’ve got room for another helping now my brain has registered my tummy’s full.’

I filled a bowl for Alex, then fetched a towel from the bathroom for Tori to rub her wet hair on and we congregated in front of the fire. Alex took the armchair and tucked into the risotto without uttering a word, Rachel sat next to Tori on the sofa and I perched on the pouffe next to the wood-burner.

‘So, come on,’ said Rachel, nudging Tori’s long legs. ‘Tell us what’s going on. How come you’re here?’

‘Have you run away?’ I asked, then felt cross with myself for sounding so snippy.

‘No,’ she laughed. ‘It’s nothing like that. I’m no Laurie, am I?’

‘So...’ Rachel encouraged, while Alex slurped.

‘Dad’s gone away on business with my eldest brother and the others are away now, too,’ she told us.

‘And your dad didn’t trust you to stay home alone?’ Rachel cut in, because it wouldn’t have been the first time.

‘Harsh,’ Alex muttered while Tori looked hurt.

‘Perhaps,’ I told him, ‘but Rachel’s only going on past experience.’

‘That’s a fair supposition, I suppose,’ Tori allowed. ‘But I actually didn’t want to stay home alone. I’ve been toeing the line since I moved back and found I didn’t want...’

‘To be tempted to throw another all-nighter?’ Rachel put in, before I could.

‘No,’ Tori tutted, sounding further deflated. ‘I really have changed, you know. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking and the truth of it is, I didn’t want to be in that big house all on my own for the next few weeks.’

‘So, you phoned your dad and he gave you his blessing to come here and join us while he was away,’ Alex knowledgeably said, rattling his spoon in the empty bowl.

‘Exactly.’ Tori nodded, throwing him one of her devastating smiles. ‘He transferred me a little spending money and arranged my travel to get me here too.’

‘So how come you ended up in The Drover’s?’ I frowned, thinking she really must have been behaving herself if her dad had relented to that degree. ‘And how come you know so much about it?’ I asked Alex.

‘I got a taxi all the way from the railway station, which Dad had booked and must have cost a fortune,’ Tori told us, further confirming that she was still without her beloved Range Rover. ‘But the driver couldn’t find the cottage and because I’d backed out of the trip at the last minute, I didn’t have the detailed directions to find the place that Catriona had given you. It’s very tucked away, isn’t it?’

‘It’s one of its many charms,’ I told her.

‘You should have messaged us before you set off,’ Rachel said. ‘I could have sent you the directions then.’

‘I wanted it to be a surprise.’ Tori beamed.

‘Mission accomplished then.’ I hesitantly smiled back.

‘So, what happened when you couldn’t find us?’ Rachel eagerly asked.

‘The driver dropped me at the pub,’ Tori carried on. ‘And when I told the lovely landlord who I was and where I was heading, he said he’d drive me here. I was just deciding whether or not I should finally message and give you a heads up in case you were out somewhere, when Alex walked in...’

‘And the rest is history,’ Alex winked, sounding thrilled.

‘So how come you were in the pub?’ I asked him, most likely sounding like a nag, but not meaning to.

‘I’d finished work early, so called in,’ he explained, ‘to see if Connor had any more desserts going spare. I thought it would be a bit of a mid-week treat.’

‘Em had already gifted us one of those,’ Rachel said, pointedly looking at the bowl on his lap.

‘And then Connor introduced me to Tori and obviously, I said I’d drive her here...’ Alex further elaborated.

‘We weren’t going to stay long,’ Tori giggled. ‘But Connor had this new beer on that he wanted us to sample and things got a bit fuzzy after that, didn’t they, Alex?’

Alex bit his lip and shook his head to suppress another laugh.

‘Since when have you been a beer drinker?’ I asked Tori.

‘Since about six o’clock this evening,’ she tittered and Alex couldn’t hold his mirth in a moment longer.

Rachel looked at me and she was laughing too, but I couldn't see the funny side. I wondered if the pair of them had also taken a walk along the lane but shut the thought down before I started to visualise it. Tori was far less inhibited than me, even without a belly full of guest beer and she certainly had form. It wouldn't be the first time she'd bagged a bloke who had once been on my radar. Not that she had known Alex had ever been on mine.

I had been dating a guy for a couple of months just after Rachel and I had graduated and when I finished things because I realised we didn't have anything in common, Tori had immediately asked if she could ask him out. I knew I shouldn't have been so put out considering I had been the one responsible for the break-up, and given that she had asked me, rather than just jumped straight in, but it had upset me more than I let on.

I knew it was my own fault because I should have said no when she asked. She wouldn't have pursued him without my blessing. But now, she wouldn't be paying me the courtesy of checking if I minded her flirting with Alex, and potentially more, because she hadn't been privy to everything that had happened before her rain-soaked arrival.

'So, did Connor have any desserts to spare then?' Rachel asked.

'Do you know,' Alex said, wiping his eyes, 'I never got around to asking.' That set him and Tori off again. 'The second I was introduced to Tori and she started telling me all about you two and your lives away from here, sticky toffee pudding went clean out of my head.'

'I hope you didn't tell him too much,' said Rachel, giving Tori another nudge.

'Only the good stuff.' She winked. 'The poor sod already knew all about your singing, thanks to the *Hope Falls* karaoke night, so I couldn't spill the beans about that.'

I felt my face grow warm as I wondered if that conversation had led on to sharing a few of the more intimate details about that

night. At least if it had, then Tori would be in the know that Alex and I had form.

‘And the conversation wasn’t all one way,’ Tori carried on, making me feel hotter. ‘Alex told me about all the things you’ve been doing here, too. It sounds like a fabulous place, even better than we imagined it would be. I can’t wait to curl up in one of the window seats like the girls did in the book and I’m thrilled I haven’t missed the skinny-dipping.’

Her knowledge of the book sounded more detailed than when Rachel and I had left her and I wondered if she’d picked it up again in our absence.

‘You won’t be saying that if you go down to the lake and dip a toe in,’ Rachel warned her with a shudder. ‘I did when we first arrived, didn’t I, Em? And it was glacial.’

‘Oh, I don’t mind that,’ Tori said. ‘When I used to go to the spa, I loved the sauna into ice bath experience. It really gets the blood flowing.’

‘I’ll bet,’ said Alex, puffing out his cheeks.

‘Who wants coffee?’ I asked, jumping up too quickly and almost toppling into the hearth.

I covered the wobble, by holding out my hand to grasp Alex’s empty bowl.

‘Did you get the milk and the rest of the shopping?’ I asked him.

He looked up at me, all puppy dog eyes. ‘I did,’ he said, ‘but it’s in my car, which is back in the village. Obviously, I couldn’t drive here after all that beer, so Connor gave us a lift home and I didn’t think to get the bags before we set off.’

‘Oh, Alex,’ Rachel laughed.

‘I’ve left my keys with him so he can put the perishables in his fridge,’ Alex continued, trying to make amends. ‘Apparently, he’s

not allowed to put them in the pub one. Health and safety or food standards or something. How weird is that? A fridge is a fridge, right?’

I let out a long breath. I didn’t give two hoots about the rules and regulations which governed running a pub kitchen, I just wanted to make us all a drink.

‘And Connor is also looking after my bags tonight,’ Tori then said, ‘because they’re all back in the bar, too.’

She’d obviously had a right old time of it if she’d forgotten her luggage. I could just imagine the three of them with their heads together, laughing and getting better acquainted. I knew that sounded childish and it shouldn’t have rankled, but it did.

‘That’s probably just as well,’ I told her. ‘Because I don’t think you’ll actually be able to stay here beyond tonight, Tori.’

‘Of course, she will,’ said Rachel, throwing me a look.

‘The booking was for three people,’ I pointed out. ‘Tori makes the party four.’

‘Catriona won’t mind,’ said Rachel. ‘I’ll walk up to the road in the morning and call to okay it with her. If I tell her it’s Tori, who was a member of the original booking we made, I can’t see it will be an issue. We’ve paid the same amount of money to be here, whether it’s three or four of us, haven’t we?’

‘If you say so.’ I shrugged.

‘I’m really sorry,’ Tori said, sounding upset. ‘I didn’t think it would be a problem. I was just so excited to see you guys and finally live the *Hope Falls* dream. Emily’s right, though. I shouldn’t have just descended. Perhaps I haven’t changed as much as I thought I had,’ she sighed, blinking back tears. ‘I suppose I could see if Connor lets out rooms, or knows someone in the village who does, although I haven’t got all that much cash...’

‘Oh, for pity’s sake,’ I said, pulling her up off the sofa and giving her a one-armed hug. ‘I’m sure it will be fine. Ignore me,’ I insisted. ‘I was just thinking aloud and wondering how we could work things out, that’s all.’

I really did feel rotten. It wasn’t her fault that I’d had such an adverse reaction to seeing her and Alex fall through the door. The look on her face now reminded me very much of the one that Alex had worn when we first arrived and I’d made things difficult because he wasn’t the person I’d been expecting.

If things had turned out all right with him, a man who just a few short weeks ago had been a total stranger, then I should be able to get my head around being reunited with one of my best friends, shouldn’t I?

Calling a truce with Alex had only enhanced the whole extended getaway experience, so the sooner I got used to Tori being with us, the better. If I gave the change a chance and quickly got my head straight again, then this very special summer now had every possibility of becoming even more magical.

‘Well,’ she said, hugging me back. ‘As long as you’re really sure.’

‘Of course, I’m sure,’ I told her.

‘Of course, she’s sure,’ said Alex.

I rolled my eyes, hoping he wasn’t back on the tipsy repetitive loop again.

‘But Em does have a point,’ Rachel then surprised me by saying.

‘I do?’ I frowned.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘What are we going to do about the sleeping arrangements? There are only two bedrooms here, aren’t there? The twin we’re in and the double.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Alex, standing up. ‘Tori can have my room.’

I felt my heart lurch and my face flush.

‘But then where will you sleep?’ Rachel asked him.

‘I can kip in here,’ he shrugged. ‘I don’t mind. As long as I can still use one of the bathrooms, I’m not bothered.’

Hadn’t he been the one waxing lyrical about the joys of that double mattress and how he was fulfilling Gracie’s dream and now he was giving it up to sleep on a sofa that wasn’t even a pull out?

‘Well,’ Rachel tentatively said, ‘as long as you’re sure.’

‘Absolutely,’ he nodded.

I couldn’t believe that Tori was going to take over the room, that exquisite room, that I had coveted for so long. In the grand scheme of things, it shouldn’t have mattered, but it did. It really hurt. I could feel Rachel’s eyes on me, but I didn’t trust myself to look at her.

‘That’s settled then,’ Tori said happily, clapping her hands. ‘Any chance I could borrow a T-shirt, Alex?’ she asked with a winning smile. ‘Only all of my clothes are back in the pub and I’m not sure it’s warm enough to sleep au naturel, or appropriate, if you’re going to be popping in and out to use the bathroom.’

Rachel shook her head and I turned away. It was all classic Tori. I bet Connor had come in for the same flirtatious treatment. I knew that she didn’t even know she was doing it half the time, but seeing her having everyone eating out of her hand grated a bit sometimes. And this was one of those times.

‘Give me a minute,’ said Alex, clearing his throat, ‘and I’ll see what I can find.’

Chapter 22

In the end, Rachel lent Tori her old Snoopy nightshirt which, of course, she looked impossibly cute in and I spent the night tossing and turning and feeling put out. The fact that I had no right to feel put out, coupled with the fact that Tori had done nothing to deserve the negativity I had already told myself I needed to banish, made its lingering presence all the more bitter and frustratingly harder to dismiss.

I was exasperatingly close to tears as I lay in bed listening to her and Alex talking next door. I couldn't hear any of what they were saying, but they chatted away long after we'd all decided to turn in. Rachel had wasted no time in nodding off, but with my ears straining to hear, even though it was impossible to make out a single word, I couldn't get anywhere even close.

'I'm going for a walk around the lake and then I'll call and sort things with Catriona,' Rachel informed me when I woke later than planned with a fuzzy head and bleary eyes the next morning. 'Are you all right? You look really rough.'

'Thanks,' I said grumpily.

'Did you not sleep?'

'How could I with the slumber party going on next door?' I complained. 'They were yapping on half the night.'

'Were they?' She shrugged, looking at the dividing wall. 'I never heard a thing.'

'Yes,' I said. 'They were. They seem to be getting along famously, don't they?'

Rachel looked at me for a second, taking me in. 'I suppose so,' she said. 'But that's all right, isn't it?'

'I guess,' I huffed, adding my own shrug to the conversation.

Rachel narrowed her eyes.

'Oh, ignore me,' I said, sitting right up and pushing my tangled hair out of my face. 'I'm just in a fug because I didn't sleep.'

There was so much more to it than that but I couldn't bear the thought of Rachel launching into a 'well, you didn't want him so don't go minding if someone else does' speech. Especially as we'd been there before and that was not what this was about.

'Why don't you try a hot shower?' she suggested in response to my explanation for sounding so sulky the second I'd opened my eyes. 'That might soothe you a bit.'

'What, and then go running down to the lake and jump off the jetty, Tori style?' I said, with a wry smile.

'It seems to work for her,' Rachel laughed.

Everything seemed to work for her. Even though her father had pulled the plug on her holiday, she'd still ended up on it. I nipped the desire to talk about piles of poo and roses firmly in the bud.

'I'll give it a go,' I said instead, pushing back the duvet with my feet. 'The shower, that is, not the swim in the lake.'

I'd finished my shower and made a pot of coffee when there was a knock on the cottage door. There was still no sign of Tori and if the softly snoring pile of blankets on the sofa was any indicator, it would be a while before Alex surfaced too.

'Hey, Connor.' I smiled, opening the door and finding him surrounded by a mountain of designer luggage. 'Are you moving in?'

'Someone is,' he laughed. 'Where do you want this lot? There's more in my car.'

‘More luggage?’ I squawked, wondering where it was all going to go.

Tori had never travelled light but a suitcase for every week we had left at the cottage felt rather excessive, even for her.

‘No, don’t panic,’ he said. ‘It’s just Alex’s shopping in the car and a parcel for you. I took it off the hands of a poor delivery guy who couldn’t find the cottage and was at his wits’ end to find the post office shut. I hope that was okay?’

‘Oh, yes, thank you,’ I said, knowing it would be more fabric I had ordered, but hadn’t had a specified delivery time for. ‘Let’s leave this lot here, next to Miss Tori’s Birkin,’ I added, wheeling one of the heavy suitcases inside, ‘and I’ll come with you to grab the rest.’

‘You don’t have to do that,’ said Connor, manoeuvring the other two cases through the door and into a position that wouldn’t cause too much of a trip hazard.

‘It’s fine,’ I told him as I pulled on my plimsolls and wondered how he’d managed to get all three cases from the car to the cottage in one go. ‘I could do with the fresh air. I’m feeling a bit groggy this morning.’

‘Is it a Tori hangover?’ he laughed.

‘Something like that,’ I sighed, following him out.

‘She’s quite something, isn’t she?’ he commented as we set off along the path.

‘Yep,’ I said. ‘She’s definitely something. Have you fallen under her spell, too?’

‘Me?’ Connor laughed. ‘I’ve only got eyes for one girl this summer, and sadly, she’s already spoken for.’

I linked my arm through his.

‘I’m sorry about that,’ I told him. ‘If we’re talking about the same girl, that is, then I’d far rather she—’

‘Don’t finish that sentence,’ Connor cut in. ‘Because that way lies madness.’

‘Fair enough,’ I said, squeezing his arm closer to mine.

‘So,’ he then asked. ‘Who else has fallen under Tori’s spell?’

‘Most likely everyone who was drinking in your pub when she landed last night,’ I reeled off. ‘Oh, and Alex, of course.’

Connor burst out laughing.

‘What?’ I frowned.

He looked at me and shook his head. ‘I’ll give you everyone who was in The Drover’s,’ he said, ‘because she made quite an impression.’

‘She always does,’ I sighed.

‘But not Alex.’

‘No?’ I said disbelievingly.

‘No,’ Connor insisted.

‘Well,’ I huffed. ‘You wouldn’t say that if you’d seen and heard the pair of them after you dropped them off. They stayed up talking half the night in the bedroom next to mine and Rachel’s.’

‘They’re sharing a room?’ Connor asked, wide-eyed.

‘No,’ I said, relieved that they hadn’t gone for that option, but still feeling put out. ‘Alex has given up his room, so Tori can have it. He’s now sleeping on the sofa.’

‘What a gent.’

‘Yes.’ I swallowed. ‘Isn’t he just?’

‘So, what were they talking about for so long?’

‘No idea,’ I sighed. ‘All I could hear was them rambling on, but I’ve no idea what about.’

I wondered if Alex had taken the opportunity to explain to Tori about why he was on the holiday. Did she know all about Gracie now, too?

‘No wonder you’re in such a grump,’ Connor said teasingly.

‘Exactly,’ I shot back. ‘I need my sleep. Always have. Anything less than seven hours and I’m not nice to know.’

‘Telling me,’ he quipped and I thumped his arm. ‘But I didn’t mean that,’ he said, playfully shoving me back.

‘What then?’

‘I meant, you’re in a grump because you think Alex likes Tori,’ he said sagely.

‘No, I’m not,’ I hotly denied, dropping his arm.

‘Yes, you are,’ he nudged. ‘But you’re completely wrong.’

I shook my head.

‘He probably does like her,’ Connor carried on, ‘because anyone who knows her must like her, right? But he doesn’t like her, like her.’

We’d reached the road by then and I helped him unload my bulky parcel and the shopping Alex had picked up but then forgotten the day before. There was quite a lot, definitely more than usual, which was just as well as we now had an extra mouth to feed.

‘I don’t know why you’d think I’d be bothered that Alex likes Tori,’ I said, unable to let the subject drop as we headed back down to the cottage. ‘Not that I am, but it makes no difference to me.’

Connor rolled his eyes and stopped to swap the bags he was carrying from one hand to the other. They were all heavy, so I didn’t bother redistributing mine.

‘What?’ I snapped.

‘I saw you at the cocktail and quiz night.’ He smiled. ‘We all did. You’re obviously into each other.’

‘You hit the nail on the head there,’ I told him, quickening my pace. ‘The cocktails had a lot to do with what went on that night.’

There was no point denying that we had been ‘into each other’ when we’d downed Rachel’s double strength concoctions, because the dancing and the duet, not to mention the rousing roadside embrace – not that anyone else had seen that – were all proof enough.

‘Maybe they did,’ Connor said, ‘but Alex likes you, Em. He likes you a lot, even without the cocktails.’

‘You don’t know that,’ I tutted, shrugging off what I already knew. Or thought I knew until Tori turned up.

‘Blokes talk,’ Connor shrugged.

I threw him a sceptical look.

‘Especially to a landlord after a few drinks,’ he said, adding weight to his words. ‘And Alex talks about you, a lot. Too much really and even without the beer. It’s quite boring. Sometimes when he leaves, I feel like I’ve got Em overload.’

I biffed him with the bags.

‘Well, whatever,’ I said. ‘Though I daresay he hasn’t mentioned me this week, because after cocktail hour, we had a deep and meaningful and both agreed that a relationship is the last thing that either of us needs right now.’

I let out a long breath wishing I felt better for saying that, but I didn’t. If anything, I felt worse.

‘You did?’ Connor frowned.

‘We did,’ I firmly said. ‘From our hangover onwards and for fear of possibly ruining our summer if things went wrong, we’ve agreed to be just good friends.’

We'd both been very grown up about the whole situation and it was now resolved. Sort of.

'Well, I hate to be the one to break it to you,' Connor said, chewing his lip, 'but I've spoken to him quite a bit this week and I don't think that's sunk in with him at all. It certainly hasn't shut him up anyway.'

'It hasn't?' I swallowed, as a fluttering sensation in my chest made my breath catch.

'Nope,' he said. 'So maybe Tori showing up will turn out to be a blessing. She might be just the tonic he needs if you're so determined that the pair of you shouldn't be together.'

If Alex did end up jumping straight into Tori's arms, especially as we'd jointly agreed that we *both* needed to be relationship-free on this holiday, then I would not be impressed. Even just the thought of it was putting me in an even grumpier mood.

'Oh yes,' I said, putting down one of the bags so I could open the cottage door. 'Tori's a tonic all right.'

I offered Connor a mug of the coffee I had made before he arrived, but he declined because he had to get back to The Drover's in time for a delivery. I was just thanking him again for his taxi service, when Rachel arrived back from her walk around the lake. In complete contrast to me, she looked the picture of health.

'Can I offer you a coffee?' I asked her, holding up a mug.

'Yes, please,' she said. 'Are you having one, Connor?'

'No,' he said. 'I'm now away.'

'In that case,' she said, 'hang fire with the coffee, Em. I'll walk up to the road with you, Connor, because I need to call Catriona.'

I watched the pair of them head off, wondering if Rachel had any idea that Connor still had romantic feelings for her. I hated the thought of her moving in with Jeremy in just a few weeks'

time. Or at any time for that matter. And especially when there were far lovelier men who thought so much of her in the world.

‘They make a cute couple, don’t they?’

‘Oh, bloody hell, Tori!’ I spun around to find her standing right behind me. ‘Where did you spring from?’

‘Sorry,’ she giggled. ‘You should see your face.’

I looked back at Connor and Rachel just as they disappeared out of sight.

‘He’s so much nicer than Jealous Jeremy,’ Tori said dreamily.

‘He is,’ I agreed. ‘And unfortunately, I need to talk to you about Jeremy.’

‘There’s no need,’ she sighed sadly. ‘I already know all about the big moving in extravaganza and the massive photo muddle.’

I felt a shiver run through me as she said the words out loud.

‘I’m so worried about her, Tor,’ I said, my voice catching again. ‘She hasn’t been in touch with him as much as I thought she had since we’ve been here, but...’

Tori laid a hand on my arm and shook her head. ‘Don’t worry about it,’ she whispered. ‘I have a plan.’

‘You do?’

‘I do.’

‘What is it?’

‘I’m not going to tell you.’ She winked. ‘But you’ll find out soon enough.’

‘But maybe I could help,’ I offered, keen to get involved.

‘You can’t,’ she said. ‘I can manage. It’s all in hand.’ Her expression changed to one of concern. ‘It might end up costing me,’ she added, ‘but it’ll be worth it.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘No more questions,’ she firmly said, smiling again. ‘Now, do I smell coffee? I’ve just had a swim in that tub and it’s given me a thirst. Isn’t that bathroom heaven?’

‘Yeah,’ I said, pouring her a mug. ‘Celestial.’

‘Ugh,’ she grimaced after the first mouthful. ‘This has gone over. Shall I make some fresh? What a novelty to have an old-fashioned pot instead of a pod machine.’

‘It’s all part of the being faithful to the book aesthetic,’ I told her, stunned that she was offering to make the coffee herself.

‘You’ll have to show me how to work it,’ she said, eyeing the pot as if it was from another time.

Which I supposed, given the age of the book, it was.

‘Here,’ I said, reaching around her. ‘This is where the coffee goes.’

By the time Tori had finished clattering about in the kitchen, over-filling the coffee pot and slightly singeing some toast, Alex was starting to come to and Rachel was back from calling Catriona.

‘All sorted,’ she announced, rushing in because it was starting to rain in spite of the promises made by the forecasters that we were in for a few dry days.

I was beginning to realise that in this part of the Lake District there was no such thing. Either that or we had been particularly unlucky on the weather front. No pun intended.

‘Catriona was thrilled that you’ve joined us, Tori.’ Rachel beamed at our friend. ‘And, you’ll be pleased to know, Alex,’ she added as his mussed-up head appeared over the back of the sofa – he looked as good as I felt, ‘that sofa is a pull out. But there’s a bit of a knack to setting it up, so Catriona’s going to come over later and show us.’

‘Great,’ he said huskily, then cleared his throat and tried again. ‘That’ll be more comfortable.’

‘And I’ve been thinking about the sleeping arrangements,’ Rachel carried on, leaving her Converse on the mat and coming further in. ‘I think we should all take a turn on the sofa.’

‘Except Em,’ Tori immediately said.

‘Why except me?’ I asked, wondering why I had been singled out.

‘Because when I drifted off to sleep last night in that delectable double,’ she said, coming to stand next to me, ‘I remembered that we’d drawn straws for that room and that you were over the moon to have won it because you’ve been dreaming of sleeping in there forever!’

I shook my head.

‘You have?’ Alex frowned.

‘She has,’ Tori confirmed, with one of her widest smiles. ‘She hadn’t shut up about it in literally months. Didn’t you know?’

‘I had no idea,’ Alex said, sounding upset. ‘Why didn’t you say anything, Em?’

Tori looked between us. ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘have I put my foot in it?’

‘No,’ I said, reaching for her hand. ‘It’s fine, Tor. I didn’t say anything, Alex, because there was no point. With the three of us here it made sense for Rachel and I to share the twin and for you to take the double. It was no big deal.’

‘Except it was,’ Alex tutted. ‘I’m so sorry. I just kind of assumed that’s what would work best.’

‘And it does,’ I said, dropping Tori’s hand. ‘It did, and don’t forget, it helped you fulfil something on that special list you came here with,’ I quietly added.

It really wasn't my place to bring either Gracie or her list up, but I wanted Alex to know that I genuinely hadn't minded about the room allocation, especially under the circumstances.

'I know,' he said smilingly, 'and it's kind of you to say so, but you're moving in there today, Em. Right, Tori?'

'Right,' she said, rushing over and giving him a high five.

'That sounds like a good idea to me,' said Rachel, also walking over and joining them.

I opened my mouth to argue but Tori shook her head and I knew she meant business, so closed it again. I wasn't sure how much she had really changed during the last few weeks, but her father's denial of her previously easy life seemed to have instilled in her a will of iron and a determination I hadn't seen before.

Combined with whatever she'd come up with to scupper Jeremy's plan to further bind Rachel into his web, it made her one very powerful woman and I found myself feeling excited about how her plan was going to play out in spite of my misgivings about her obvious fondness for our other housemate.

'I'll help you move your stuff,' she insisted. 'I'll even change the bed.'

Rachel took a step away and turned to gape at her. 'Who are you?' she gasped, 'and what have you done with our friend, Victoria?'

I couldn't help but laugh.

'I told you guys,' Tori pouted, giving Rachel a look. 'I'm a changed woman.'

Had I not heard her make the offer with my own ears, I never would have believed it, but she genuinely was sounding less like footloose and fancy-free Rose with every passing minute.

Chapter 23

My astonishment at Tori's transformation was given another nudge when she kept her word and did help me move my things from one room to the other. She even stripped and remade that fabulous double bed, just as she said she would.

'I cannot believe you know how to work a washing machine,' Rachel commented, also looking surprised as Tori bundled in the bed sheets and set the program.

'And I can load a dishwasher,' Tori said smugly, standing back up again, 'and I'm getting there with the ironing, too.'

'It's a miracle,' Rachel teased, but I knew that really, she was as pleased about Tori's down to earth and back to basics transformation as I was.

We both loved her to bits, but the way she had been cossetted and pandered to for so long hadn't made her the most well-rounded adult in the world.

'Your housekeeper will be out of a job soon,' I told her.

'I wouldn't go that far,' she said. 'I'm still thinking about what I'm going to do for a career so I'll need help at home when Dad hopefully signs the new lease and lets me move back into my apartment, won't I?'

'Oh, yes,' said Rachel, rolling her eyes. 'Just like Em and me. We need domestic help too, don't we?'

'Absolutely,' I laughed, pleased to hear that our friend was at least still thinking about the world of work. 'We just don't get it.'

‘Well,’ Tori further surprised us by saying, ‘I’m rather enjoying getting stuck in to some of the domestic stuff. There’s a sort of satisfaction in it, isn’t there?’

‘In that case,’ said Alex, who had been listening in and was wearing an amused expression, ‘you can carry the bin bags down to the road this week. The refuse van can’t get to the cottage so we have to lug them up the path.’

‘Steady on,’ Tori tutted, sounding more familiar. ‘Don’t go mad, although I suppose it would be a good arm and core workout,’ she thoughtfully added.

We ate supper next to the lake that evening and I tried not to mind that Alex and Tori shared both the bench and a blanket, when it started to get chilly. Given that I was the one who had instigated the whole *nothing can happen between us* situation with Alex, it was hardly fair that I should object to their closeness.

However, the fact that Alex had cited his own baggage as justification for accepting the non-start situation between the two of us meant that the apparent speedy transferral of his affections and willingness to get to know Tori better did grate a bit. Had he somehow miraculously emptied his bags or was I reading too much into it?

Even though I was still trying to puzzle the Tori and Alex situation out, I made my excuses early and headed back to the cottage alone. I held my breath as I stepped into the bedroom and closed the door behind me. Thanks to the lingering scent of sweet peas it was easy to imagine myself tucked up in another room, in a different house in the Lakes, with the voice of Grandad describing everything that I could now see around me with my own eyes.

The room was every bit as perfect as I had always imagined it would be. The large windows overlooking the trees, the smooth warm floorboards underfoot, the patchwork cushion filled rocking chair, the old-fashioned dressing table and of course, the inviting double bed. This had been Heather’s sanctuary in the book and

now it was mine. Coupled with walks in the wonderful landscape, she had puzzled out her life's purpose in this very room and I was determined to do the same.

After a long bubble filled bath (which I enjoyed even more than when I had aching muscles after the ghyll scrambling), and as I slipped between the deliciously cool cotton sheets, I strove to get on track again and keep everything else that was now happening in perspective.

I again reminded myself what I had come on this holiday to do and in a spirit of renewed bonhomie and letting bygones be bygones, drifted off to sleep thinking that the next day would be the perfect time to present Rachel with her dress and maybe offer to make transformed Tori an outfit of her own.

'Like a log,' were the first words I heard Alex say when I reluctantly left the beautiful bedroom the next morning.

'And you're not just saying that?' Rachel asked.

'No,' he said. 'I really mean it.'

'Alex says he's going to sleep on the sofa every night,' Rachel told me.

'That's hardly fair, when he's paid all that money to be here,' I pointed out.

'I'll have to share with either Rachel or Tori if I don't,' he explained, 'and that's not ideal either, is it? I'm really not concerned about the money.'

My heart further lifted to know he wasn't jumping at the chance to bunk in with Tori. So much for perspective!

'I hadn't thought of the dynamics,' I said, scratching my head. 'Maybe you and I should swap, Alex...'

He quickly put up an objecting hand.

'Nope,' he firmly said. 'No way. I've long since fulfilled Gracie's dream of sleeping in that room. Now it's your turn, Em.'

‘Who’s Gracie?’ Tori yawned, stretching her hands above her head and showing off a smooth and tanned midriff in the process as she drifted out of her and Rachel’s room.

I couldn’t resist a quick look at Alex and found he hadn’t noticed the flash of flesh at all.

‘It’s a long story,’ he said. ‘I’ll tell you another day.’

Given the amount of time they had already spent chatting, especially the night Tori had arrived, I was surprised Gracie hadn’t come up. Rachel looked at me and raised her eyebrows and I wondered if she was thinking the same thing.

‘So, what’s the plan for today?’ Rachel asked.

‘I wouldn’t mind watching the film tonight,’ Tori suggested. ‘Unless you guys have worn the DVD out already.’

Given the choice, she always went for the movie over the book.

‘I’ve read the book three times since you guys arrived here and I’ve worked some stuff out about myself as a result,’ she then said, completely contradicting what I had just thought. ‘And I’d like to see if I still feel the same way after I’ve watched the film again.’

‘Well, I never,’ gasped Rachel, who was clearly as surprised as I was.

‘The DVD is still intact,’ I told Tori, pleased that I hadn’t been the one to display such blatant shock. ‘And I don’t think there’s anything specific on the schedule, but Rach,’ I added, turning to her, ‘I do have a surprise for you.’

‘You do?’ she asked, spinning around to look at me and forgetting all about Tori’s surprise revelation.

‘I do,’ I confirmed.

‘What is it?’ she demanded, excitedly clapping her hands.

‘If she tells you,’ Alex laughed, ‘it won’t be a surprise, will it?’

‘Quite right,’ I agreed and Rachel pouted.

Knowing what she was like in the run up to Christmas and birthdays, I realised I should never have mentioned that I was going to give her something ahead of the event because she then nagged her way through the whole of breakfast and during every minute we were watering the veranda pots and making plans for the weekend.

It felt impossible that another week had flown by and we now were at the mid-point of our time at the cottage. In fact, when I checked the calendar and made a quick mental calculation, I realised we really did now have more of the holiday behind us than ahead. I went to say as much to the others, but then decided not to. If they hadn't worked it out for themselves, I didn't want to bring the mood down, especially when I was about to give Rachel her dress.

'Come on then,' I said, when I couldn't bear her plucking at my sleeve and following me around wearing a pleading expression a moment longer. 'Sit there and I'll get it.'

She bounced over to the sofa and held out her hands.

'It's not that big,' I laughed when I came back with it and she moved her outstretched palms closer together.

'Is this a private moment?' Alex asked, going to stand up.

'Not at all,' I told him.

'Boys allowed?' he chuckled.

'This boy is always allowed,' Rachel grinned.

'Cheers to that,' Tori agreed, raising her mug of tea.

Alex sat back down looking very pleased with himself and obviously lapping up the attention being lavished on him. I wasn't sure it was quite what Gracie had in mind when she'd made him promise he would make the trip to Lakeside and stay in the cottage to honour her memory and long-held wish.

‘Okay,’ I said, feeling nervous as the moment came to hand Rachel’s dress over. ‘This is from me and your mum, Rach, with love. And yes, she’s given me permission to let you open it while we’re here. In fact, she insisted, but on the promise that we’d FaceTime her at some point with your reaction.’

‘This sounds monumental,’ said Alex.

‘And intriguing,’ added Tori.

‘It’s both.’ I nodded, while she grabbed her phone.

Rachel looked puzzled, but wasted no time in pulling the ribbon and ripping into the soft tissue paper I’d carefully wrapped the dress in. I held my breath as she held it up, one hand covering my mouth to stop me talking her through the moment. I needed to give her time to take it all in without interruption or explanation.

She didn’t need time though, because she took one look at the painstakingly put together panel on the front and burst into tears. Tori and Alex exchanged a glance and my heart thumped so hard in my chest I thought it was going to stop me breathing.

‘These are all Nanna’s,’ Rachel whispered, the look on her face conveying all of the emotion I felt times ten.

I nodded, but couldn’t get the words out over the lump in my throat.

‘Oh, Em,’ said Tori, cottoning on and also starting to cry as she snapped away on her phone, recording the treasured moment for posterity.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ Rachel sobbed.

‘It was your mum’s idea,’ I told her. ‘And you don’t have to say anything, just go and take a minute and then try it on. I want to check the fit. Although it should be fine. I’ve created enough frocks using your figure as a guide now to know your measurements better than my own.’

‘Oh, you,’ she laughed through her tears, balling up the tissue paper and throwing it at me.

‘I’ll help,’ said Tori and the pair disappeared into the bedroom.

Ideally, I would have liked Rachel’s mum to witness her daughter’s delight first-hand, but I had known it would be an emotional moment and one better suited to the privacy of the cottage as opposed to the potentially packed pub.

‘What was that all about?’ Alex asked, once the door had closed behind Rachel and Tori. ‘And did you really make that beautiful dress from scratch, Em?’

‘I did.’ I nodded, feeling proud.

It was the first of my dresses that he had seen. He had admired the anniversary picture and my fern skirt but hadn’t seen the dress I’d quickly made because he’d been off treading the boards and it had had to go in the post practically as soon as the last stitch had been sewn.

‘And the patchwork panels are all made up of fabrics which belonged to Rachel’s nanna, who died a short while ago,’ I further explained.

‘Oh,’ he said, sounding touched. ‘The nanna who was also a book-lover?’ I nodded. ‘Well, that explains the tears.’

‘Exactly.’ I swallowed, trying not to succumb to my own. ‘*Hope Falls* became her favourite after Rachel introduced her to it.’

‘Well, I love the dress every bit as much as the picture,’ Alex praised. ‘What a wonderful keepsake.’

‘I think so.’ I smiled. ‘And Rachel’s mum wanted her to have the dress on this holiday because of the book and film connection.’

‘And their shared love of both,’ Alex added, just as the bedroom door opened again and Rachel stepped out.

‘Oh, Rach,’ I gasped, both hands covering my mouth this time.

She gave a twirl and then came over.

‘It’s perfect,’ she said, reaching for my hands. ‘It fits like a second skin.’

‘It really does,’ said Tori. ‘I had no idea you were so skilled, Em. This is couture quality.’

‘Goodness.’ I blushed. ‘I don’t know about that.’

‘Well, I do,’ Tori said seriously. ‘And it is.’

‘This coming from a woman who spends hours looking at couture and spends endless amounts of money on it,’ said Rachel, as she turned this way and that and made the fabric of the skirt swish about her legs.

‘A woman who *used* to spend endless amounts on couture,’ Tori corrected. ‘I might have kicked the habit, but I do still know what I’m talking about. I know a good thing when I see it and this is most definitely it.’

‘She’s been commissioned to make a couple more of these too,’ Rachel told Tori. ‘And all through word of mouth.’

I turned Rachel around so I could examine the side seams of the bodice a little closer.

‘That’s wonderful,’ Tori praised. ‘But to be honest, I’m surprised it’s not more. Are you sure your social media accounts and online presence is working at full stretch, Em?’

I looked at her and laughed and then realised she was being serious.

‘You see,’ said Alex, wagging a finger in my direction. ‘I’m not the only one who thinks you should be taking this more seriously, Em.’

I began to feel hot and imagined my neck turning blotchy as they ganged up on me. At this rate, I wouldn’t need to explain my business plan because they would goad me into launching and

assume the resultant success was solely down to their encouragement!

‘Please tell me you have social media accounts for...’ Tori frowned.

‘Passion for Patchwork,’ Alex then blurted out. ‘That’s what I told Em she should call her sewing empire.’

‘I like that,’ said Tori, cocking her head to one side. ‘And of course, I know you don’t have accounts to champion your work because if you did, I’d be following you, wouldn’t I? Oh, Em,’ she scolded. ‘You really need to get your butt in gear.’

‘Well...’ I feebly said.

‘Have you got anything else with you?’ she then demanded, cutting me off. ‘Any other garments?’

‘A skirt,’ Alex told her, answering on my behalf. ‘She made it last week.’

I gave him a look and he shot one straight back, making me feel even hotter.

‘Go and put it on,’ Tori insisted, waving a hand towards the bedroom. ‘And then we’re going to go down to the lake and I’m going to photograph you and Rachel and get you online.’

‘I hardly think now’s the time...’ I began to say but they carried on talking over me and the words trailed off.

‘You’ll never have a better backdrop,’ she prudently pointed out as I went to get changed.

‘It’s ridiculous that she isn’t already online, isn’t it?’ said Alex, throwing further fuel on to Tori’s fire.

‘She needs no encouragement from you, thank you very much,’ I tutted, but I didn’t really mean it and the grin he gave me told me he knew it.

I might not have been willing to admit it, but I was actually feeling pretty excited about their enthusiasm and excitement. Or I was until it dawned on me that Rachel hadn't joined in with the conversation at all.

I turned to look at her, worried that she didn't think Tori's plan to launch me online was a good one. However, when I caught sight of her face as she examined the panels around the bottom of her dress, I realised she hadn't heard a word of what was being said.

She was utterly mesmerised, miles and years away, lost in a plethora of happy memories and I felt extremely proud of what I had created from a bag of fabric that might otherwise have never seen the light of day.

'Now this time, you stand on the left, Em,' Tori shouted, eyeing us through half-closed eyes. 'And Rachel, you look out across the lake.'

Rachel puffed out her cheeks.

'I hope the dress is worth this,' I muttered under my breath and risking Tori's wrath because I had momentarily abandoned my pose.

When Tori had said we should come down to the lake to take a few snaps, I thought she had meant literally just that, but my assumption had been wrong. The few snaps, taken on her phone, had required complete makeovers for us both and we were now in full make-up and sporting carefully styled hair. It had taken a surprising amount of time to achieve the relaxed and casual, I've just popped out for a walk down to the lake, aesthetic. We'd got props too. An artfully draped blanket and vintage flask and enamel mugs had been utilised to complete the idyllic composition.

'It totally is.' Rachel beamed, which made Tori snap away even faster. 'I love it. And believe it or not, I'm rather enjoying this.'

‘Em!’ Tori then yelped. ‘Why the look of surprise?’

‘Sorry,’ I giggled and Rachel properly laughed. ‘I’ve just had a bit of a shock.’

‘Well, get your act together,’ she tutted. ‘There’s not long to go before we’ll lose the best of the light.’

Rachel gasped as she realised the time, but didn’t say why. I wondered if she was panicking about missing one of Jeremy’s assigned call times, but didn’t ask. A few shots later, the familiar rain clouds began to gather so Tori said Rachel could go, but she wouldn’t let me follow her.

‘You’ll need a profile pic,’ she told me, rushing over to tease out my casual curls and touch up my lip gloss. ‘And I’ve had a brainwave, but we’ll need Alex.’

‘I’m not sure he’ll be up for being photographed,’ I warned her.

‘I don’t want to photograph him,’ she told me. ‘Although he would make a wonderful subject. I need him for his manpower.’

‘As beautiful as they are,’ Alex shouted as he approached, having been summoned by Rachel who Tori had sent off with a request for him to join us, ‘I’m not sure Em’s dresses are quite my style.’

Tori rolled her eyes.

‘No modelling required,’ she said. ‘I just want you to steer this thing.’

Her big idea for my profile pic was to snap me sitting on the end of the jetty, looking into the lake with my bare feet dangling over the edge and the fern skirt fanned out around me. In order to achieve it, she needed Alex to row her into position so she could take the picture facing me on the water.

‘What do you think?’ she asked Alex, showing him the images, once she’d taken a few.

‘Beautiful,’ he said huskily. ‘You look beautiful, Em.’ He smiled, looking up at me and making my heart skitter.

‘Thank you,’ I said, feeling my face flush.

‘Although,’ he said, ‘you do look a bit mean and moody. You could cheer up a bit.’

Tori looked furious and I burst out laughing as she gave him a sharp nudge which rocked the tiny boat and almost made him drop an oar.

‘And that’s a wrap!’ I said, jumping up and shoving my feet back inside my plimsolls.

‘Indeed, it is,’ Tori said, looking down at the final moment she’d captured.

By the time Alex had retied the boat to the jetty and we’d walked the path back through the woods to the cottage, a few fat raindrops had started to fall and Rachel had changed out of her dress and was making dinner. I was relieved she hadn’t rushed off to answer a summons from Jeremy.

‘I know I said I wanted to watch the film tonight,’ said Tori, scrolling through the endless shots on her phone, ‘but I think we should focus on getting you set up online, Em. The sooner the better as far as I’m concerned.’

She was certainly keen.

‘I appreciate that,’ I told her. ‘But you’d need Wi-Fi to do it, wouldn’t you?’

‘Oh, damn,’ she said, wrinkling her pretty nose. ‘I forgot we’re in the wilderness. So, where around here can we go to get online?’

‘The pub,’ the three of us said together.

‘In that case,’ she said, putting down her phone and picking up the DVD case, ‘let’s do the film tonight and then marketing tomorrow.’

‘And you could FaceTime your mum then, Rach,’ I suggested.

‘I was already planning to.’ She smiled back.

Chapter 24

Alex ducked out of watching the film with us that evening.

‘I’ve just had a lightbulb moment connected to something I’ve been working on,’ he explained, when all three of us objected to his absence. ‘And I’d really like to get it drawn up tonight before the idea does a bunk.’

‘So, are you heading to the pub to do that?’ Tori asked.

‘No,’ he told her. ‘I’ve got all the components I need already downloaded to my laptop, so I can adapt them and put them together here and then upload them when I’m back in the office again.’

He wouldn’t be swayed to put the work off, so it was just the three of us watching that night. He set himself up to work in what was now my room, so our reciting the actors’ lines ahead of them, laughing and then blubbing at the saddest bits wouldn’t disturb him or tempt him to abandon whatever it was he was doing to watch. I curled up in his armchair and Rachel and Tori stretched out on the sofa.

I missed his presence more than I cared to admit that evening, but no one else seemed to mind that it was just the three of us.

‘So,’ said Rachel, as the closing credits began to roll and we all had a stretch. ‘Does the film back up what the book told you, Tori?’

The look on our friend’s face was a mixture of surprise and delight.

‘Yes.’ She nodded. ‘Thanks to Dad’s intervention, carefree Rose has taken a backseat and, now I’ve realised I’ve spent years running away from reality, Laurie is in the driving seat. Hold on to your hats, girls,’ she added with a giggle, ‘because it’s all about to kick off!’

I knew her father’s actions and Tori’s willingness to accept them hadn’t always sat easy with Rachel and me, but credit where it was due, he had known what he was doing and Tori had obviously realised she had needed it to happen.

‘I don’t believe it,’ Rachel gasped. ‘I hope you haven’t completely eradicated all your Rose traits though, Tori, because she had a fresh start, too.’

‘That would be impossible,’ I laughed.

‘Don’t worry, there’s still a bit of Rose in me,’ Tori beamed. ‘And you might not believe this either, Rach, but had Dad not called time on my spending, I would have done it myself. He’s got me to this point faster than I would have done, mostly because he said Mum wouldn’t have been happy with how he’d always pandered to me, but I was actually getting bored with living the high life and having nothing to show for it.’

‘Curiouser and curiouser!’ Rachel laughed, then pretended to pass out.

When I returned to my idyllic refuge, I tried not to think too deeply about what Tori meant by things being about to kick off, but when I saw what she was victoriously holding up the next morning when she stepped out on to the veranda, I didn’t need too deep a dive to work it out. She already had Alex wrapped around her finger.

‘I don’t believe it!’ Rachel gaped. ‘How have you wangled that?’

It was Alex’s expensive laptop Tori was holding aloft. He must have had extremely strong, and trusting, feelings for her if he was

willing to lend her that.

‘Just last week I asked him if I could borrow it,’ huffed Rachel, sounding hurt. ‘And he looked as if I’d asked if I could buy his baby or something!’

‘What can I say?’ Tori shrugged, stroking the bespoke case. ‘Maybe I asked more nicely than you did, Rach.’

‘I don’t even want to think about what you might possibly mean by that,’ Rachel tutted, standing up. ‘Are we going or what?’

I didn’t want to think about it either.

‘Is this really the best you could do with all that money I raised by parting with my treasured Tom Ford clutch?’ Tori groaned as we pootled up the road from the cottage to Lakeside in our almost clapped-out car.

We could have walked, but Tori had insisted it would be safer to transport Alex’s laptop by four wheels rather than on two legs. A suggestion she almost retracted when she remembered which car we’d be traveling in.

‘Not all of the money went on the car,’ Rachel, who was wearing her special dress again, reminded her. ‘There was fuel and insurance and tax to pay too. Remember?’

‘You’re going to have to teach me about all that sort of stuff, Rach,’ Tori surprised me by saying seriously rather than further scoffing. ‘Dad’s always taken charge of that sort of thing, but if I ever end up with enough in the bank to buy a car in my own name, then I’ll need to know, won’t I?’

It didn’t sound like she was expecting to see her Range Rover again after all.

‘That you will,’ said Rachel, winking at me in the rear-view mirror. ‘That you will.’

She parked as close to the pub as she could get and Tori jumped out.

‘Are you open?’ she called to Connor, who was just finishing watering the plants in the baskets and tubs and which had grown enormously since we’d moved into the cottage.

‘Not quite,’ he said, checking his watch and then spotting Rachel. ‘But I suppose I could make an exception for you three.’

‘You are a love,’ said Tori, standing on tiptoe and giving him a kiss on the cheek.

‘I know,’ he said, blushing. ‘My generosity will be my downfall one of these days.’

Rachel and I gave Siddy her usual fuss while Connor fired up the coffee machine, admired Rachel’s outfit and Tori set up her office – as she called it – at a booth furthest away from the main bar area.

‘Don’t you like dogs, Tori?’ Connor asked, when she rushed back and asked him for the Wi-Fi code, while giving Siddy a wide berth.

‘Love them,’ she said, giving the friendly hound a smile. ‘I just don’t want to get her doggy smell on my hands.’

‘Poor Siddy,’ I said, giving her an even longer fuss which she lapped up. ‘She’s perfectly fragrant. Not at all smelly.’

‘Well, whatever,’ said Tori. ‘Hurry up, you two. We’ve got work to do.’

We didn’t settle down to it immediately though, because Rachel FaceTimed her mum after Tori had sent her the snaps and video of Rachel’s first glimpse of the dress and explained that she’d finally made it to Lakeside and would be with us for the rest of the holiday.

When the call to her mum’s phone connected, Rachel stood up and did a twirl at a distance before leaning closer to the screen to show off the patchwork panels.

‘Oh, Emily,’ her mum sniffed, pulling a tissue out of her sleeve. ‘It’s perfect. Absolutely perfect and the look on your face when you ripped into that parcel was priceless, Rachel. Thank you for capturing the moment, ‘Tori.’

‘Wait until you see the panels in real life,’ Rachel sighed dreamily. ‘Em’s done Nanna proud.’

‘I can already see that.’ Her mum beamed. ‘But I am looking forward to seeing it up close.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, feeling relieved that I’d so effectively fulfilled her brief. ‘I’m so pleased you like it.’

‘I love it,’ she said. ‘Well done you. Next stop, a catwalk in Paris!’

‘Well,’ I laughed, ‘I don’t know about that...’

‘I do,’ said ‘Tori.

After Rachel signed off, ‘Tori explained what her vision for my online launch could look like. She had based her ideas on both the aesthetic of the film and the photos she’d taken at the lake, along with my actual range of clothes, of course. It struck me again how *Hope Falls* had influenced my designs without my even realising it. ‘Tori had almost finished dazzling us with her ideas when Rachel’s phone began to ring.

‘Oh, blast,’ she tutted, sliding out of the booth having checked the screen. ‘It’s Jeremy.’

‘Why’s he ringing now?’ I frowned. ‘Surely he should be at work.’

Rachel shook her head.

‘Really?’ ‘Tori frowned as she went to press accept call. ‘You’re really going to answer? We’re in the middle of something extremely important here.’

‘I know,’ said Rachel, sounding embarrassed, ‘but if I don’t pick up now, he’ll just keep calling so I might as well get it over

with.'

She headed for the door and Tori tutted.

'You know, I really do think he's got her tracked,' she muttered. 'And the second she falls within signal range, he pounces.'

'I know,' I agreed, but I was smiling.

'That's not a good thing, Em.' Tori tutted again. 'He's enemy number one, remember.'

'Oh, I haven't forgotten,' I told her. 'I haven't forgotten that for one second, or that you've got a plan to take him out.'

'Is that why you're smiling?' she asked. 'You're so certain that my plan will work, even though you've no idea what it is?'

'No,' I told her, then hastily added, 'although I'm sure it will help things along. But I was just appreciating Rachel's choice of words. If you're in love with someone and they call you, you do not say "oh, blast", or that you want to get the conversation over with, do you?'

Tori took a second to process that, her eyes flicking to the left as she recalled what Rachel had said.

'Well spotted, comrade.' She nodded, offering me a high five, which I willingly accepted. 'Now,' she demanded, 'back to business.'

She was still waxing lyrical when Rachel returned. I didn't immediately know if Tori noticed that our friend's eyes looked a little red, but I did. I went to ask if she was all right, but Tori pressed her leg against mine and I stopped myself. Clearly, she had noticed.

'So,' she said, taking a breath, 'to sum up. What I'm thinking, is that you should go for the Cottagecore slash pioneer aesthetic. The landscape around here fits that perfectly, Em, and you could even make a trip back here to take the photos for your website a

regular event when the collection is updated, because it would be a tax-deductible expense.'

Rachel blinked a couple of times and I turned to look at Tori.

'How do you even know this?' I asked her. 'When did you become such an expert?'

Tori looked well pleased. 'You might think I'm always faffing on my phone' – she smiled – 'or that I always *used* to be faffing on my phone, but I've realised recently that I actually picked a lot of stuff up about the way the things I was buying were marketed, presented and packaged. I might have been buying stuff from the accounts I was continually scrolling, but I also took on-board how they worked. And I know this will work for you, Em. I've come up with the perfect strategy to get the orders rolling in.'

'I'm impressed,' I said, as Connor came to replace our coffees.

'Everything all right here?' he asked.

'Everything will be fine,' Tori told him. 'As long as your Wi-Fi signal holds out.'

'I can't guarantee that' – he smiled – 'but I'll keep the coffees coming, shall I?'

'And if you've got any of those pastries from the bakery,' I said, 'a few of them wouldn't go amiss.'

'I'll see what I can do,' he chuckled.

'My only concern,' Rachel said, biting her lip, 'is if your plan to introduce Emily's designs to the world works too well, Tori, she won't be able to keep up with demand. She's starting this new job next month...'

'What new job is this?' Tori cut in.

I brought her up to speed about the offer I'd had just ahead of the holiday and how I was supposed to be joining the new company in September. By the time I'd finished explaining, she was looking at me in disbelief.

‘Are you seriously telling me that you’d rather be analysing data than designing dresses?’ she gasped, before I had a chance to fill her and Rachel in about the working part-time idea I’d recently come up with as a compromise.

‘Well, no,’ I said, avoiding looking at Rachel and thinking again of the pleasure I’d felt in making her dress and my fabulous fern skirt. ‘I wouldn’t rather be doing that.’

‘So why in god’s name are you taking the job then?’ Tori asked, sounding aghast. ‘I know I’ve never taken much interest in your patchwork before, Em, but I am now and I’m telling you, *this* is where your future lies.’

‘Well,’ I rushed to explain before Rachel had the opportunity to say something sensible about job security and company pension plans, ‘I have recently been wondering about working part-time and sewing part-time. I thought it might be...’ My words trailed off as Tori vehemently shook her head.

‘That won’t work,’ she said. ‘You need to commit, one hundred per cent, Em. You need to give Passion for Patchwork your absolute all.’

‘But I also need to not be stressing about paying the rent,’ I pointed out. ‘With Rachel moving in with Jeremy, a regular income, be it full or part-time, will give me some security.’

‘That’s true,’ Rachel said and I wondered if the compromise would keep me in her good books and not give Jeremy the ammunition to take a pot shot at our friendship.

I was also interested to note that she had said nothing to contradict my assumption, nothing which suggested she was having doubts about the move or still considering it, as opposed to getting on and doing it.

‘Rachel!’ Connor shouted, beckoning her over before I could ask her to once and for all properly clarify the situation.

‘Don’t say anything important,’ she insisted, as she slid out of the booth and went to see what he wanted.

‘You do realise,’ Tori immediately said in a frustrated whisper, ‘that not taking that job and not finding something part-time would in effect put an end to Rachel’s plan to move in with Jeremy because she’d be too worried about your fragile finances.’

‘Of course, I realise that,’ I said, keeping one eye on Rachel at the bar.

Tori threw up her hands. ‘Then why the hell have you accepted it?’

‘I’ve accepted it for now,’ I patiently explained, ‘because the last thing I want is to give Jeremy another reason to drive a wedge between us. If I don’t take that job, he’ll make Rachel believe that I turned it down to stop her leaving. You know how manipulative he is.’

Tori’s shoulders dropped as she realised the truth in what I was telling her.

‘He’ll pour more poison into her and she’ll end up thinking the worst of me as a result,’ I carried on to really drive the point home.

‘Yes, yes,’ Tori said, nibbling the end of her thumbnail. ‘I can see that now.’

I batted her hand away. ‘But I have genuinely been thinking about the part-time scenario,’ I carried on, even though she didn’t think that would be a good idea. ‘I really do want to launch this business. I even came on holiday with the intention of deciding whether I dared go for it and I’ve got savings in place to help while I get going.’

My explanation gathered speed, for fear of Rachel coming back before I’d told Tori everything. It felt good to share what I had been thinking about, even though the moment didn’t match the one I had imagined.

‘And I had pretty much made up my mind to go for it,’ I said in a rush, ‘when Rach mentioned moving out and I panicked. I can’t lose her, Tori.’

‘But don’t forget I’m on the case now,’ she reminded me. ‘And I really do have a plan. Whatever else you do end up doing and however you end up doing it, we’re getting you online right here, right now. It’s what we came here to do today.’

‘Look out,’ I hissed as Rachel walked back, carrying a plate of sweet treats and an envelope which she then put in her bag.

‘So, did you?’ Rachel asked.

The smell of the warm pastry made my tummy rumble. The pain au chocolat looked particularly good and I immediately reached for one.

‘Did we what?’ I innocently asked, through a buttery, sweet mouthful.

‘Say anything important?’

‘We did rather,’ Tori recklessly announced. ‘I’ve told Em that as I’m going to be finding myself a job soon, I’ll move into the flat when you move out, so that way she won’t need to fret about money, you won’t need to worry if she’s managing and she can focus on properly launching Passion for Patchwork. All of which,’ she carried on before either of us could register our surprise or Rachel could form a cautionary response, ‘leads me nicely on to this...’

She tapped a few keys, then turned the laptop round to show us a logo bearing my dream business name.

‘What on earth?’ I gasped, leaning closer to the screen and momentarily forgetting that she had come up with a plan which should keep Rachel happy and save me poring over more spreadsheets.

The logo layout featured a hexagonal patchwork background with the words Passion for Patchwork laid over the top. The background shapes were made up of gingham, polka dot and ditzy floral patterns and the lettering was in solid colour, which made it stand out. It had an almost 3D quality to it and was extremely stylish.

‘There are four,’ Tori explained as Rachel came around to our side of the booth to take a closer look at what was making my mouth open and close like a trapdoor. ‘And each one represents a different season.’

She scrolled down and the summer colours changed to shades of orange, yellow and red for autumn. Then red, white and blue for winter and finally pretty pastels for spring.

‘Same great logo,’ she said, scrolling up again so we could see all four together. ‘But with a seasonal twist. There are banners for all social media platforms, too.’

‘Where did you get these?’ Rachel asked as I carried on admiring the exquisite details.

I noticed that each of the letters was edged with tiny stitches and at the end of the word patchwork there was a tiny needle and thread, making it look as though the words had been sewn rather than typed.

‘Where do you think?’ Tori laughed.

‘Alex.’ Rachel grinned, returning to her seat.

‘Alex made these?’ I gasped, looking at Tori.

‘Of course, he did,’ she nudged. ‘This was the lightbulb moment he finished last night while we were watching the film. He told me he’s been secretly working on them for a while in the hope that you might see sense.’

I put the half-eaten pastry back on the plate and wiped my fingers on a paper napkin.

‘Tori, what exactly did you say to convince him to lend you his laptop?’ Rachel asked, tracking back to what we’d been saying before we left the cottage.

‘Nothing.’ Tori shrugged. ‘He knew I needed more than a phone to get Em up and running today, so rushed to finish the logo last night and then offered me the laptop first thing this morning. I think he’d do anything for you, Em,’ she finished up with a nudge, half serious, half teasing.

‘He’s certainly a wonderful friend,’ I finally found voice enough to say and not daring to fully take in her words and the implication that went with them.

My other two friends rolled their eyes.

‘So,’ said Tori. ‘Do you like these? Do you want to go ahead with this look Alex and I have in mind?’

‘I absolutely love them.’ I swallowed. ‘They’re perfect, aren’t they? Exactly what I would have asked for had I commissioned them myself, so yes, I want to go ahead. I don’t know how much he charges, but these are worth every penny.’

‘He won’t be billing you, you dozy mare,’ Tori nudged me again. ‘Now, let’s get you up and running.’

By the end of the morning, she had set up accounts on every popular platform for my new business and was making inroads into designing a website too. The profile picture she insisted we use was the one taken with me sitting on the jetty, but not of me looking into the water. We had all agreed that the lucky shot of me laughing when Alex told me to cheer up was by far the best. As I examined it, I thought I looked rather good and that was something I never said.

‘You can launch without a website,’ Tori insisted, as she typed away, ‘because prospective clients can message you via the socials, but we might as well do as much as we can to set one up now.’

And,' she added, clicking her fingers, 'I'm going to get you a business email address too.'

Rachel looked at me and mouthed 'wow' and I responded with 'I know'. Fortunately, I wasn't too stunned by our friend's savvy knowledge and online prowess to feel stumped about how I could repay Alex for his hugely generous skill sharing.

He had given me something related to his work and in return I would create the picture for his mum and dad, made from things Gracie had loved, for free. It would be the ultimate labour of love and I couldn't wait to get started on it to show him how much I appreciated what he had so kindly done for me.

Chapter 25

Once we'd finished up at The Drover's, Rachel drove us back to the cottage and I walked down to the lake to see if I could find Alex. It dawned on me as I wandered along the now familiar path, that my decision about whether or not to go for it on the business front, the idea of which I had planned to spend the whole six weeks of my time away mulling over, had now been irrevocably and excitingly made. More than that, it was actually happening!

Tori's no-nonsense approach had cut through my procrastination and shone a light on the very heart of the matter, that I did still want to give my venture a full-time chance, and in spite of the fact that I was scared that my timing, given the whole Rachel moving out debacle, couldn't have been trickier.

Had Rachel not told me about moving in with Jeremy then I most likely would have already followed the yearning in my heart. It was pussyfooting around their relationship which had held me up, but Tori had ripped right through that. I wondered what Rachel thought about our friend's plan to move in to the flat and pay her share of the bills while I got the business going and, more to the point, what did I make of it? I loved Tori to bits, but could I live with her?

'Alex!' I called out, when I spotted him walking along the edge of the shore beyond the jetty.

He turned around and waved, then waited while I caught him up.

'I wondered when you'd be back.' He smiled, but I couldn't help thinking he looked a little sad, in spite of his attractively

upturned lips. 'How have you got on?'

'Absolutely brilliantly,' I told him. 'And it's all thanks to you and Tori.'

'You like the branding and logo idea?' He blushed.

'No,' I said, reaching out and pulling him into a hug, 'I love it. Absolutely adore it.'

'Really?' he said, as I loosened my grip a little and he looked down at me. 'Because it was just an idea. My interpretation of what I thought you might like. We can alter anything you're not happy with, so don't say you love it if there's something you want to change, because it will be easy enough to fix.'

'Alex,' I cut in, halting his rush of words. 'I really do love it. All of it. In fact, I love it so much that, if you go online and search for Passion for Patchwork, your summer logo and the banners along with Tori's clever words will come up. You might have to scroll a bit because of the unfathomable algorithms, but you'll find me for sure, represented by your beautiful artwork and Tori's clever spiel.'

Not only had Tori created the pages for my social media accounts, she'd also written up some wonderful descriptions along with a bit about me and my vision for my clothes to go with them, all based on a quick chat we'd had while we ate lunch.

I had just twittered on as we ate, assuming we were having a regular conversation but it turned out she was interviewing me and then used what I had said to put together the lovely pieces for the pages. It wouldn't have sounded anywhere near as good had I known what she was doing because I would have felt too self-conscious to come up with the vivid descriptions which she had then turned into perfect prose.

'Already?' Alex laughed.

'Already,' I confirmed.

‘Crikey,’ he said, as he started to walk again and I fell into step. ‘Tori doesn’t hang about, does she?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘She doesn’t. Once she sets her sights on something, she has to have it. Only on this occasion,’ I thoughtfully added, ‘it wasn’t something for her, it was something for me.’

Her kindness in sharing her skills and getting me set up was further proof that she really had changed and, remembering how buoyed up she’d been and how focused, I knew she’d enjoyed doing it.

‘You sound surprised,’ Alex said, carrying on towards the benches and campfire.

‘I am,’ I laughed and he gave me a disapproving look. ‘You needn’t look like that,’ I told him. ‘If you knew Tori as well as I do, then you’d know that she’s currently going through a total transformation. She’s always been lovely, but pretty self-absorbed and until recently, her wealthy father has given her everything she’s ever wanted on a plate so she’s never much had to think about other people, but now...’

‘He’s pulled the plug,’ Alex put in. ‘Yes, she told me all about her sudden change in circumstances and how she’s going to have to become better acquainted with the real world and pay her way to get along in it.’

I wondered if that was some of what they’d spent half of Wednesday night – the evening Tori had arrived at the pub – talking about.

‘She does seem to be making headway with introducing these dramatic changes, doesn’t she?’ he further said.

‘Yes,’ I said, probably sounding more amazed than I intended given the second slightly censorious look Alex then bestowed on me. ‘She does. Rachel and I are both stunned.’

I hoped that coupling Rachel's reaction with mine, might make him realise that it wasn't just me who was surprised that Tori was getting her act together so quickly. The last thing I wanted to sound was bitchy and bitter.

'Well,' said Alex, 'I like her enormously already, so I'm really pleased for her and I'm pleased I'm getting to know her after her father cut her off because I'm not sure I would have had all that much in common with her before.'

My stomach dropped and I found myself immediately, and selfishly, wishing that they hadn't met at all. I might not have wanted to turn mine and Alex's gate-side kiss into something more lasting and serious but I couldn't bear the thought of him possibly pairing up with Tori. Not that he really would, would he?

Surely not if he was still carrying the baggage we'd both cited as one of the reasons for not taking things any further between us and, given the nature of his, I couldn't really believe he would be able to empty it all out in one clean sweep just because Tori was on the scene, even if I had previously wondered.

But then I further tortured myself by thinking that if I was finding our dream holiday so transformative, there was no reason why he wouldn't be too. Perhaps he was suddenly feeling footloose, fancy-free and ready for a fling and Tori had arrived just in time to wedge herself into prime position as the person to indulge in it with after I'd turned him down.

'Perhaps not.' I swallowed. 'She really is a completely different person now. In fact,' I rushed on, trying to use her transformation to my advantage, 'her actions have helped me offload practically all of that baggage we talked about just a few days ago. I feel like a weight has been lifted and I can really focus on having some fun now.'

I held my breath, wondering how he would interpret my blatant declaration.

‘Well, that’s great.’ He beamed. ‘And further proof of what a wonderful woman Tori is, or has recently turned into.’

‘Uh huh,’ I sighed, frustrated that he hadn’t caught on.

‘Do you fancy a beer?’ he then offered. ‘I’ve got a few in a cool bag.’

‘Nah.’ I smiled. ‘But thanks.’ Then, tracking back to the original reason why I’d come to find him in the first place, added, ‘I just wanted to say thank you for creating my logo. It’s a beautiful interpretation of my vision and I’m truly very grateful.’

‘Well,’ he nodded, blushing again as he shoved his hands in his jeans pockets, ‘I’m delighted you like, I mean, love it.’

‘I really do.’

‘Are you sure you don’t want that beer?’

‘I am,’ I said, taking a step towards the path. ‘I kind of got the impression that I’d broken into your thoughts when I interrupted your walk.’

‘You had,’ he confirmed, but then seeing my smile falter, added, ‘but that was probably no bad thing.’

‘Oh?’ I queried, then found myself rooted to the spot in spite of my previous decision to leave him to his musings.

‘I was thinking about Gracie,’ he sighed, looking out over the lake. ‘Sometimes now, I can think of her with nothing but joy and gratitude for the fact that I had such an incredible sister, but other times, like today, it all gets tangled up in my head and I lose sight of that and end up feeling bitter and angry that she was taken so soon.’

He pulled his hands out of his pockets and ran them through his hair. His nostrils flared as his exasperation with the injustice of his sister’s life being cut so cruelly short ignited again.

‘You know what,’ I said, stepping back to the bench. ‘I will have that beer.’

Alex narrowed his eyes. 'It's not a pity beer, is it?'

'No,' I laughed but when Alex looked disbelieving, I reiterated the point. 'It's not,' I said again. 'There's something else I wanted to tell you, but until you mentioned Gracie, I hadn't been sure whether to suggest it to you today.'

With a bottle each, we sat together on the bench and looked out over the lake which was as smooth as a millpond. I didn't immediately mention my desire to create the memory picture as a thank you for designing my branding and for a couple of minutes we sat in companionable and comfortable silence taking in the spectacular view.

'When it's so still like this,' Alex said, with a nod to the water, 'I always think it looks like you could walk from one side all the way to the other.'

'I would love to see you test that theory,' I laughed, the bubbles from the beer going up my nose and making my eyes water.

'I haven't forgotten about our email exchanges discussing the skinny-dipping, you know,' he said, raising an eyebrow and looking more like the mischievous version of himself I'd previously seen glimpses of.

'Well,' I said, reluctantly pulling my gaze away from his. 'You can forget all about Rachel and me joining you. Rachel reckons her toes still haven't recovered from the tentative dip she gave them off the end of the jetty when we first arrived.'

I had been about to add that he might be able to tempt Tori, but stopped myself. We'd already discussed it once and I wasn't about to jog his memory by suggesting something that would make him think about her again, especially with no clothes on.

'Gracie would have been up for it,' he said impishly.

I looked at him and shook my head. 'Oh no,' I admonished, but with a smile. 'Don't be dropping Gracie into the conversation again the second you want to rope me into doing something I

don't want to do. That's how I ended up throwing myself down the rapids, remember?'

'How could I forget?' he laughed and I gave him a shove.

'But talking of Gracie,' I said, after I'd taken another swig of beer, 'I've been thinking about the picture you asked me to make for your parents.'

'I haven't forgotten about that,' he was quick to say because it was a while since it had been mentioned.

'I didn't for a second think you had,' I hastily told him. 'But what I was thinking was that as you've been so kind to create and design my logo and haven't billed me for it, I could do the same with Gracie's picture. Will you let me make it as a thank you?'

He was quiet for a moment and looked back at the lake again.

'I'm pretty sure the patchwork picture will take many more hours to create than I spent on your logo.' He then frowned. 'Not that I skimped...'

'Alex,' I interrupted, lightly laying a hand on his arm. 'Please let me do this. I really want to and I think it would be a lovely way for us to share our skills.'

'A tax beating bartering system but with a personal touch,' he said, with a wry smile.

'Something like that.' I smiled back.

'All right,' he said. 'I'll agree to that.'

'Good,' I said, clinking my bottle against his as the chilly condensation ran down my fingers, 'because I was going to do it anyway.'

Alex shook his head. 'In that case,' he said, putting his bottle down and wiping his hands on his jeans, 'I'd like to show you this.'

He reached into the bag of beers again, but this time presented me with a wooden box about the size of a shoebox, rather than a

bottle.

‘What is this?’ I asked, taking it from him, after also putting down my bottle and drying off my hands.

‘It was Gracie’s,’ he said, the words sticking in his throat. ‘And it’s filled with some of her favourite things. You might be able to use some of them in the picture. I carried it down here to look through, but then got a bit maudlin and left it. I’d like to show you though.’

I carefully opened the lid, a hint of floral scent escaping as Alex reached inside and picked up a bundle of photos tied together with a length of pink ribbon. Along with the pictures, I could see cinema stubs (including multiple viewings of our beloved film, of course), a tiny teddy bear, letters, holey stones, silk flowers and a random assortment of trinkets which had all been a treasure trove to their owner.

Alex fondly explained everything, sometimes with laughter on his lips, other times with tears in his eyes, but always with love in his heart. I was entranced by the images of the beautiful woman who had Alex’s eyes and smile, but a feminine grace and elegance which took my breath away. I didn’t say much as we looked, happy to listen to Alex’s descriptions of everything and the heart-warming anecdotes which accompanied them and explained their coveted place in Gracie’s most special memories. Many of the things had a connection to *Hope Falls* and felt even more special as a result.

I don’t know how long we spent looking through everything but the light had begun to fade as I handed Alex the box and he carefully put the lid back on.

‘You’re right, Alex,’ I told him, already imagining how I could make the picture look. ‘I will be able to use lots of these in my design and I’m privileged to have had the honour of getting to know Gracie through some of her favourite things. Thank you for sharing them with me.’

The shuddering breath Alex took told me he appreciated my words. I only wished Gracie herself could have shared her memories with me.

‘Thank you,’ Alex said softly, returning the box to the bag. ‘I know the picture will be beautiful and Mum and Dad will love it.’

‘It will be stunning,’ I confirmed. ‘I can promise you that. And then we’ll be even.’

Alex shook his head. ‘No, we won’t,’ he said, turning to look deep into my eyes. ‘I’m still in your debt.’

‘You are?’ I swallowed.

‘I am,’ he told me.

‘How so?’ I frowned. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Yours *and* Rachel’s actually,’ he said, and I felt even more confused. ‘You’ve helped me prepare for my next step in life and introduced me to a potential new partner and I’m not sure what the going rate for that is.’

‘Oh,’ I said, clumsily standing up as realisation dawned and I thrust my half-drunk bottle into his hands. ‘No charge. You can have that one on us.’

‘That’s very generous.’ He frowned, clearly taken aback by my reaction as I took a step away from the bench. ‘You’re not going, are you?’

‘Yes,’ I said, turning to walk off. ‘I’ve just remembered I promised I’d help Rachel with dinner and it’s getting late. I’ll leave you to your thoughts again and see you back at the cottage in a bit.’

Chapter 26

I kept to the periphery of the conversation that evening, thanked both Alex and Tori for their hard work in helping to launch my business online then, feigning a headache, had an early night. I had expected to feel on cloud nine, what with it being such a monumental day on the business front and having been gifted the privilege of getting to know Gracie a little better through her collection of saved treasures, but I couldn't get anywhere near close.

The kindest thing I could do for myself that night was put a bit of distance between me and my friends, but there was no chance of that happening the next day. And actually, I was so excited to see if I'd had any interest online, I was able to put what Alex had said about a potential new partner, for most of the time at least, almost to the back of my mind.

'We'll take my car,' he offered, as we were getting ready to head to The Drover's for Sunday lunch. 'That'll get you there quicker, Em,' he added, catching my excitement.

'There's no rush,' Rachel pointed out. 'Because we've agreed not to look online until we've eaten.'

'But the earlier we get there, the earlier we can eat,' Tori cleverly said.

'Not that I'm going to be able to eat.' I dithered, wiping my hands down my shorts. 'I'm too nervous.'

'Excited,' Alex said hearteningly. 'You're not nervous, Em, you're excited.'

‘Potayto, potahto.’ I shrugged, rubbing my tummy. ‘Either way, I still feel nauseous.’

‘In that case,’ Tori announced, ‘I’m sure you’d benefit from some fresh air and I’d like to walk to the pub, if that’s all right with you three.’

Rachel and I looked at each other and gasped.

‘What?’ Alex asked, looking between us. ‘What have I missed?’

‘Tori has just said she wants to walk somewhere,’ Rachel said in a tone laden with teasing drama and genuine shock. I hoped her reaction would make Alex realise that what I’d said about Tori the day before was nowhere near wide of the mark. ‘That’s *never* happened before.’

Tori poked her tongue out.

‘Before my father confiscated my funds,’ she said to Alex, ignoring Rachel flagging up her former refusal to ever walk anywhere when she could be driven, or drive herself, ‘I’d picked up a few bits and pieces for the holiday and it would be a shame not to try them out now I’m here, wouldn’t it?’

That explained the lovely Dubarry boots and pristine Barbour.

‘What sort of things?’ Alex asked.

‘These walking boots for a start,’ she said, holding up a pair of boots which were most definitely not from Mountain Warehouse.

‘Fair enough,’ said Alex with a smile as he returned his keys to the kitchen counter. ‘In that case, we will walk. It’s not that far.’

Tori had barely made it a few minutes into the short trek to Lakeside before she was complaining about the beginnings of a blister and wanting to limp back to the car.

‘We’re not going back for the car,’ I tutted.

‘There’s only one thing for it then,’ said Alex, crouching down in the middle of the road. ‘Hop up.’

Tori literally jumped at the chance.

‘You won’t be able to give her a piggy back all the way,’ Rachel laughed. ‘You should have broken those boots in, Tori.’

‘And where would I have done that?’ she asked as Alex hitched her higher and set off at a pace.

‘Do you think she really is going to move in to the flat?’ Rachel asked, the second they were out of earshot.

‘She seemed pretty serious when she suggested it yesterday, didn’t she?’ I pointed out.

‘Was that the first you’d heard of it?’ she then demanded, taking me by surprise because she sounded so suspicious.

‘Yes,’ I said, trying to gauge her expression but it was hard as we were striding out side by side.

I didn’t want to unwittingly say anything now which might scupper either her plans or mine and waited for her to carry on.

‘Well, in that case,’ she then bluntly said, which suggested her mood was no longer the sunniest, ‘don’t get your hopes up.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You know what she’s like,’ she said, sounding mean.

‘I know what she used to be like,’ I corrected, jumping to Tori’s defence. ‘This new version of her is a whole different ballgame.’

One, unfortunately, which appealed to a wholly different man, but I wasn’t going to dwell on that.

‘Don’t get arsey,’ Rachel tutted. ‘I was just saying.’

‘I’m not getting arsey,’ I shot back. ‘But even if she doesn’t move in, I can manage. I’ve got savings, so there’s no need for you to worry about that side of things.’

I knew they weren’t enough to pay for everything if Tori did change her mind about moving in, but I wasn’t going to back down now I’d come so far. I’d already got commissions lined up

and that was without the benefit of the clever online campaign. I'd manage somehow, even if I did end up living on beans and bread for a while. Needs must if I wanted this to work, and now I'd finally made the decision, I really did.

'I can't help thinking that you've been planning this business launch for a while,' Rachel said, sounding further put out.

'It was something I planned to think about during our holiday,' I admitted, knowing there was no need to keep it under wraps now. 'And yes, I have been making plans for the financial side of it, for a while, just in case I found the courage to go for it.'

'It sounds to me like you had every intention of going for it whether you had time to dither over the pros or cons or not.'

'I didn't realise that myself until very recently,' I admitted, further taken aback by the harsh trajectory of her mood swing, 'but I think you're right.'

'So why did you let me think you were taking the other job?' she burst out.

'What on earth's the matter with you, Rach?' I frowned.

'I just don't understand why you didn't tell me before,' she said, sounding upset as well as angry.

'I was going to tell you what I was considering,' I told her. 'Quite soon after we got here actually, but then you said about moving in with Jeremy and I knew that if you thought I was going to turn the job down and take a risk to become self-employed you'd worry that I wouldn't be able to manage and you'd feel obliged to stay.'

'I thought you'd jump at the chance to stop me moving in with him,' she said cruelly.

Clearly, she didn't need Jeremy pouring poison in her ear about me, because she'd concocted a draft of her own and in spite of my

determination to protect her from, rather than include her in, my recent soul-searching.

‘Thank you so much, Em,’ I said sarcastically. ‘For generously putting my feelings ahead of your own.’

She didn’t say anything.

‘I just want you to be happy.’ I sighed. ‘Aren’t you happy?’

‘Perfectly,’ she said, picking up the pace again. ‘I just feel a bit of a fool that I didn’t know what was going on for all this time, that’s all.’

‘I would have told you everything once I’d fathomed it out,’ I said, matching her stride. ‘But when Tori arrived and bluntly stated the obvious about me going for it, I could see what she was getting at and as a result it all fell into place far sooner than I expected it to and in a way I didn’t really think it would, either.’

‘So, you hadn’t talked to her about it before?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I hadn’t. The only person who has known about it all along is me!’

‘Well, I’m thrilled for you,’ she said, still sounding anything but as we rounded a bend and Tori and Alex came into sight.

Alex was bent double nursing a stitch and Tori was sitting on the verge untying her walking shoes. Had I not just had such an unexpected dressing down, I would have laughed.

‘I’m sure the two of you will make every success of your new business,’ Rachel choked with a nod at Tori, before she marched off, ‘and be very happy living together.’

‘Thanks,’ I called after her, feeling put out that I was having to justify my decision to the one person I had hoped would be thrilled it had been so well thought through and with her life-changing situation at the heart of it. ‘I’m sure we will too.’

The pub was busy by the time we arrived and with Connor short-staffed again, Rachel offered to help him out, rather than sit

with us while we waited for our lunch. Tori and Alex sat on one side of the booth and I sat on the other, wondering if gooseberry was on the menu or if my existence made it present enough.

‘So,’ said Tori, pulling her mobile out of her pocket once we’d finally eaten – or in my case half-eaten – our lunch, ‘let’s turn on and see what’s happened, shall we?’

We’d agreed not to walk into the pub with our phones switched on, mine in particular, so we wouldn’t be distracted by the (hopeful) influx of notifications when they connected to the Wi-Fi.

‘Here goes,’ I said, taking a big breath and, with shaking hands, turning mine on.

‘Put it on the table,’ Alex laughed. ‘Before you drop it.’

I turned it face down and then let it stay there while it went through the motions of starting up. It was some minutes before it stopped pinging and my nerves had shifted from worrying that no one would have found me to stressing that too many people had.

‘Don’t panic, Em,’ said Alex, reaching across the table and squeezing my hand. ‘I’m sure they won’t all want you to make something.’

‘Well, she won’t have to worry about paying the bills if they do,’ Tori laughed.

‘I thought you were chipping in with those,’ Rachel tersely reminded her.

‘Go on,’ said Alex, letting my hand go again and not picking up on the icy edge in Rachel’s tone. ‘Have a look.’

‘Start with Insta,’ Tori advised. ‘That’s where I reckon you’ll have had the most interest and interaction.’

I opened the app and looked at the number of followers I’d gained, along with how many likes and comments the photo of Rachel and I standing on the rocks next to the lake had received.

‘That’s good, right?’ I said, looking at Tori, who was also looking at the same thing on her phone.

‘That’s phenomenal,’ said Alex, his head close to Tori’s as they shared her screen.

Rachel leant over to look at mine. ‘Crikey,’ she said. ‘I thought Insta was a slow and steady kind of platform.’

Tori was scrolling through the comments far faster than I was.

‘I can see what’s happened.’ She beamed. ‘There are a couple of big influencers who have shared you to their stories, Em, and that’s what has kicked it all off. People have found you through them.’

‘Thanks to you.’ I grinned. ‘It’s your name that will have made the difference, Tor.’

‘Have you got to reply to all of these?’ Alex frowned.

‘I have.’ I beamed, wriggling in my seat. ‘It’s going to take ages, but I don’t care about that.’

‘Especially the influencers,’ said Tori. ‘You certainly want to make a connection with them and maintain the relationship.’

‘Will you tell me what to put?’ I asked, feeling nervous about messing it up.

Tori shook her head.

‘Nope,’ she said. ‘Just be yourself. Your authentic self, Em. Not the person you might think they want to connect with. Be yourself right from the start and everyone will love you for it.’

I could see the sense in what she was saying, even though it terrified me.

‘You don’t have to tell everyone what you had for breakfast,’ she further said. ‘These are business accounts, after all, but be yourself. Let prospective clients know who they’re working with right from the start.’

Her knowledge of how to do things clearly ran deeper than the nuts and bolts of setting the accounts up.

‘You’re going to have to keep up with this every day from now on, aren’t you?’ Rachel said, sounding almost resentful. ‘So much for the rest of our holiday.’

It was on the tip of my tongue to bite back about her constantly being in contact with Jeremy at random hours of the day, but then I remembered she hadn’t been as much as I thought and then Tori took her to task anyway.

‘Oh, stop moaning, Rachel,’ she tutted. ‘I thought you’d be pleased. Em needs orders to make her business work and by the looks of it, she’s already got enough here to keep her busy right to the end of the tax year. That makes one thing less for you to have to worry about, doesn’t it?’ she pithily added.

Rachel took a moment to let that sink in. ‘Of course,’ she said more happily but with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. ‘I’m really pleased for you, Em.’

‘Thank you,’ I graciously said, then turned back to Tori. ‘You’re a genius,’ I told her. ‘By the looks of it, the other platforms haven’t been quite so quick on the uptake but there are still a few likes and messages. I’m going to need a system to keep track.’

Tori smoothed down her hair, looking delighted.

‘Em’s right,’ said Alex, looking adoringly at her. ‘You are a genius.’

I tried not to let his admiration taint my excitement.

‘I’ll ask Connor if he’s got a notepad and a pen you can borrow, Em,’ he then said, ‘so you can make a note of everything as you go through it.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, as he dashed off.

Tori followed his gaze and gave a sigh.

‘What?’ Rachel frowned.

‘I’ve never been called a genius before,’ she said wistfully.

‘Em called you it first,’ Rachel reminded her.

‘I know,’ she said, looking back at us. ‘Twice in one day. How amazing is that?’

Rachel went back to the bar when Alex returned with a notebook Connor said I could keep, and a pen.

‘I’m going to be a while,’ I told him and Tori. ‘You don’t have to wait if you want to get back to the cottage.’

I didn’t much want to be the conduit which facilitated them spending time alone together, but it was hardly fair to manipulate them into staying where I could keep an eye on them. I had made my bed as far as Alex was concerned and I would just have to lie in it. My attempt to point out to him the day before that my holiday baggage was now finally unpacked and that I was ‘up for fun’ had fallen on deaf ears and I would have to accept that and try to forget about my feelings for him by focusing more on my fledgling business instead.

My heart rate quickened as I thought what a success it already was. With Tori’s help and Alex’s encouragement I had gone for it and if the interest recorded on my phone was any indicator, it had paid off. I was going to have to seriously think about putting Tori on the payroll because she clearly knew her stuff and had all the right contacts to boot.

Perhaps Alex’s ignorance of my attempt to hook him again was no bad thing. If I was going to do Tori’s clever social media strategy justice, I was going to need to fully engage both my head and my heart and not split focus anywhere or for anything.

‘Your very first afternoon in the office.’ Tori beamed.

‘And it’s a Sunday,’ said Alex. ‘You’ll need to watch that, Em,’ he jokingly added. ‘Don’t let the work life balance go to pot in your first month.’

‘And don’t forget,’ said Tori, nudging him along so she could get out, ‘to email that company you’re supposed to be starting with next month and tell them thanks but no thanks.’

‘You don’t think I should wait...’ I started to say but she gave me a stern look.

‘You’re right.’ I nodded, thinking of my nest egg sitting safe in the bank and which would see me through for a while at least. ‘I really do need to give this my all, don’t I?’

I could imagine both Nanna and Grandad standing behind Tori and Alex and nodding their heads. They’d both be so proud, especially if they knew which part of the country I’d launched the business from. Both them and *Hope Falls* had played a far larger part in inspiring me than I had previously realised, and I was so grateful.

‘If you can afford to,’ said Alex, sounding more level-headed than Tori as he sat back down, ‘then you should. My business was a shoestring start-up and it worked for me. There’s less to lose with a small start and, for me at least, that gave me the confidence to keep moving forward. If I’d borrowed big time from the bank, I would have been totally stressed.’

With Alex’s experience and Tori’s passion, I knew I didn’t need to go further than them for advice. They made the perfect team. Alex would provide the sense and the facts and Tori would keep drumming up the energy and enthusiasm.

‘You and Em sound like a match made in heaven,’ said Tori, making me blush because that was exactly what I’d just been thinking about her and Alex. ‘I reckon she’d feel exactly the same if she had a big bank loan weighing her down.’

Alex shuddered. ‘I certainly didn’t want that sort of pressure,’ he said. ‘I wanted to be in total charge of how the business would grow and not having payments to make meant I could pick and choose the projects I really wanted to work on and selectively build my portfolio.’

‘Yep,’ said Tori, making my cheeks further flame. ‘Peas in a pod.’

‘At least we know we’re compatible in one respect,’ Alex smiled at me.

Tori looked between the two of us. ‘What have I missed?’ She frowned.

‘Nothing,’ I quickly said and glanced back at my phone as it pinged again. ‘Now, let me get on, otherwise I’ll never catch up.’

‘She’s right,’ said Alex, giving Tori a look as he stood up. ‘Now, how are we going to get you back to the cottage?’

‘Save your back and ask Connor if he’s got a wheelbarrow,’ I teasingly suggested. ‘Then you could push her. It’s downhill most of the way.’

‘Hey!’ Tori yelped. ‘I’ve only put on a couple of pounds. I can’t help it if I’ve developed a fondness for Kendal mint cake, can I?’

Alex shuddered again and I pulled a face and laughed.

‘Don’t tell me,’ Tori tutted. ‘Something else you both have in common.’

With them finally gone and Rachel still helping out behind the bar, and seeming to get on far better with Connor than she currently was with me, I turned my attention back to my phone. I acknowledged every comment left on every account and replied to every commission enquiry, writing down the details as I went, along with messaging my thanks to the influencers.

I also drafted out the email to send to the company I wouldn’t now be joining, but I didn’t send it. I thought it had been enough of a monumental day and I wanted to get the wording just right. Not that I supposed it mattered as I wouldn’t be joining them now, but that was how I felt.

‘How are you getting on?’ Rachel asked and when I looked up at her, I winced.

‘Damn,’ I said, stretching out my neck and moving my head from side to side, before rolling my shoulders.

‘No wonder you’re stiff,’ she said, putting down two plates of cheesecake. ‘You’ve been at it for two hours straight.’

‘No way,’ I gasped, but she was right. ‘Oh, my god,’ I said, glancing around and finding the place considerably emptier than when I’d started. ‘I had no idea.’

‘How’s it all looking?’ she asked, sliding on to the seat opposite.

‘Really good.’ I grinned in spite of the crook in my neck and her former mulish mood. ‘I’ve checked my banking along with all the accounts Tori has set up and I’ve been paid for everything I’ve sent off so far. I really think I’ll be able to make a go of it, for a year at least.’

‘Don’t let Tori hear you say that.’ She smiled. ‘She’s got you down for the long haul.’

‘I think you’re right,’ I agreed. ‘She’s going to keep pushing me on, isn’t she?’

‘And I will too,’ she said, sounding choked. ‘I’m sorry I was a cow earlier. I have a horrible feeling that I’ve ended up sounding just like your parents and that was truly never my intention.’

I hadn’t wanted to point it out, but she had. They would be quaking in their boots if they knew I was passing up a perfectly decent job to start my own business, especially with the world in such a volatile state. They were risk-free all the way and I suppose with Rachel’s job at the school, she was similar in that respect herself.

‘I am excited for you,’ she said, offering me the slice of lemon cheesecake, even though it was her favourite. ‘And I didn’t mean to be such a bitch about Tori moving in either.’

‘It hasn’t happened yet,’ I pointed out, switching plates. I would be more than happy with the cherry. ‘Everything is all right

with you, Rach, isn't it?'

I didn't want to have to say the 'J' word unless it became absolutely necessary.

'It is now we've cleared the air,' she said a little too brightly as she handed me a fork. 'Now, let's see if Connor's cheesecake really is all that. He's been going on about it all afternoon.'

I wasn't sure I believed that everything was all right with her, but for the moment I let it drop and a couple of minutes later, I was puffing out my cheeks as I pressed the fork into the last few crumbs on the plate and ate them even though I was stuffed.

'Well?' said Connor, swaggering over, looking very pleased with himself. 'Marks out of ten.'

'Eleven,' I immediately said.

'Rachel?' he asked.

Hers was the opinion he really wanted.

'I think eleven's a bit mean,' she said, flashing him a hundred-watt smile. 'I'd say a definite fifteen.'

'Wow,' I said, as Connor blushed bright red. 'And from the cheesecake connoisseur, that is quite something.'

'I'm honoured,' was all he could say as he gathered the plates and returned to the bar.

Rachel and I looked at each other and laughed. I gathered my notes together and checked my phone one last time, while she settled our bill and Connor again insisted on paying her for the pints she'd pulled.

There were already likes on the new pic I'd posted on Instagram, but mindful of what Alex had said about it being a Sunday, I thought I would come back to the pub, or head somewhere else with a signal, and respond to them during the official working week.

Rachel and I walked back to the cottage arm-in-arm and I had the strongest feeling that everything was suddenly right in the world. Or it was until we opened the cottage door and found Tori and Alex wrapped in each other's arms.

'Shit,' Alex swore as they sprang apart and Tori made a beeline for the bedroom.

'Oops,' said Rachel, trying to cover our embarrassment but making the situation worse. 'Sorry. We should have knocked.'

'No,' Alex said, running his hands through his hair. 'We were just...'

'There's no need to explain,' I said, heading out the side door on the pretence of watering the pots as I felt a forceful wave of déjà vu wash over me. 'It's none of our business.'

Chapter 27

For the next couple of days, I went into denial overdrive. I didn't know that's what it was at the time, but my fixed smile, cheerful can-do attitude and constant busyness must have been painful to watch, let alone live with. I was overly nice to everyone; sickeningly sweeter than even the mint cake Tori had developed a fondness for and more full of cheese than Connor's fifteen out of ten cheesecake.

I threw myself into keeping up with social media via regular trips to Lakeside. I was as keen to avoid the sight of Alex and Tori together as I was to keep on top of responding to notifications. Not that I'd caught the pair in any further clinches, but they either had their heads together in the cottage or were taking long walks around the lake, so it didn't take a genius to work out the direction their recently formed friendship had taken.

The Passion for Patchwork order book (aka currently the notebook Connor had given me), was bulging by the middle of the week as I'd drawn up and sent off quotes for every enquiry and the majority of clients had confirmed receipt and requested I should go ahead as soon as possible.

I'd even found time to make another skirt. Creating that had gifted me the perfect excuse to stay hidden in my room because that was where my sewing station was set up and I claimed the light was better in there too, even though it wasn't, to further ensure no one objected to my absence.

Just as Rachel feared would happen, for the next couple of days, I completely abandoned our holiday and as a result of me

hiding away, she spent even more time in the pub than I did. As mid-week rolled around again, we were a fractured little group and I knew I wasn't the only one who had noticed the change.

'So, about tomorrow,' Rachel announced as we settled to eat lunch, for once all together, on the veranda. 'I've checked the forecast and it's going to be damp in the morning but sunny in the afternoon so I thought we could have a lazy start, maybe watch the DVD...'

Tori started to shift in her seat and I hoped she wasn't going to say she wasn't ready to watch it again. She claimed to be, had even proved herself to be a fully paid-up member of the *Hope Falls* fandom now and therefore should know that was not how it worked. Watching – and reading – on a loop was perfectly acceptable and I thought Rachel would combust if she suggested otherwise.

'And then take a picnic to the island in the afternoon,' Rachel carried on, in spite of Tori's wriggling. 'I can't believe we haven't explored it yet.'

'That sounds like a wonderful idea,' I quickly said to try and divert her attention from Alex who had also started to look antsy. 'It is ridiculous that we haven't been over there, although I don't suppose it's hurt to eke things out a bit, has it?'

The island was almost in the middle of the lake and beyond a dense copse of trees at its centre, there wasn't anything to see but a couple of the pivotal scenes in the movie had been filmed there and that was enough to make it a mecca for us book devotees.

It had been high on our list of places to visit, but just as I had known would happen, our time at the cottage had started to run away with us. I needed to keep a check on that. I couldn't let what was now happening between Tori and Alex impact on my summer dreams because if I did, in the long run I would feel nothing but regret that I hadn't squeezed the most out of each and every day and I would be letting Rachel down too.

‘What do you think, Alex?’ Rachel asked. ‘I know you’re a proficient rower, but we wouldn’t expect you to take us all the way. We can all pull our weight too, can’t we?’

Tori didn’t say anything and I could only nod as thoughts of Alex rowing the two of us out on to the lake to watch the meteor shower filled my head. His prowess with the oars had been as impressive as the stars, but I wasn’t supposed to be dwelling on things like that. I’d spent the last few days forcing myself not to, but clearly, I wasn’t out of the woods yet.

‘That sounds wonderful,’ Alex regretfully said, ‘but it’s Wednesday tomorrow and I won’t be here. I’ll be heading off to Manchester first thing.’

Like Rachel obviously had, I’d also forgotten about him going to work, but the fact that he was sticking to his routine suggested he wasn’t too obsessed about staying glued to Tori. The thought cheered me more than it probably should.

‘And I’m going with him,’ Tori then said, cutting me straight back down to size.

‘What are you going for?’ Rachel demanded, sounding angry. ‘You don’t just duck out of a book-lovers’ dream getaway, you know, especially when you’ve only just got here!’

Tori looked contrite but didn’t say anything.

‘I know for a fact you haven’t got funds to go shopping,’ Rachel goaded.

‘There’s just a couple of things I need to do,’ Tori eventually and evasively said.

Rachel still looked thunderous, but made no further comment.

‘Well, never mind,’ I cajoled. ‘I’ll come with you, Rachel. I think it sounds like a wonderful way to spend a sunny afternoon. In fact, I’ll head down to the village after lunch and pick up some extra treats from Mrs T for our picnic.’

‘And I’ll pay for half of them out of my wages from Connor,’ she insisted.

With that settled, I took the opportunity to wolf down my lunch and shoot off to Lakeside faster than a gazelle who’d spotted a lion.

‘What about this salmon mousse?’ Mrs Timpson suggested temptingly, holding it up. ‘That’s always good for a picnic.’

I had been thinking more along the fancy dips and classy crisps route, but Mrs T, as always, had ideas which reached way above her customers’ expectations. And budgets.

‘And these gooseberries?’

‘Yes, to the salmon,’ I said, even though the price tag made me flinch. I was relieved I’d recently been paid for the latest commissions. ‘But no to the gooseberries.’

That was one summer fruit I still wasn’t keen on.

‘You’ll want a packet of these all-butter crackers to go with the mousse then and how about a hot water crust pork pie to fill you up. The mousse is very light and the pie is made by the same farmer who supplies the Scotch eggs, so you know that’s a winner.’

She whirled about the tiny shop, adding the extras to the bag of apples and chocolate chip cookies I’d already picked out and before I could object.

‘And this cream cheese mixed with chilli jam is delicious for dipping celery and carrot sticks into,’ she suggested. ‘If you like that healthy sort of thing.’

The cream cheese did look delicious, but hardly healthy.

‘I do like it,’ I told her. ‘But I think we’ve got enough now. The little boat will sink at this rate and I’ll never manage to carry it all back, let alone down to the lake.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Mrs Timpson. ‘That boat is as safe as houses. My brother, Sidney, checks it over every spring. Oh, I almost forgot, you’re going to need something to drink. Don’t worry about lugging it all back, I’ll get Sid to run it down later.’

I walked back to the cottage wishing she’d mentioned Sidney’s delivery services weeks ago and feeling in a total daze. This whole avoiding Tori and Alex shenanigan was costing a fortune.

I lay in extra late the following morning, eager to avoid bumping into the housemates who were heading off for the day, and when I eventually got up once the coast was clear, I was surprised to find Rachel still fast asleep. Had it been the start of the holiday, when she was worn-out by the gruelling end of term teaching, I wouldn’t have thought anything of it, but heading towards the end of August, it was wholly unexpected.

‘Hey you,’ I said, when she finally joined me in the kitchen. ‘Is everything all right?’

As the forecast had predicted, the damp morning was giving way to a sunny midday and we would need to set off to the island soon, unless Rachel had plans for us to picnic at teatime, rather than lunch. We’d already missed the chance to watch the film again, but I had read a few scenes from the book while she slept.

‘Yes,’ she said brightly. ‘All good. I just fancied a lie in and thought I’d make the most of not having to listen to Tori snoring. You need to get yourself some earplugs before she moves in, because...’ she added, her words trailing off.

When I looked up to see why she’d stopped, I could see her eyes had filled with tears and her bottom lip was wobbling. I resolved there and then to use our alone time at the island to get to the bottom of whatever was going on with her.

‘I’m fine,’ she said, waving a hand in front of her face. ‘I thought I was going to sneeze. My hay fever’s hell at the moment.’

Hay fever, my eye.

‘Um,’ she later said when we were standing on the side of the jetty and looking down into the boat. ‘Are you sure it’s safe?’

‘As safe as houses,’ I told her. ‘According to Mrs T, Sidney keeps it shipshape and seaworthy and it was fine the night Alex took me out to watch the meteor shower.’

Having been a combination of both busy and distracted Alex hadn’t rowed Rachel out in it, so this was going to be her first on board experience.

‘But you didn’t have all this extra weight then,’ she said, nodding at the heavy, packed hamper. ‘And who is Sidney?’

‘Mrs T’s brother,’

‘Oh, well,’ she said, gingerly stepping down and making the boat rock. ‘I suppose that’s recommendation enough.’

I passed down the rest of the provisions and then, having given Rachel time to check for leaks, climbed in myself.

‘Shall we take it in turns to row?’ I asked. ‘Or grab an oar each?’

There was just enough room for us to squeeze in sitting side by side so we decided to try and row together. It took us a few minutes to get the hang of it and stop giggling as we went around in circles, but we finally found our stroke and set off on a haphazard course towards the island.

‘That took longer than I expected,’ Rachel puffed as we took off our sandals to hop out and pull the boat further up the pebbled shore.

‘And the jetty looks a long way away, doesn’t it?’ I frowned, shielding my eyes from the sun as I looked at how far we’d come. ‘I hope we’ll be able to get back.’

‘Let’s not worry about that now,’ said Rachel. ‘I’m starving. Let’s eat.’

We braced ourselves then plunged our feet in the icy water. It only reached our ankles, but it took our breath away.

‘Geez,’ Rachel gasped. ‘It hasn’t warmed up, has it?’

I shook my head, unwilling to speak because I knew the only thing that would come out of my mouth would be a string of expletives. Rachel laughed and then stood on a sharp stone which made her swear enough for both of us.

With the boat and oars secure, we unloaded the hamper, rug and our shoes and carried it all further up the beach. We soon forgot how cold our feet were as the sun burnt off the last remnants of cloud and we tucked into the fabulous fare.

‘When you said picnic,’ said Rachel, holding her glass out so I could further fill it, ‘I had no idea you’d gone all posh on me. This is a total treat. No wonder there was no money left over.’

‘I’m pleased you’re enjoying it.’ I smiled. ‘Though I can’t take the credit. We need to thank Mrs T for talking me into buying quite a lot of this and you of course for footing half the bill,’ I admitted.

Rachel shrugged. ‘It wasn’t money I knew I was going to have,’ she smiled, ‘so god bless Mrs T and her persuasive ways,’ she added, raising her glass and I did the same. ‘And more fool Tori for heading off with Alex,’ she finished up, giving me a side-eye that she probably thought I wouldn’t notice. ‘She’s really missing out today.’

‘Oh,’ I sighed, thinking of her spending the day alone with Alex, ‘I wouldn’t say that exactly.’

Rachel put down her glass and leant back on her elbows, tipping her face up to absorb the warmth of the sun.

‘Careful, Em,’ she said softly. ‘Nothing tastes, or sounds as bitter as regret.’

‘I don’t regret anything,’ I said back, reaching into my bag for the sunblock.

I loved my freckles, but in spite of the usual cloud cover, they had got a bit out of control this summer. I squeezed a blob of factor fifty into my palm, slightly too much as was usual, and nudged Rachel who then scooped some of it up and applied it to her own face, while I covered mine.

‘Are you sure about that?’ she then further probed. ‘Only I’ve got the impression over the last few days, that regret is your current go-to emotion, where Alex is concerned, that is.’

I looked out across the lake and pulled in a breath.

‘Well,’ I said, in as carefree a tone as I could muster, ‘I don’t know where you’ve got that idea from because you’ve hardly seen me.’

‘Exactly,’ she said sagely. ‘I’m not an idiot, Em. I know you’ve been keeping yourself extra busy and tucked away with more reason than launching your business.’

I felt my face grow warm as I wondered if Tori or Alex had worked that out too. Then remembered that given how wrapped up in each other they currently seemed to be, it wasn’t likely.

‘You’re a fine one to talk about staying tucked away,’ I batted back, twisting around so I could gauge Rachel’s reaction. ‘I know you’ve been spending more time with Connor than you’ve let on.’

She reached up and pulled the claw out of her hair so it swung down and forward, covering the side of her face.

‘And I also know you’d been messaging Tori before she turned up,’ I forged on, throwing caution to the wind, ‘but for some reason you let me assume that it was Jeremy you were in contact with every day. Everything is all right between you two, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’ She swallowed, tucking her hair behind her ear. ‘Of course. It’s just a big thing, deciding to move in together. It’s a

huge life change and it's given me a lot to think about.'

I couldn't help wishing that her thinking had resulted in her turning Jeremy's request down as a crystal-clear vision of the future popped into my head. I could imagine Rachel living in Jeremy's flat, Tori settled in Rachel's room and Alex coming to stay for weekends and all with me not quite fitting in anywhere. The thought made me gasp.

'Em?' Rachel frowned. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes.' I vigorously nodded, as I tried to shake the unbearable images off. 'Too much rich food at the wrong time of day,' I bluffed. 'Let's go for a wander, shall we?'

We tidied the remains of the picnic away and then pulled our plimsolls back on and set off to explore.

'I can't believe we've got the whole place to ourselves!' Rachel called over her shoulder as she wove her way, book in hand, through and between the stand of pine trees growing at the centre.

They provided some shade from the sun which hadn't felt warmer on any other day of our holiday. I stuck to the edges, keen to soak up the vitamin D, now I'd applied the sun cream, as we walked around.

'Here, Em!' Rachel called again. 'Look!'

I followed her voice and found her looking from her phone and the book back to the trees and then turning around to look towards the cottage.

'This is it,' she beamed. 'The exact spot.'

She held out her phone and I compared the screenshot to the view in front and behind us. I already knew it fitted the fictional description the author had so beautifully written.

'Oh my god,' I laughed. 'You're right.'

She'd found the very spot where the island campfire scene had been filmed. We both looked around for any evidence of what had

occurred there, but there was nothing and I was pleased about that.

‘I’m so pleased there isn’t a sign or anything,’ said Rachel, echoing my thoughts. ‘It’s so much nicer to find it for yourself, isn’t it?’

‘It is,’ I agreed, sitting down cross-legged on the pebbles in the spot I imagined Heather had sat in before me.

Rachel did the same only in the position where Laurie had perched. She took loads of photos, some with us in, some without.

‘I’ll send you these when we’ve got a signal again,’ she said.

‘Thank you.’ I nodded, still looking around. ‘In the book,’ I quietly said, pointing at the treasured title, ‘and in the film, this scene by the fire was a full circle moment, wasn’t it? Heather, Rose and Laurie had almost come to the end of their journeys. Do you think we have too?’

Rachel thought for a moment. ‘No,’ she then said. ‘No way. I think ours is just beginning, especially yours with your new business. I know I didn’t make a very good show of it at the weekend, but I really am pleased for you, Em. I think you’re really brave. It’s not something I could do, but I do admire you for making it happen. I hope you know that.’

‘I do now,’ I said, reaching for her hand and wishing I’d been able to find a way to tell her about it all sooner. ‘And I admire you too.’

‘For moving in with Jeremy, you mean?’ She wryly smiled, squeezing my fingers.

That was exactly what I meant.

‘For moving in with anyone,’ I said, to soften the inference.

She still didn’t look as excited by the prospect as I thought she should and even though I wanted to see my earlier resolution, to find out what was wrong with her, through, I didn’t want to risk

spoiling what had been a holiday highlight either. It had been a truly perfect afternoon and therefore I let the subject drop.

‘Come on,’ I said, standing up and pulling her to her feet as the sun went in and the temperature dropped. ‘We should think about heading back before it rains again.’

‘It’s not going to rain again,’ she said, looking around wistfully. ‘It wouldn’t dare.’

We’d barely made it halfway back before the heavens opened, but we were laughing too much to care.

Chapter 28

Tori arrived back with Alex looking like the cat who had got the cream that night. Not that I could blame her because no matter how hard I tried to stave the feelings off, ever since Alex and I had shared another precious moment looking through Gracie's treasures at the lake, he had become an even more attractive prospect, in every sense of the word.

As a result, I couldn't resent Tori for snapping him up and looking smug about it. I wasn't even all that shocked, given what had happened in the past, but I did feel guiltily bitter about missing out myself on what could have potentially been something very special indeed.

However, having considered what I thought was smugness, when I caught Tori creeping back into the cottage early on the Sunday morning, having got up to fetch myself some water from the kitchen, she looked as far from feeling that as it was possible to get.

'Where had you snuck off to?' I whispered, scaring her half to death because she hadn't spotted me before I spoke.

If I'd expected to find her sneaking anywhere it would have been to cosy up with Alex on the pull-out, but he was very much alone and sleeping soundly. Although he had shifted a bit when Tori let out a stifled screech.

'Are you trying to give me a heart attack?' She grimaced, turning pale then puce and back again. 'I just needed to check something on my phone.'

‘At this hour?’ I frowned.

‘Yes,’ she said, sucking in her lower lip as her dark eyes widened. ‘I think I might have made a mistake, Em.’ It wasn’t the first time I’d heard her say that. ‘I’ve done something in good faith but I think it’s going to backfire on me in a way I hadn’t bargained for. I knew it might cause trouble, but...’

I puffed out my cheeks as her words trailed off. In the past, she’d have the mother of all meltdowns about maxing out her credit cards at the start of the month, then her father would pay the bills or up her allowance limit and that would be that, but that clearly wasn’t the sort of thing this early morning tizz was about.

‘What have you done?’ I hissed, pulling her into my bedroom as Alex moved again.

‘It’s to do with—’ she started to say, but then Rachel wandered in before I could close the door and Alex gave a frustrated groan.

‘It’s Sunday,’ he grumbled, when Rachel asked what was going on. ‘Why are you all awake and what are you all whispering about at this ungodly hour?’

‘Are we whispering?’ said Rachel at a volume that was definitely not a whisper.

Alex groaned again.

‘What’s the craic?’ Rachel asked, turning back to us and rubbing her hands together in anticipation of gossip.

‘There is no craic.’ Tori shrugged, still looking pale.

‘You’ve been spending too much time with Connor,’ I said to Rachel. ‘Hasn’t she, Tori?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said, heading to the bedroom. ‘I’m going back to bed.’

‘Oh no,’ said Alex, flinging the covers off. ‘No one’s going back to bed. You’ve woken me up now and it took me ages to nod off,

so we're having coffee and then we're going for a walk around the lake.'

'You can't tell us what to do,' Rachel laughed at his bluster and bonkers bed hair which confirmed he'd been tossing and turning.

'Yes,' he said, manically trying to flatten the bouffant, 'I can. Get the kettle on and your coats ready, because we're going for a hike.'

Even with Tori's toes covered in plasters to minimise the blister risk, she still grumbled as we strode around the lake and Alex looked as if he was regretting bossing us around even before we'd made it through the woods. Rachel was looking bleary-eyed and I was too worried about what disaster Tori thought she had set in motion to really enjoy the fresh air.

I tried to collar her a couple of times to ask, but Rachel was always within earshot and she just nervously shook her head and hung back to wait for Alex. I supposed I would have to wait it out and see what, if anything, kicked off.

We had plans to go to the pub that evening. Connor was holding another book-lovers' quiz night and as Tori hadn't been with us for the last one, we decided to go along. But only after I'd made Rachel promise to leave the mixology to the landlord.

'I will,' she said slyly, loud enough for the other two to hear. 'But only because we don't want a repeat of what happened last time, do we?'

'Oh, I don't know,' Alex confused me by saying, accompanying the unexpected comment with a suggestively raised eyebrow.

'Why?' Tori gleefully pounced, sensing scandal. 'What happened last time?'

It was the first time she'd looked anywhere near like herself all day but I wasn't about to furnish her with the details and I was shocked Alex had hinted that something had happened.

‘Never you mind,’ I said dryly.

‘Let’s just say, I underestimated the impact of double measures,’ Rachel put in with a mischievous wink.

‘Triple,’ Alex and I said in unison, then grinned even though I tried not to.

Tori looked between us and I didn’t linger to enjoy the camaraderie with Alex or further feed the moment. Given that I had persistently tried to claim that I wasn’t interested in the man who was now paired up with one of my closest friends, I had just failed dismally to rein my feelings in when they received even the merest hint of encouragement.

‘I’m going to go and start getting ready,’ I said, even though it was way too early.

Tori still seemed to be in a less jittery frame of mind by the time Alex had driven us to the pub. She was looking very glam for a night in The Drover’s but then she always looked glam whenever we went out. It felt like forever since we’d met in The Flamingo and she’d dropped her bombshell about not being able to join us on the holiday, but the scent of her perfume kicked off a whole host of Friday night drinks memories.

It felt as if we were all living entirely different lives now. Which in a way, I supposed, given everything that had happened to each of us during the last few weeks, we were and that, of course, was perfectly in keeping with the plot of the book. My Passion for Patchwork business had launched, Rachel was moving in with Jeremy, Alex had fulfilled Gracie’s wishes and further assimilated his grief and as a result, he and Tori were now partners. I shoved that last twist in the plot firmly and as far away as I possibly could.

‘I’ll get the first round in,’ offered Alex, leaning past me and assaulting my senses with a full-on close-up waft of the same aftershave he’d been wearing at the last party.

I'd got a whiff of it in the car, but not close to and I felt every erogenous zone light up before I could take a step away.

'And I'll find us a table.' I swallowed, dragging Rachel along with me.

'What's up?' she asked.

'Nothing,' I said, shaking the impact of Alex's aftershave off the further I moved away from him. 'I'm fine.'

'Good,' she said, looking back to where Tori was standing at the side of the bar scrolling on her phone and not taking any notice of the attention she was drawing. 'I'm pleased one of us is because Tori has been in the weirdest mood all day.'

I didn't hear a word of what Rachel said after that as I watched Tori, thinking she must be completely besotted with Alex if she was capable of not responding to the admiring looks and attention she was getting.

'Don't you think?' Rachel nudged, when I didn't respond.

'I don't know.' I shrugged, hoping she had still been talking about Tori's weird mood. 'I haven't noticed.'

'Not you too,' she tutted.

'Here we go,' said Alex, coming back with a loaded tray. 'Connor reckons these have got so little alcohol in them, they're practically mocktails.'

I raised my eyebrows, feeling sceptical.

'His words, not mine.' Alex beamed, making my insides fizz again as he put down the tray and held up his hands.

'Well,' I said, feeling half-drunk already, in spite of the fact that I hadn't tasted a drop. 'Let's hope he's right because you're driving us home.'

'I'm not actually,' he said, handing me a glass and not letting go as my fingers closed around it. 'I've booked the taxi and I'm

leaving my car here, so we'd better watch out.'

My eyes flicked to his and I wondered what he was doing. He couldn't possibly be flirting with me when Tori was almost in earshot. In fact, he shouldn't be flirting with me, wherever she was. I got a grip on myself and looked away, embarrassed that I had read too much into what he had said. Of course, he wasn't flirting with me. I was delusional to even think that let alone for a moment believe it.

He had just finished handing out the rest of the drinks when Tori shot across the pub and almost knocked the whole lot for six.

'What the hell's the matter with you today, Tori?' Rachel tutted, as she used a paper napkin to mop up the spillage. 'You're doing my head in.'

'Come on,' I said, wondering if her speedy second change of mood was related to whatever it was that she had snuck out so early to do or if it was connected to what had just beguiled her on her phone. Or were they even both the same thing? 'Sit down and have one of these. It'll settle your nerves.'

'I'm not nervous,' she said, downing the drink I handed her in one huge gulp.

Alex looked at her and frowned. 'I'd better get another round in then,' he said, heading off again.

'Make them doubles!' Tori shouted after him.

Having drunk a couple more cocktails and come second in the quiz, Tori seemed to settle down, which helped the rest of us relax. I wasn't sure if she was feeling genuinely soothed or if the alcohol had knocked the worst of her jitters off, but whichever it was, I was grateful for the transformation. However, the evening didn't stay settled for long.

We had just started to discuss what we were going to do the following week to keep the *Hope Falls* momentum going when an

argument broke out at the bar. I'd never heard Connor shout before and his infuriated Irish lilt made me flinch.

'What the hell?' Alex frowned, quickly jumping up and racing through the packed pub to his new friend's aid.

It was then that the shouting really cranked up and it sounded like a fight, *a real fight* (as Tom in *Bridget Jones's Diary* had so ecstatically declared), had broken out. The three of us took one look at each other and then rushed in the direction Alex had headed.

'Oh my god!' Rachel practically screamed and Tori burst into noisy sobs as we waded through the crowd of onlookers. 'Jeremy!' Rachel yelled, grabbing his shirt sleeve before he swung his fists again. 'What the hell are you doing here?'

Alex was bent double and when he straightened, there was blood pouring from his nose and the beginnings of a black eye blooming.

'Alex,' I said, rushing to his side as Connor manhandled a swearing and very ugly-looking Jeremy towards the door. His face was horribly contorted with fury. 'Here,' I said, grabbing a tea towel and steering Alex towards a seat.

'Was that who I think it was?' he choked.

'Pinch the end of your nose,' I commanded, handing him the towel. 'And lean forward. Can you do that?'

He nodded and did as I had instructed.

'Tori,' I then said. 'Come and help Alex while I go and find Rachel.'

Tori was still sobbing and I guessed the nasty little scene which had just played out had something to do with her, but we would get to the bottom of that later.

'Tori!' I said more sharply because she hadn't moved. 'Come and sit here with Alex.'

The kitchen staff had already shut Sidly behind the bar and were picking up the glasses which had got knocked over and smashed in the one-sided scuffle. The expressions on the faces of the customers were a mixture of appalled and enthralled.

‘I take it you know this feckin’ eejit?’ Connor asked me the moment I stepped out of the door and found him, Rachel and Jeremy in a silent stand-off.

Connor looked pretty wild, but then given that Jeremy, the ultimate feckin’ eejit, had just ruined a wonderful night in his pub, I was hardly surprised.

‘Unfortunately,’ I said, giving Jeremy a look of pure loathing, ‘I do, yes. Are you all right, Rach?’

The look she gave me was withering.

‘Of course, you’re not,’ I responded, shaking my head. ‘Sorry.’

I didn’t think I’d ever seen her looking so angry, not even when Tori and I had tried to make her see sense over Jeremy’s behaviour before and she had vociferously defended him, her misplaced annoyance turned squarely on us.

‘We need to talk,’ Jeremy had the gall to boisterously say to her. ‘Alone.’

‘You need to shut the hell up,’ said Connor, pushing him roughly back down on the bench he’d dumped him on, when he tried to stand up.

‘It’s okay, Connor,’ Rachel said, her softer tone at odds with the look in her eyes. ‘Really. Jeremy’s right. We do need to talk.’

Jeremy shrugged off Connor’s grip on his shoulder and rearranged his shirt, looking triumphant.

‘But we won’t be alone,’ she then said, which made Jeremy’s smile falter. ‘Em, will you stay, please? I want a witness to what I’m going to say.’

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Whatever you want.’

Connor shook his head and didn't budge.

'You need to go and sort things in the pub,' Rachel insisted. 'We'll be fine.'

He looked at her for a long moment and she nodded.

'You'd better behave yourself,' he then said to Jeremy, through gritted teeth. 'Em,' he added, turning to me. 'One wrong word out of him and you come and get me.'

'I will,' I said, thinking what a pleasure that would be. I felt like thumping Jeremy myself and I'd never thumped anyone. 'Will you ask Alex if he wants to press charges?'

'I'm going to call the police,' he told me. 'So, they'll ask him that.'

Jeremy didn't look quite so cocky all of a sudden.

'Good idea.' I nodded.

Giving Jeremy another hard stare, he reluctantly went back inside and Jeremy immediately opened his mouth to speak. I would have been interested to hear how he was going to attempt to justify his behaviour, but Rachel didn't give him the opportunity.

'No,' she said, pointing a rigid finger in his face. 'I'm going to talk and you're going to listen. You can answer my questions, but that's the only time you get to speak. Do you understand?'

I shook my head in disbelief as Jeremy had the audacity to roll his eyes. I would have thought by then he would have been contrite and wheedling for forgiveness but there didn't appear to be a hint of remorse in a single bone of his body.

'Question one,' Rachel began, holding up her thumb. 'What are you doing here?'

He took a moment before answering. 'I was looking for the cottage,' he said tersely. 'I couldn't find it, but your phone led me here, anyway.'

I shook my head again, realising his words confirmed that Tori had been right about him having a tracker app connected to Rachel's phone.

'I should have known you and the other two would be out partying,' he then said, throwing me a look of pure disdain.

In return, I rolled my eyes.

'And here you all are.'

'Your opinion isn't necessary,' Rachel said with far more tolerance than I could have mustered under the circumstances. 'Just stick to answering the questions. Question two,' she carried on, holding up the finger next to her thumb. 'Why have you come here now, when we'd agreed a few weeks back that you would stay away?'

He looked at her and ground his jaw, a spark of his former aggression reigniting. I wondered if I was going to have to shout for Connor sooner than expected.

'Because I saw the photos that snooty cow, Tori, posted online and after first cosying up with that Connor bloke, I couldn't believe that you'd been shacked up with a guy all this time and not said a word,' he half-shouted in a furious rush. 'You let me assume Alex was a woman and when I saw those photos—'

'You saw red,' I neatly finished for him and he fired another look of hatred my way.

So that's what had got Tori jittery. She'd posted the photos to taunt Jeremy and been panicking ever since, and with good reason, about what his reaction to them might be. I bet I knew which ones she'd shared. There were a fair few she'd taken of the four of us, laughing at the lake, and I daresay she had cleverly cropped a couple to fit her purpose.

'For fuck's sake, Jeremy!' Rachel shouted, making me jump. 'Given what you've just done in there, is it any wonder that I didn't tell you?'

‘I was hurt,’ he said, sounding pathetic. ‘If you’d told me from the start...’

‘You would have dragged me straight home,’ Rachel raged on.

‘I’ll feel better when we’re living together,’ Jeremy said, making my mouth fall open. ‘When you’ve moved in, I’ll feel more secure.’

‘This isn’t about feeling secure or anything like it,’ Rachel laughed without humour. ‘This is about you being a control freak and an abuser.’

Jeremy flinched at the word, but I felt a huge rush of relief to hear her say it. The scales had finally dropped.

‘My friends have always been able to see that your so-called protectiveness was actually jealousy and manipulation,’ she further said, ‘but it wasn’t until I met Connor—’

I saw the muscles in Jeremy’s arms tense up.

‘It wasn’t until I spent a decent amount of time with him,’ Rachel continued, ignoring Jeremy’s reaction, ‘that I realised exactly how off-kilter and screwed up our relationship is. I’ve been tying myself up in knots these last few days because I knew I was going to break things off but I didn’t know how best to do it. Thankfully, although my poor friend Alex and his bloody nose probably wouldn’t agree with me, I don’t have to find the words now because you’ve just done it for me.’

So, that explained Rachel’s strange mood. Not only was she worried about how to handle the break-up, she was most likely also fretting over the fact that Tori had said she’d move in when Rachel moved out. The complications with the flat didn’t matter though. All I cared about, and all Tori would care about, was that Jealous Jeremy had, at long last, been issued his marching orders.

‘You’re breaking up with me?’ Jeremy gaped.

I had to stop myself from laughing at the incredulity in his tone. He really was deluded.

‘Yes,’ said Rachel. ‘Well done, Jeremy. You’ve got it. I’m breaking up with you and you’re in real trouble because that assault you’ve just carried out, in front of witnesses, was premeditated. The police won’t see this as a common assault because you singled Alex out.’

I watched with interest as the colour drained from Jeremy’s face. ‘But I was just trying to protect you.’ He swallowed.

‘From what?’ Rachel shrugged. ‘My friends? Newsflash, Jeremy. Men and women can be friends. Just friends.’

‘But he’s in love with you,’ he said, his nostrils flaring. ‘You only have to look at those photos.’

I sensed movement behind me and turned to see Alex and Tori coming out of the pub. Alex’s face was still covered in blood, but his nose had stopped bleeding. Tori’s complexion was as white as snow. She was clearly terrified to see the result and repercussions of her well-meant interference, but I was beginning to think she deserved a congratulatory slap on the back. That was, as long as Alex had suffered no lasting damage, of course.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked him.

‘I’ll live,’ he said, sounding as though he’d got the head cold from hell. ‘No thanks to this cretin.’

Jeremy went to stand, but then thought better of it. It was beginning to look like the fight had finally gone out of him.

‘He’s in love with you, Rach,’ he said again, in one last-ditch attempt to justify what he no doubt considered to be chivalrous behaviour in his screwed-up head.

‘Jeremy!’ Rachel screeched. Clearly, she still had some frustration left to vent. ‘Alex is not in love with me. He’s in love with...’

At this juncture she pointed her thumb over her shoulder in the general direction of where the three of us were standing.

‘She means you,’ I said to Tori, who then, even though I wouldn’t have believed it possible, turned another shade paler.

Rachel spun around at my words with a deeper frown etched across her already troubled brow.

‘No, I don’t,’ she said, sounding irritated. ‘I meant you, Emily.’

I felt my knees go weak and wondered if she’d had a blow to the head too. No wonder Tori was still looking more ashen than a hint of white paint chart. No one wanted to hear that their partner was smitten with someone else and in this instance it absolutely wasn’t true.

‘No,’ I stuttered. ‘You’re wrong.’

‘No,’ said Alex, stepping away from Tori and closer to me. ‘She’s right. It is you I’m in love with, Em.’

Chapter 29

When someone you're utterly enamoured with reveals in no uncertain terms, leaving not one inch of opportunity for misinterpretation, that they're in love with you, you should, in theory, be on the ultimate high. Yes?

Um, that's what I had always thought, too. However, that's not quite where I found myself when Alex declared his feelings for me, because the second he uttered the magical words, the sound of police sirens assaulted my ears and Jeremy tried to make a run for it which meant that Connor, who had only just joined us again, had to wrestle him to the ground in a rugby tackle which might also have involved a bitten butt cheek because Siddy had broken free of the bar and thought her beloved master was in trouble.

The next few minutes were a blur, which saw us all denying that we'd seen Siddy do anything, and by the time we were able to leave The Drover's and head back to the cottage, I had convinced myself that Alex hadn't said anything even remotely like, 'I'm in love with you, Em,' in spite of the many loaded glances he threw me as Rachel drove us back, the taxi trip abandoned.

'Are you sure you're feeling okay?' she asked him for the umpteenth time. 'Not sick or anything?'

'No,' he said with a wry smile. 'If anything, I'm on a bit of a high. I think my nose was flattened for a very worthy cause tonight and I have just the thing stashed away at the cottage to celebrate that... amongst other things.'

Tori sat in the back of the car next to me. She looked to be in a total daze and hadn't uttered a word for ages. I couldn't bring

myself to ask if she was all right. She certainly didn't look in the mood for a celebration and her apparent upset did make me wonder again if I had heard Alex right, after all.

I was still feeling all at sea when we arrived back at the cottage and ducked out on the pretence of changing into my pyjamas and Rachel and Tori did the same. With my emotions in such a muddle and my recollection of what had happened at the pub hazy at best, I would have much preferred to hide away for the entire night, but Alex wasn't going to allow that and it was hardly fair on Rachel.

'Come on, you three!' he called, loudly clapping his hands and I realised it wasn't only me who was taking my time. 'I've cleaned myself up, lit the wood-burner *and* I've got fancy crisps. Where are you all?'

Rachel and I stepped out of our bedrooms at the same time.

'Oh, well.' She smiled, looking more like herself again. 'If fancy crisps are on offer.'

'Where's Tori?' I asked.

'Still getting changed,' she informed me, but didn't get the chance to say anything else, even though I could tell she was about to, because Alex carried on.

'And there's this as well as the crisps,' he said, holding up a bottle of Elderflower and Rose Gin Liqueur from Lakeside Liqueurs. 'I was saving it,' he told us, flipping open the stone swing top with a flourish, 'for the week we were due to leave. I knew we'd all be down in the dumps and thought this would give us a lift, but I'm in the mood for it now. And not because I'm down in the dumps,' he elaborated with a huge smile at me.

'Did someone say liqueur?' asked Tori as she finally joined us.

Like the other two, she was also smiling and looked fine again as she sat next to Rachel on the sofa. I hadn't been expecting her to reappear looking so happy and couldn't take my eyes off her as I

plonked myself down on the footstool and Alex commandeered the armchair, as usual.

‘Sit here,’ Rachel said to me, nodding at the space next to her, as she reached for the crisps and Alex poured the liqueur which was prettily pink. ‘There’s plenty of room.’

‘I’m all right here,’ I said, the words sticking in my throat as I tried to work out the altered group dynamic. ‘I’ll warm up quicker next to the fire.’

‘Cheers, everyone,’ said Alex, handing out the glasses filled with generous measures and holding on to mine as he passed it to me until I had no choice but to look at him. ‘Cheers,’ he said again, but softly and just loud enough for me to hear.

‘Cheers.’ I swallowed and he finally released the glass.

The tender look in his eyes had me questioning whether I was right to dismiss what I had thought he’d said back at the pub. I didn’t much like the way my heart lifted at the thought, given that Tori was going to be hurt in the potential fallout, even though she was suddenly looking happier, and they were words I had yearned to hear.

‘And here’s to an evening of further revelations,’ he added, holding his glass up higher and prompting us to toast.

I could have sworn Tori winked at him when he said that but didn’t have time to properly puzzle her reaction out, before I had swallowed the deliciously floral tasting treat and realised that Rachel was crying.

‘Oh, Rach,’ I said, as I put my glass down and rushed to the space she’d already suggested I should fill. ‘It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.’

She shook her head as I put an arm around her and pulled her close and it was then that I realised she wasn’t crying, she was laughing and on her other side, Tori was tittering too.

‘I really am forgiven then?’ Tori further giggled.

‘Of course, you are,’ said Rachel, wiping her eyes. ‘Posting those photos was a masterstroke, Tori. I can’t get over the look of shock on his face as I stood up to him. That was priceless!’

Clearly, explanations regarding Tori’s involvement in the evening’s events had been made in the bedroom while they were changing and Tori’s change of mood was the result of Rachel’s understanding and, if her laughter was anything to go by, gratitude. It was cheering to see her in such high spirits again, even though my own emotions were now further spread all over the place.

‘I obviously wouldn’t have forgiven you just a few weeks ago,’ Rachel carried on. ‘But I meant what I said about my time with Connor putting my relationship with Jeremy into perspective. His completely overblown and irrational reaction to those photos was just the thing I needed to give him his marching orders. Although I’m still sorry your nose was punched before I had the chance, Alex.’

‘As am I,’ Tori vehemently agreed. ‘You getting assaulted hadn’t been part of my plan, Alex. I really am sorry about that.’

‘It’s all right,’ he said, tentatively touching his nose. ‘It’s still attached to my face, thankfully, so no harm done.’

The three of them laughed again and I began to feel like I was walking through a dream where everyone other than me had read the script. Alex couldn’t possibly have said he was in love with me then because if he had, Tori wouldn’t have cheered up to this extent, no matter what Rachel said.

‘And given what I know about your relationship, Rachel,’ he then more seriously said, ‘I’m happy to have borne the brunt of Jeremy’s temper if it helped free you from him.’

‘Thank you.’ Rachel nodded.

‘So, I really am off the hook?’ Tori smiled.

‘You are,’ Rachel confirmed.

‘And the locals are going to love you even more after tonight.’ Alex grinned at her. ‘You’ve given them something to talk about for months!’

‘That’s true,’ she said, biting her lip to stifle another giggle. ‘Did you see their faces? So, all’s well, that ends well.’

‘Absolutely,’ said Alex. ‘Although, it does now leave you in a conundrum about the flat. If Tori’s moving in—’

‘Oh, don’t worry about the flat,’ Tori cheerfully cut in as if she hadn’t a care in the world. ‘I’ll just carry on at Dad’s if I can’t talk him into signing the new lease on my place.’

Given her continued breeziness and Alex’s almost blasé tone when addressing her, I was further convinced that I really had misheard what he’d said. The pair of them couldn’t possibly carry on as they currently were if they’d just broken up.

‘I can’t believe I let him take me in for so long,’ Rachel then huffed, sounding frustrated. ‘The pair of you tried to warn me so many times,’ she tutted. ‘And when I think about how I reacted...’

‘Don’t think about it,’ Tori said resolutely. ‘It’s done now and we can all move on.’

‘Yes,’ Rachel agreed. ‘You’re right. We can.’

I took another sip of the liqueur.

‘You’re very quiet, Em,’ Alex softly said to me.

I swallowed and looked up at the three pairs of eyes now trained on me.

‘I guess I’m still trying to process everything,’ was all I could manage to falteringly say.

‘I can give you something else to mull over if you like?’ he offered.

‘No,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘You’re all right.’

‘Well, I’m going to,’ he said, ignoring my request not to. ‘I can’t not after what I said back at the pub, can I?’

My eyes focused on his face. He had said something then.

‘That was probably the concussion talking,’ Tori grinned and Rachel gave her a nudge, ramping my confusion up another notch and making me feel even more like I was the one who had received a blow to the head.

‘It wasn’t concussion,’ he said, his eyes never leaving mine. ‘Or anything like it. I was a fool to think that after our kissing gate moment that I could go back to being just your friend. I don’t want to give you up, Em.’ He carried on, ‘I can’t. And I don’t think you want to give me up either. Not really. Not deep down.’

‘Alex,’ I burst out, unable to keep my thoughts in a moment longer. ‘Stop. How can you say all of this when Tori is sitting right there?’ I leant around Rachel to point at her. ‘You’re really not the man I thought you were if you think you can treat us like this. It’s only five minutes ago that Rachel and I walked in on you in each other’s arms, for pity’s sake!’

Rachel let out a gasp and Tori jumped up. ‘No, no, no,’ she said, pointing at one of us and then the other. ‘Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!’

She looked squarely at Alex and some thought transferred from her brain to his and as a result his eyes widened and his mouth fell open.

‘No,’ he said, looking from Tori to me.

‘Yes.’ She vehemently nodded.

‘No,’ he said again.

‘Will someone please tell me what’s going on?’ Rachel exasperatedly asked. ‘I thought that hug...’

‘I don’t believe it,’ Alex cut in, as he put down his glass and ran a hand through his hair. ‘Did you really think—’

‘If someone doesn’t put me straight, right now,’ Rachel demanded, thumping the cushion next to her and narrowly avoiding me.

‘Em,’ said Alex, jumping out of the armchair, handing my glass to Rachel and kneeling in front of me. ‘That day, when you walked in on us, I’d just told Tori about Gracie.’

‘And I’d just told Alex about losing my mum,’ added Tori.

‘And that’s why we were hugging,’ Alex further said.

‘It was a comfort hug,’ Tori finished up. ‘Nothing more.’

‘Oh.’ I swallowed.

‘And when I said that you and Rachel had introduced me to a potential new partner,’ he carried on, sounding desperate, ‘I meant business partner. Not life partner.’

I looked from him to Tori.

‘We’re going to be working together,’ Tori carried on. ‘That’s why I went with Alex to Manchester. We needed to further discuss our idea and didn’t want you or Rach to find out about it until we’d got it more sorted.’

‘Until we’d ironed out a few of the wrinkles,’ Alex said, squeezing my hand.

‘So, you’re not a couple then?’ I whispered, feeling lightheaded.

‘No,’ said Alex.

‘And we never have been!’ Tori said.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ I breathed, as relief rushed through me with the power of a storm force gale.

‘Don’t say anything then.’ Alex smiled.

‘But...’

‘No, I mean it,’ he said. ‘I’d rather you took the time to think about what I said than rush into giving a response that you might

later regret. I'd honestly rather have no hope than false hope because I've put you on the spot as a result of a post-brawl adrenaline rush.'

I laughed at that and was itching to throw my arms around him but respected his request and held myself back. Just.

'With your new business to focus on,' he said kindly, 'I know you've got a lot on your plate, and given that we've called a halt on things between us once already, I'm happy to wait for the right answer.'

I wasn't sure I was going to be capable of waiting or further thinking, but I could see the sense in what he was saying.

'All right,' I said, giving him a look which I hope offered some indication as to what my final response was going to be. 'If that's what you really want.'

'It is,' he said, kissing the back of my hand.

'You two!' Rachel groaned. 'I really wish you'd just get on with it, but I'm not going to interfere. Given my relationship track record...'

'You weren't the problem,' Tori firmly reminded her.

'I suppose.' She shrugged. 'So, come on then,' she carried on, letting Alex and me off the hook. 'If this pair aren't about to immediately head off into the sunset, tell us what's the plan, Tori?'

'Well,' she excitedly said, as Alex stood up again and refilled our glasses. 'It was all Alex's idea really.'

'No, it wasn't,' he corrected, her words stopping him from staring down into my eyes again with an intensity that had me aching to kiss him, which was probably just as well given his request that I should take my time and think things through. 'You should take the credit, Tori.'

'All right,' she conceded. 'It was *our* idea.'

Alex raised his glass to that and went back to his armchair. I was tempted to follow him.

‘And in a roundabout kind of way,’ Tori continued. ‘Dad’s too because when he cut me off, he said that if I spent half as much time establishing a career as I did messing about on my phone, then I’d be at the top of the corporate ladder by now.’

‘That was a bit harsh,’ Rachel tutted.

‘No,’ said Tori. ‘It wasn’t. It was true, and his words, combined with the success I’ve made of launching Em’s business and Alex pointing out a few things, has helped me to realise that messing about on my phone, as Dad put it, could actually become my career.’

‘I don’t understand.’ Rachel frowned.

‘That’s because you’re knocking that liqueur back too quickly.’ I smiled, noticing her glass was empty again. ‘I get it,’ I said, giving Tori my full attention. ‘You’re going to help businesses develop their online presence, aren’t you, Tori?’

‘Yes.’ She nodded.

‘Got it in one,’ Alex confirmed. ‘And even though we won’t be business partners in the true sense of the word, we’re going to operate a sort of combined consultancy package. I often get asked if I know someone who can take on the branding I create and maximise its impact, especially online.’

‘And I’m bound to find clients who will want rebranding before they launch, or re-launch, online,’ Tori chimed in. ‘Or even clients who I recommend a rebrand to and can then introduce to Alex.’

‘Now I see.’ Rachel smiled.

‘I think it’s a genius idea,’ I said, looking at them both.

‘You do?’ said Tori, sounding a little unsure.

‘I really do,’ I told her. ‘This is the perfect role for you. No one knows the tricks of the getting-noticed-online trade like you do and you’re always one step ahead. You were right at the front of the line when TikTok became a thing. You’re really going to be in demand.’

‘I certainly hope so,’ she said, biting her lip.

‘We’re putting together a business plan for Tori to present to her father after the holiday,’ Alex further explained.

‘He could certainly do with refining his branding and upping his online game,’ Tori said, shaking her head.

‘He could be your first official client,’ I suggested.

‘Oh my god!’ she gasped. ‘Can you imagine?’

‘I can actually,’ Alex said thoughtfully.

‘And of course, Alex is in charge of my branding.’ Tori grinned. ‘Although I do have some ideas about how I want everything to look.’

‘Crikey,’ I said, raising my glass to them both. ‘I’m both impressed and relieved.’

‘Relieved?’ Tori frowned.

‘Yes,’ I laughed. ‘I’m relieved you helped me launch Passion for Patchwork before you went public. I’m pretty certain I wouldn’t be able to afford your fees now.’

‘Don’t worry,’ she laughed back. ‘I would have offered you mates’ rates.’

‘I’ve already got Tori one client,’ Alex said. ‘And along with what she’s done for you, Em, that will prove to her father that the time spent on her phone could be very lucrative indeed.’

‘And he’ll love that,’ Tori said, draining her glass. ‘Dad’s all about a healthy bottom line. That might even convince him to take me on.’

‘Crikey.’ Rachel smiled, puffing out her cheeks. ‘This really is turning out to be a transformative getaway, isn’t it?’

‘I told you I was a changed woman,’ Tori laughed. ‘But I am sorry about what you’ve been through tonight, Rach.’

‘Well, I’m not.’ She beamed. ‘I’m well shot of Jealous Jeremy. Although I do wish your face hadn’t been on the receiving end of his fist, Alex.’

‘Rather mine than yours,’ he pointedly said, gingerly touching his slightly swollen nose again.

‘He never laid a finger on me,’ Rachel said. ‘But I suppose there was no telling where we might have ended up after one row too many, was there?’

‘Exactly,’ Alex said. ‘You really are well shot of him.’

‘I am,’ she said again. ‘And with Tori and Em finding their business feet and you honouring your promises to Gracie, I’m certain all our wishes for this wonderful summer have come true.’

‘Almost all,’ said Alex, looking at me, and making my heart thump and my cheeks flush. ‘But I’m happy to wait to hear the outcome of my most recent one.’

Chapter 30

I didn't really expect to sleep that night, but I went out like a light and stayed slumbering until I was woken by a rare streak of sunshine which found its way through a tiny gap in the curtains and eventually across my face.

I stretched out in the bed, luxuriating in the warmth where the sun had already been and playing over the events of the day before, which rivalled even the most thrilling Friday night drinks session.

Rachel was finally free of Jeremy, Tori had at long last discovered her niche and I had launched my own bespoke business *and* had the love of a good man. And Alex, I realised, had played a huge part in all of those things. He had taken one on the nose for Rachel (literally), he'd guided Tori along the path to work and he'd encouraged me to become self-employed. He'd also said he was in love with me and, as yet, the poor guy didn't know for certain if I was in love with him. In spite of the promise I had made to take my time to think it over, I made it my thrilling mission for the day to rectify that.

'Oh, look who finally woke up,' tutted Tori, but with a grin as I arrived in the kitchen at the exact same moment she and Rachel came in from outside, laden down with bags. 'I reckon the only thing that would make that double bed more comfortable would be to have a decent bloke in it.'

I rolled my eyes and filled the kettle.

'What do you think, Rach?'

‘Perhaps,’ she said. ‘But to be honest, I’ll stick to having one side of my bed empty for a while.’

‘Just as well,’ Tori said cheekily, putting the bags she was holding down. ‘Especially as we’re currently sleeping in single divans.’

‘What on earth have you got there?’ I frowned, ignoring the pillow talk as Rachel put her bags down too.

‘Never you mind,’ she mysteriously said.

‘It’s a surprise.’ Tori winked and Rachel groaned.

‘It’s *supposed* to be a surprise,’ she said sardonically. ‘You’re not to go in the fridge today, Em, or mine and Tori’s room. Got it?’

‘How am I supposed to eat without going in the fridge?’ I laughed, wondering what the pair of them were cooking up that I wasn’t allowed to know about.

‘Tori will keep you fed and watered today,’ Rachel firmly said. ‘Won’t you, Tor?’

‘I’ll do my best,’ she promised.

Knowing her culinary repertoire was even more limited than mine, I wouldn’t be eating three courses.

‘So, what is this surprise?’ I quickly asked, hoping to catch one of them off guard.

‘Nice try,’ said Rachel, in her trademark teacherly tone. ‘Now, go back in your room until we’ve sorted this lot and then Tori will scramble you some eggs.’

Tori wrinkled her nose. ‘Tori will *try* to scramble you some eggs,’ the assigned chef amended.

‘Where’s Alex?’ I asked, noticing that the pull-out had been put away and his pillows and blankets were folded on one of the window seats.

‘He’s at the police station where they kept Jeremy overnight,’ Rachel said, with a sigh. ‘Connor came and told Alex earlier this morning that his presence was required.’

‘Jeremy has been in a cell all night?’ I frowned. ‘That’s not normal procedure, is it? I thought they would just have a word and send him on his way, for the time being at least.’

Not that I had an in-depth knowledge of police procedure, but that had been the lie of the land when we came back to the cottage.

‘That’s what I thought too.’ Rachel nodded. ‘But the idiot got all cocky again after we’d left. Apparently, he kicked off big time and ended up punching one of the attending officers.’

‘No way!’ I gasped.

‘It’s true,’ said Tori. ‘Lakeside is buzzing with it. Mrs Timpson is doling out the goss to all and sundry.’

‘But she wasn’t even there,’ I pointed out.

‘Not directly on the scene,’ Tori sniggered. ‘But she was hanging out of her bedroom window which is right opposite the pub, so she had a bird’s eye view of the aftermath even though she didn’t see the first punch.’

‘And she recorded it all on her phone,’ Rachel said, shaking her head. ‘So, the evidence against Jeremy is pretty damning.’

‘What a knob,’ I muttered.

‘Always was,’ said Rachel, ushering me back into the bedroom, ‘always will be. And talking of phones, I’m ditching mine and having a new one with a new number and everything. That way, I’ll be certain the knob isn’t still tracking me.’

‘Excellent idea,’ Tori and I agreed, feeling grateful that Jeremy had dropped himself further in it by confirming that he had been.

After a very late breakfast of extremely dry scrambled eggs and charred toast, I decided to walk down to the village. Not to get the

latest lowdown on Jeremy's fate – as far as I was concerned, they could throw away the key – but to clear my head and check in on Passion for Patchwork courtesy of The Drover's Wi-Fi.

Not surprisingly, the pub was abuzz and Connor was making the most of the till ringing. Sundays were always busy with people stopping for his legendary lunches but the world and his wife seemed to be in either the shop or the pub and on occasion switching between the two and back again that afternoon.

'Any sign of Alex?' Connor asked, when he spotted me among the throng.

'No,' I said. 'No sign. No word. What do you think the police wanted him for?'

'To convince him to press charges I should think,' he said, in a low voice. 'The officer Jeremy punched won't let him off lightly and Alex adding the weight of what happened to him to the cause will get the idiot further into trouble.'

'It's no less than he deserves,' I said, feeling especially uncharitable.

I was generally easy-going, but not where he was concerned.

'I agree.' Connor nodded. 'What on earth did Rach ever see in him?'

'I have no idea.' I shrugged, not wanting to get into it. 'But I know she values your friendship deeply, Connor,' I was willing to say and which made him blush. 'She said that her relationship with you had flagged up just how wrong hers was with Jeremy, so we're all extremely thankful for that.'

'Well, you know how I feel about her,' he whispered. 'And that's not going to change. I hope she'll stay in touch when the time comes for you to...'

'Don't,' I winced. 'I can't bear to think about it.'

He smiled and nodded. 'Same,' he agreed. 'I never usually have all that much to do with whoever's staying at the cottage, but you four have been different.'

'We've been that all right,' I laughed.

'In a good way,' he grinned.

'I should hope so.'

'And what about you and Alex?' he then asked. 'Is he going to have a happier ending to your dream getaway than I am?'

'I think I should tell him that before you, don't you?' I grinned.

'Fair enough,' Connor laughed. 'But I hope you don't keep him waiting too long. He looked like a tortured soul when I came to the cottage this morning.'

'Don't worry,' I said, further forgetting the promise I had made to think everything through now I knew he was suffering. 'I'll put him out of his misery soon.'

'Say no more.' Connor winked. 'Now, what can I get you? It's on the house.'

It was noisy inside the pub and, as the sun was still shining, I sat out front at one of the picnic tables. The change of position didn't afford me much privacy, but thankfully the Wi-Fi stretched that far and I was able to keep my head down and get through what I needed to do without too much disruption.

There were further dress enquiries and dozens more likes and comments on what I'd already uploaded and, thanks to Tori's foresight, I had more photos to share. Consistency was key, she had told me, when she set the accounts up and that if I didn't want the initial interest to tail off, then I needed to keep on top of responding and make sure there was always something new to look at. Looking at the results of what she'd started, I had every faith that she would make a huge success of her business.

As I made one last check that I'd made notes of everything I needed to, I scribbled down a few extra words about an idea I'd had for some bespoke bags. I couldn't wait to make one up and as much as I was dreading my book-lovers' adventure coming to an end, at least I knew I had something exciting to start on when we left. And I had Alex too, of course, no matter what I decided to say to him, because he was going to be working with Tori.

Who was I kidding? I laughed to myself, making a couple of passing hikers give me a wide berth. The decision was already made, it had been for weeks, all I had to do now was find a way to present it in the most romantic way possible. I thought that after everything he'd been through, Alex deserved that and actually, so did I.

The cottage was empty when I arrived back but there was a note from Rachel and Tori pinned to the door.

We're at the lake. Don't come down.

R and T

x

'What are they up to?' I muttered, as I unpinned the note and went in.

There was no sign of Alex either so I headed into the bedroom to look through the bags of fabric to see if I could cobble something bag-like together from the material I hadn't yet used. I hadn't planned to properly start the new idea, but I was itching to see if it might work and I soon lost track of time. My neck was horribly stiff from having sat in one position for so long when I heard the cottage door open and close and looked around.

'Ow.' I winced, gingerly moving my head from side to side to reduce some of the tension which had built up.

When I started sewing full-time I would have to schedule alarms to remind me to get up and have a jig and a stretch every

now and again.

‘Em?’

‘Alex,’ I said, abandoning the stretches and jumping up. ‘You’re back.’

I rushed from the bedroom and found him pulling off his shoes.

‘I am,’ he said. ‘At bloody last. What a waste of a day.’

He sounded tired and crotchety and I could hardly blame him. None of what had happened was his fault and yet he was well and truly caught up in it.

‘Do you want to talk about it?’ I asked.

‘Not really,’ he said, rubbing his eyes. ‘I’ll only get wound up.’

‘In that case, maybe I can cheer you up?’ I suggested, giving him a smile.

‘If anyone can,’ he smiled back, ‘you can.’

With three quick strides I was across the room and in his arms, ready to give him the news that his feelings were reciprocated and that they always had been. Not that my reaction to seeing him could really have left him in any doubt.

‘No, no, no, no, no!’ shouted Tori as she burst in through the back door.

‘Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!’ Alex retorted, holding me tighter and making me laugh.

‘Rachel!’ Tori yelled at the top of her voice. ‘Hurry up! They’re almost doing stuff!’

Rachel then bounded in and Alex groaned. He released me, knowing it was impossible to carry on. It wouldn’t have been the grand romantic moment I had been hoping to conjure, but had we not been disturbed we would at least have now been reading from

the same page. Not that my rushing into his arms could have really left him in any doubt as to what I was going to say.

‘Em,’ Rachel primly admonished. ‘I thought you were supposed to be taking time to think through your response to Alex’s public declaration of amour?’

‘I am,’ I said defensively, then realising how the situation looked, added, ‘I was.’

‘We were just in the nick of time,’ tutted Tori. ‘Just a few seconds later and it would have all been wasted.’

‘Do you have any idea what she’s talking about?’ Alex asked me.

‘Not a clue.’ I shrugged. ‘But that’s not unusual. You’ll learn that as you get to know her better.’

Alex shook his head.

‘Come on,’ said Rachel, sounding bossy. ‘Grab a jumper or a jacket and follow us.’

I really did have no idea what the pair of them were up to, but did as I was told. I pulled on a jumper while Alex put his shoes back on and then we followed them, crocodile style, out of the cottage and through the woods down to the lake.

‘There,’ announced Tori, giving Alex and I a little shove towards the end of the path. ‘Now you can properly carry on doing or saying whatever you were just getting into back at the cottage.’

‘And we’ll see you later.’ Rachel waved, pulling Tori quickly away.

Alex and I watched them go, giggling as they went, then we turned back to one another.

‘I’m still none the wiser,’ said Alex.

‘Me neither,’ I laughed, heading for the pebbled shore. ‘Come on.’

Just a few seconds later, however, we were both in the know. I no longer had to worry about how to create the most romantic moment to tell Alex the outcome of my brief musings because Rachel and Tori had gifted me one.

‘Is this?’ Alex gasped, looking around.

‘It is.’ I swallowed, feeling choked that my friends had gone to so much trouble.

‘It looks exactly like we’ve just walked into the book,’ Alex said, sounding choked.

‘I know.’ I smiled, blinking back tears. ‘I think that’s the idea.’

One of our favourite scenes, one of everyone’s favourites scenes to be precise, was set at the side of the lake on a clear evening exactly like the one we were experiencing. It was a pivotal point in the book, the very moment that Heather allowed her formerly broken heart to be healed, the second she embraced hope again and declared her love for the kind and gentle man who had so tenderly helped put her back together again.

The seats were arranged identically to the scene in the film, around the campfire which had also been lifted straight from the pages and there were throws over the chairs, a packed picnic hamper, champagne to celebrate, candles in jars, hurricane lanterns and even the film soundtrack playing from somewhere.

‘I really hope your friends haven’t misinterpreted what your reaction to my still being in love with you might be, Em,’ Alex said, with a slightly apprehensive smile. ‘Because if they have, this could be really awkward...’

‘Alex,’ I said, moving to stand in front of him and so close again that there could be absolutely no room for misunderstanding.

‘Yes.’ He swallowed.

‘Stop talking.’

‘Okay...’

I silenced him with a soft kiss on the lips, my eyes never leaving his.

‘Given my reaction back at the cottage just now, you must know that I’m still in love with you too,’ I whispered. ‘How could I not be?’

I kissed him again, for longer that time.

‘So.’ Alex smiled. ‘My unexpected wish for this summer really has come true.’

His hands found my waist and he pulled me close again, the next kiss reaching the passionate heights we’d climbed to after cocktail hour and it wasn’t until the song played through for the third time that I realised just how long we’d been kissing for. We both took a breath and I rested my forehead against Alex’s.

‘My wish has come true, too,’ I told him. ‘I didn’t expect anything like this to happen on this holiday.’

‘Of course, you didn’t.’ Alex grinned. ‘Because you thought I was going to be someone else for a start.’

I let out a breath as I remembered the first few days after our arrival.

‘I thought your being here was going to bugger everything up,’ I told him.

‘I know,’ he said, also reminiscing. ‘I remember.’

‘But actually, you’ve made it a million times better.’

‘And you’ve made my time here a million times easier,’ he told me. ‘You all have, but you especially, Em. All this time we’ve been waiting to come here, all these years we were on Catriona’s list and then we end up at the cottage together, right at the same time.’

‘It was serendipity,’ I whispered, moving to kiss him again.

‘I love serendipity,’ he whispered back.

‘Me too.’

‘It was written in the stars,’ he added, punctuating each word with another kiss.

By the time we sat down and opened the champagne, I was beginning to see stars.

‘You have the best friends,’ said Alex, opening the picnic and finding that even the food was the same as that featured in the book.

No wonder it had taken Rachel and Tori all day to put the surprise together. This was pure magic.

‘You have them as friends now too,’ I reminded him. ‘We’re both equally blessed.’

I thought back to what I’d arrived on the holiday with – a head packed full of tangled thoughts – and compared it to what, in just over a week, I would be leaving with. A treasure trove of special memories, a thrilling future and a fine romance. It wasn’t a bad effort for just a few weeks.

‘Penny for them?’ Alex asked, as we snuggled under a blanket and got comfortable to wait for the real stars to appear.

‘I was just thinking how wonderful this summer has been,’ I told him.

‘And it’s not over yet,’ he reminded me. ‘We’ve still got more time here to enjoy.’

Now that Alex and I were officially a couple, the thought of that was even more thrilling than before.

‘That we have,’ I said, snuggling into his arms. ‘And I want to savour every single moment.’

Chapter 31

When we eventually returned to the cottage that evening, Rachel and Tori had tactfully turned in for the night, but they were both up with the lark the next morning to make up for their former discretion.

‘What’s he doing on there?’ Tori hissed and pointed, when we met in the kitchen and she spotted Alex sound asleep on the pull-out. ‘You didn’t turn him down, did you?’

‘Tori,’ Rachel shot back. ‘You can’t ask Em that!’

She then gave me a look so loaded with inquisitiveness that I knew I had no choice but to say something by way of explanation if only to shut the pair of them up.

‘Come into my room,’ I said, hoping Alex really was asleep and hadn’t heard what Tori had just asked.

‘So?’ she squealed, bouncing up and down on the bed the second I’d shut the door and climbed back under the duvet.

‘So,’ I repeated. ‘First off, I want to say thank you both so much for what you did last night. The whole set up was incredibly romantic, utterly perfect down to the last detail and it totally set the scene for me to tell Alex...’

‘Yes,’ Tori and Rachel gasped, as they moved closer together, clutched hands and leant in.

Surely, they could have no misgivings about what I’d told him, given that I had just thanked them for the dreamy tableau they had

created, but then, finding Alex sleeping alone had seemed to throw Tori a curveball.

‘That I was in love with him, of course,’ I laughed. ‘What did you think?’

‘I told you, Tori!’ Rachel beamed, letting go of Tori’s hand and flinging herself across the bed to give me a hug.

‘Well, I wasn’t completely sure,’ Tori admitted, also getting in on the hugging action.

‘And I know partly why,’ I laughed with a nod to the sitting room. ‘But Alex was the perfect gentleman and we went our separate ways at bedtime.’

‘How very civilised,’ Rachel commented. ‘Were you disappointed?’

‘No,’ I said, shoving her away but still laughing.

‘What about before bedtime?’ Tori asked, suggestively waggling her eyebrows. ‘Tell us everything.’

‘Tori,’ Rachel tutted. ‘She doesn’t have to tell us anything, let alone everything. Unless she wants to,’ she hopefully added.

I told them enough to satisfy their curiosity.

‘I still can’t believe he’s on the sofa,’ Tori said disbelievingly once I’d shared most of the details of our romantic evening under the stars. ‘Are you sure he didn’t leave you in the early hours?’

‘No,’ I said, throwing a pillow at her. ‘He did not. I think I’d remember if he’d been here in my bed, don’t you? Don’t answer that,’ I hastily added.

She still didn’t look convinced but Rachel did.

‘If it was going to be my first time with a fella,’ she succinctly said, ‘I wouldn’t want to be going for it with you two in the next room.’

‘Bloody prude,’ Tori teased.

‘We don’t all have zero inhibitions.’ Rachel grinned, but then her face dropped. ‘Not that I’m suggesting...’

‘I know,’ Tori said, whacking her with the pillow.

Having already been on the receiving end of some truly searing kisses, I was very much looking forward to getting to know Alex more intimately than I already did, but Rachel was right. That was going to be impossible while we were at the cottage with her and Tori watching our every move.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Rachel, giving me a nudge. ‘I know exactly what you’re thinking and we’ve come up with a solution to that.’

‘I’m not sure the weather here in Lakeside is compatible with al fresco lovemaking,’ I giggled as the rain began to drum on the cottage roof.

‘Have no fear.’ She winked. ‘My plan leaves you in no danger of exposing any goose pimpled flesh in the great outdoors and it will benefit us as much as you.’

‘Well, well, well,’ said Alex, making us screech as his head appeared around the door. ‘What have we here? Or shouldn’t I ask? I hope I’m not the main topic of conversation this morning.’

‘Absolutely not,’ Tori said cheekily as she hopped off the bed and squeezed around him.

‘Your name hasn’t come up even once.’ Rachel grinned, also disappearing.

‘Now you’ve said that, I don’t know whether to be relieved or disappointed.’ Alex smiled, flopping down on the duvet. ‘God, I’ve missed this bed.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ I gasped, chucking the pillow I’d previously aimed at Rachel at his head. ‘You’re only really interested in me for my feather filled mattress, aren’t you?’

‘Damn!’ he cried. ‘The cat’s out of the bag. You’ve sussed me.’

I leant over him and before I had a chance to kiss him, he flipped me over and pinned me down, one hand either side of my head. He looked deep into my eyes and I felt my body relax as he slowly lowered his lips to mine. Things were just about to get interesting when Rachel started bossily shouting about us joining her and Tori for a breakfast meeting.

‘You could never doubt what she does for a living, could you?’ Alex sighed, reluctantly releasing me.

‘Absolutely not,’ I said, feeling hot all over and more than a little frustrated. ‘I gave her a Little Miss Bossy mug for her birthday last year in the hope that she’d take the hint and tone it down, but if anything, it’s made her worse. The damn thing’s a constant reminder and I’m sure she strives to live up to the title every time she drinks out of it.’

‘The first time I come to your flat,’ Alex whispered, ‘that mug might go missing.’

I couldn’t wait to welcome Alex to the flat, but quickly banished the image of him there because that would mean the holiday would be over and, even though I was excited to get stuck into my business plans, I wasn’t anywhere near ready to leave Lakeside. The same, however, could not be said for Tori and Rachel.

Over a breakfast of coffee and eggs, Rachel shared the plan she and Tori had come up with while Alex and I had been canoodling by the lake the evening before.

‘But that’s just five days away,’ I groaned. ‘And a whole five days ahead of the proper end of our holiday. You can’t leave then.’

I might have been craving some alone time with Alex, but not at the expense of finishing our getaway without her and Tori.

‘But remember, term starts on the sixth,’ Rachel said for the umpteenth time. ‘And I have so much prep to do...’

‘Since when?’ I huffed. ‘The original plan was for us to leave here at stupid o’clock on the sixth and for you to go straight to school in time for first registration. You’d even cleared it with the head.’

I had always thought forgoing the two days planning in school ahead of the start of the autumn term was a bit bonkers because I knew how much she usually got done in that time, but she had insisted that, just this once, she could manage without it. And now, she’d had a total turnaround and was trying to convince me that she couldn’t.

‘You were the one who always said that was a mad idea,’ she reminded me. ‘And if I’m being honest, I only really came up with it because it meant I could have a few extra days away from Jeremy.’

‘Oh, Rach,’ I said, feeling relieved that she didn’t feel obliged to give Alex and me some time, but also choked to know what had been her real motive before. ‘But you were going to move in with him.’

Alex reached for my hand.

‘Sometimes,’ he said, sounding wise beyond his years, ‘we can’t see how wrong something is until we’re completely free of it.’

‘Exactly,’ Rachel shudderingly said. ‘Now Jeremy’s out of the picture, I’ve got an entirely fresh perspective and I can see as clear as day all of the things that were so wrong in our relationship and further than that, my life.’

I supposed that was the silver lining to her leaving ahead of schedule.

‘I’m going to miss you, Rach.’ I swallowed. ‘I know it’s only going to be a few days, but this place won’t be the same without you in it.’

‘Will you miss me, too?’ Tori then piped up.

‘Not you as well,’ I groaned.

‘I’m going to stay with Rach, until you get back,’ she explained. ‘Just in case Jeremy turns up and makes a nuisance of himself.’

‘I think that’s a good idea,’ said Alex, and I couldn’t disagree.

I didn’t like the thought of Rachel staying in the flat alone so soon after the punch up at the pub. At least if Tori was there and Jeremy did show up, there was safety in numbers.

‘And while Rachel is getting to grips with her prep,’ Tori carried on, ‘I’m going to be honing my business plan and contacting a few people ahead of presenting Dad with my idea and proving to him that I really have got my life together.’

I couldn’t object to that either. Until just a few weeks ago, the only thing Tori had appeared to be interested in focusing on was having a good time.

‘In that case, I’ll get the train back,’ I said, as the practical as well as emotional implications of their early departure sank in. ‘But I’m not sure how I’ll manage with all my stuff. There’s my sewing machine for a start.’

‘That’s no problem,’ Alex insisted. ‘I can drive you back.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes,’ he said, then sombrely added. ‘It will mean the holiday doesn’t end when we put the cottage keys back in the security box.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, kissing his cheek and forcing myself not to think about the end of anything as I looked at Rachel and Tori. ‘And if you two have made up your minds....’

‘We have,’ they confirmed.

‘Then we’d better make the most of these last few days here all together, hadn’t we?’

The four of us had a fabulous time traveling further about, visiting the pub, rowing on the lake and of course, reading scenes from the book aloud, and watching the film – this time, pointing out how cleverly Tori and Rachel had set up the lakeside picnic – but the biggest highlight of the lot, we all agreed, was heading back to Archer's Force for the day.

'I'm still gutted Star Shine Falls was such a let-down,' Rachel tutted as we packed up Alex's car for the journey, 'but at least we managed to find an alternative.'

'An extremely beautiful alternative,' I added. 'And all thanks to Charlie, the security guard.'

'Have you got your skirt, Em?' Tori asked, as she checked we'd packed up as much as we could carry.

She had insisted that I should take the fern skirt so she could photograph me in the exact spot that had inspired the design for it. Her clever marketing strategy was inspired and further proof that she had the right head for the business she had chosen to go into.

'I have,' I told her. 'And have you got the plaster pack? It's a bit of an uphill hike to reach the falls.'

'And I won't be giving you a piggyback,' Alex laughingly added.

'My boots are fine after all the extra walking we've done this week,' Tori told us both and I hoped she was right.

The last leg of the journey and the road up to the falls was as daunting as the first time we'd navigated it, but that could have been because I was now sitting in the front and Rachel was in the back with Tori. When we eventually arrived at the car park, however, we found it entirely empty so traversing the treacherously tight roads a second time had been totally worth it. I couldn't believe we were going to have the place to ourselves again, but we did and, on that occasion, with extra wildlife to make it even more memorable.

‘I don’t believe it,’ I whispered, my voice filled with emotion as I watched a red squirrel scampering nimbly through the branches of the trees which lined our path down to the falls. ‘It really is Squirrel Nutkin.’

The sight of the bushy tailed creature sent me spiralling back through time and I imagined myself tucked up in bed with Nanna and Grandad sitting at the side of my bed and reading the tale, along with all the others, aloud to me. My love of books had been instilled long before Grandad introduced me to *Hope Falls* and I was so grateful for that.

‘Are you sure it’s not Twinkleberry?’ Alex asked, also watching the little red’s progress.

‘No,’ I said as the creature slipped silently out of sight. ‘That was definitely Nutkin.’

As soon as the falls came into view, Tori fell into raptures just as we all had on our first visit. She keenly scrambled up and down, her cheeks flushed as she tried to pick out the best spot to photograph me wearing my skirt.

With the sun thankfully shining, the waterfall and verdant ferns were every bit as beautiful as the first time I’d set eyes on them. Familiarity hadn’t taken away any of the magic of the place and I really wouldn’t have been surprised to discover some spell had been cast over the place.

‘Here,’ announced Tori, pointing at a boulder right next to where the falling water splashed into the pool. ‘This will be perfect.’

Rachel helped me out of my practical trousers and jacket and into my skirt. I was already wearing a floaty cream blouse and was grateful the day wasn’t too cool, although it still felt a bit chilly with fewer clothes on.

‘Barefoot will be perfect,’ Tori insisted, looking me up and down, before positioning me in the spot she thought would best

showcase my outfit.

‘You can look now,’ Rachel said to Alex who had chivalrously kept his back turned while I undressed and re-dressed.

‘Are you certain?’ he teased. ‘I don’t want to catch Em in her undies again.’

‘Are you sure about that?’ Rachel teased and Tori insisted she was told what the in-joke was.

My toes were feeling chilly by the time she was happy with the photos she had taken on her phone but looking over her shoulder as she scrolled through the images, I could see the few goose pimples I’d succumbed to had been completely worth it.

‘You’ll be able to write a lovely narrative to go with this,’ she said, as Rachel helped me back on with my socks and Alex poured champagne we didn’t know he’d picked up into the tin mugs we’d brought with us from the cottage. ‘Your clients will love reading about the background behind the skirt.’

‘Especially if you tell them how one disappointment then turned into something so memorable,’ Rachel suggested, harking back to our first trip to admire a waterfall.

‘A bit like me really,’ Alex laughed as he handed out the mugs, his considerably less filled than ours, and we all snuggled together on the rocks next to the falls.

‘You were never a disappointment,’ Rachel shot back.

‘But you are extremely memorable.’ I smiled, leaning over to kiss his cheek.

He turned his head just at the right moment and my lips landed on his.

‘It just goes to show, doesn’t it?’ Tori wistfully said as a breeze softly ran through the branches above us and the water sparkled even brighter.

‘Show what?’ Rachel asked, when Tori didn’t carry on.

‘That sometimes in life,’ she eventually continued, ‘something unexpected, which might seem like a complete disaster, can turn into something wonderful.’

‘You’re right,’ I agreed.

I had once thought Alex was going to ruin my book-lovers’ getaway, Tori had believed her father’s actions were going to stop her finding her purpose and Rachel had realised she was trapped in a ruinous relationship. However, each of us had found ways around and through the challenges we faced and come out the other side carrying something life-enhancing and fabulous. Even Alex, whose life had been so engulfed by grief, had been able to move forward and find a way through the darkness.

‘We really have done Heather, Rose and Laurie proud, haven’t we?’ Alex smiled. ‘They all came to the cottage for the summer with problems to work through and so did we.’

‘Our time here really has turned out to be about so much more than just taking the *Hope Falls* book-lovers’ tour, hasn’t it?’ Rachel laughed.

‘It certainly has,’ I sighed happily. ‘And I’m so pleased we’ve been able to come here all together.’

The four of us smiled and put our mugs together to toast our future as well as our recent past.

‘Unshakeable and unbreakable,’ said Tori and Rachel in unison.

‘Unshakeable and unbreakable, for life!’ Alex and I added.

Alex had decided to forgo his days in Manchester once the countdown to going home began in earnest, but not even the change in routine had the ability to stop the sand slipping through the timer and before we knew it, it was time for Rachel and Tori to leave.

‘I’ll call you when we’re in the pub Sunday afternoon,’ I tearfully said as we got ready to wave them off.

Typically, it was a gloriously sunny day, quite possibly the warmest we’d enjoyed since we arrived and the irony of that wasn’t lost on any of us.

‘Don’t spend the whole afternoon indoors,’ Tori said cheekily. ‘Now the sun’s properly shining you should go for a swim.’

We had talked about skinny-dipping the evening before, but Rachel reckoned her toes were still suffering from frostbite and insisted that jumping naked into the lake was the one and only *Hope Falls* tradition she was happy to miss out on.

‘Oh yes,’ she said as she turned the engine over, knowing she was now completely safe from getting pushed in at the deep end. ‘There’s still time for you two...’

‘Off you go then,’ I said, patting the roof of the car, before she fixed the idea too firmly in Alex’s head. ‘See you next week.’

Amid shouts, laughter and waves, Rachel released the handbrake and they were off.

‘So,’ said Alex as the car turned the corner and they disappeared out of sight. ‘What now? It is pretty hot for once.’

‘I can think of something,’ I said, grabbing his hand and pulling him back through the gate. ‘And it doesn’t involve any UV risk whatsoever!’

I had no plans to tell Tori that we didn’t see the light of day, let alone the sunshine, for the next twenty-four hours, but I knew, given the reason, she wouldn’t have scolded us too severely for missing out on the warm weather.

‘It’s just as well we’re heading into Lakeside today,’ Alex said, treating me to a lovely glimpse of his wonderfully toned body as he slipped into the bath I was already in and very nearly caused a flood in the process.

‘Why’s that?’ I asked, looking admiringly at his broad shoulders and wondering if my own muscles were going to get a chance to relax before we put them through their paces again.

We were deep in the honeymoon phase and even though I had been upset when Rachel and Tori had decided to leave, I was now feeling grateful for the privacy their departure had gifted us.

‘Because without my weekly top-up shop,’ Alex explained, ‘stocks and supplies are running low.’

‘Oh yes,’ I said, stifling a yawn. ‘I hadn’t thought of that.’

‘Mrs T is bound to have everything we need to get us through the next few days.’ He smiled. ‘And I’m sure Connor can help out if there’s anything she hasn’t got.’

I couldn’t imagine there would be anything she hadn’t thought of, but he was right.

‘In that case,’ I said, standing up, ‘let’s head to The Drover’s now. I’m looking forward to calling Rachel and Tori and I’ve worked up quite an appetite.’

‘Me too,’ he said seductively, also standing up and then demonstrating quite wonderfully just how famished he was.

With groceries to buy and feeling exhausted after many hours spent getting to know each other better, Alex said he’d drive us to Lakeside, rather than walk and given how satisfyingly worn out I felt, I didn’t object.

‘You can tackle Mrs Timpson while I call Rachel and Tori, can’t you?’ I hopefully suggested as he parked up just around the corner from The Drover’s.

‘Coward,’ he teased and I flashed him a smile. ‘Oh, go on then.’

I gave him a long kiss as a thank you.

‘But only if you’re going to be bragging to the girls about my prowess as the perfect partner,’ he insisted, flexing his arms,

muscle-man style. 'Make sure you let them know I was worth the wait.'

'Believe me,' I laughed, as I went to climb out, 'we won't talk of anything else.'

'Don't you dare!' he gasped, leaning across me so I couldn't move. 'I was only kidding.'

'Well, I wasn't,' I said, finding his most ticklish spot so he couldn't keep me trapped a second longer. 'Take your time,' I told him. 'I have a lot to tell them.'

He shook his head and I was still laughing when I walked into the pub.

'Someone's happy,' said Connor, wiping down the bar. 'I thought you and Alex might call in last night for the karaoke, but I'm guessing you were otherwise engaged.'

'You could say that,' I said, unable to rein in the smile which stretched from ear to ear.

'I'm really pleased for you both,' he said kindly. 'I don't think there's ever been a cottage romance before.'

'Has there not?'

'No,' he said, thinking for a moment. 'Most people are either in friendship groups like you, Rach and Tori or holidaying as a couple. I'm pretty sure you two are a first.'

'I love that,' I said, thinking that made mine and Alex's romance even more special.

'Me too.' He nodded. 'And I also love that Rachel called me last night and has promised to come and visit in October half-term,' he added, with a shy head duck.

'Has she now?' I beamed, wondering if there was hope for her and Connor after all.

‘She’s going to stay in my spare room for a couple of days,’ he said. ‘And help out with the Halloween party on the Saturday night.’

‘I might have to see if we can all make that trip.’ I nodded, imagining myself partying in a witchy orange and black patchwork creation. ‘There’s bound to be a bed and breakfast somewhere around here that could put the rest of us up.’

I made a mental note to think about seasonal adaptations for my dresses, skirts and potential bags, too.

‘It would be great if all of you could be here,’ Connor said. ‘The party is always a laugh and then there’s bonfire night and Christmas...’

‘Are you trying to turn us into Lakeside residents, Connor?’ I asked, cutting him off.

‘Maybe,’ he laughed.

I loved the thought of living either in or near the village. I could imagine myself in a tiny cottage, with a blazing fire and a cat curled up next to it while I worked away at my sewing machine. If Passion for Patchwork really took off, I could single-handedly keep Mrs T’s post office afloat!

‘Can I get you a drink?’ I heard Connor ask as I drifted out of my Lakeside fantasy.

‘A Coke, please,’ I told him. ‘Alex will be here in a sec, so I’m going to quickly call the girls.’

Once the video call connected, I gave Tori an instant warning.

‘I’m in the pub,’ I told her, ‘so no squealing and certainly no questions of an intimate nature. Right?’

She looked disappointed, but Rachel laughed.

‘Everything all right though?’ she asked with emphasis.

‘Everything *very* all right,’ I told her. ‘Thank you for asking.’

‘Well,’ Tori said, ‘you certainly look happy.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Rachel objected. ‘She looks knackered.’

‘Exactly,’ said Tori, giving Rachel such a shove, she nearly fell off the sofa.

I tried to keep my laughter under control and ended up giggling instead.

‘Oh, good grief,’ Rachel laughed along. ‘She’s got it bad.’

‘I really have,’ I was happy to confirm. ‘But never mind me, how are you two getting on?’

We were still chatting when Alex joined us.

‘Here he is,’ Tori said loudly. ‘The man responsible for Em’s eyebags.’

‘Shush,’ I admonished, but Alex stuck out his chest looking like a prize rooster.

I half expected him to crow, but he kissed my cheek instead.

‘Ah,’ said Rachel. ‘Come on, Tori, let’s leave the lovebirds to their nesting.’

‘And their lunch,’ Tori said naughtily. ‘After all that shagging, they must be...’

I cut the call off and messaged them some outraged, laughing and shocked emojis.

‘I think she was going to say starving.’ Alex grinned, picking up the menu.

‘But that’s the thing about Tori.’ I grinned back. ‘You can never be sure.’

Chapter 32

Whenever I had fantasised about my *Hope Falls* inspired dream holiday, I had always shied away from imagining what the end of it would feel like on the assumption that there would be nothing but negative emotions attached to it. However, given the number of surprising, unexpected and transformative things which had happened during my six weeks' stay at the cottage, the reality couldn't have been more different.

The book-based pilgrimage had been a total joy and had ended up exceeding expectations in every conceivable way. That in itself was a miracle because not only had it got off to such a rocky start, I had also put it on such a pedestal of perfection for so many years, it could have easily fallen short, but ultimately it hadn't, not in any respect.

My relationship with both Rachel and Tori had gone through some testing times as had each of our lives, but I felt (and I knew they would agree with me) that we were all the better for it. We had, each of us, shed and gained so much during the last couple of months and as a result our sisterly bonds were bound even tighter.

And then, of course, there was my other relationship. My cheeks flamed when I thought of how I had objected to and resented Alex's presence when we first arrived. Had someone told me then how we were going to end up, I never would have believed them. I felt immensely grateful for both the changes our relationship had gone through and for the opportunity Alex had found at the cottage to both grieve for Gracie and heal.

Last, but by no means least, there was my new business. I had left home with the intention of thinking about it, mulling it over and trying to decide if I was brave enough to take it on. However, not only had I made the decision to go for it, but with Tori's expertise and my friends' support and encouragement, I had already launched it! Consequently, I had reached the end of my time at the cottage having finally sent off the email to turn down the data analyst job, and I felt excited about my future, was looking forward to the challenges to come and ready to embrace every fresh opportunity with open arms.

Never mind Passion for Patchwork, I was feeling passion for *everything*! I felt as though a light had been switched on inside me and the bulb which lit up as a result was burning bright and shining out into the world.

On our last evening at the cottage, Alex and I walked hand in hand down to the lake. We had spent the day talking and planning while we packed our bags so that what we were doing didn't feel quite so final.

We had plans to see each other every weekend. What with the train journey for me being only an hour each way and less time for Alex in the car, it was doable and it would ensure our working week was uninterrupted and we stayed focused and committed to helping our businesses grow. We had both agreed that we wanted our lives to have the right balance and that, for now at least, felt like the best way to achieve it.

However, during our last night under the stars, we focused only on the moment and each other. Not the past, or the future but the present. It was all that mattered, it was all that we were living and breathing for.

'Are you sure you want to do this?' Alex asked, as we arrived at the end of the jetty.

'Absolutely not,' I said, pulling Gracie's hoodie over my head and unzipping my jeans.

‘Me neither,’ he said, puffing out his cheeks as he pulled off his trainers and socks. ‘But we owe it to Gracie.’

‘And ourselves,’ I insisted. ‘I know we’ll regret it if we don’t.’

‘Even undies?’ he asked, wrinkling his nose as we stood almost naked, but not quite.

‘Even undies.’ I nodded, looking about before I unclasped my bra.

‘Sure?’ Alex grinned, twanging the waistband of his trunks.

‘Yeah,’ I quickly said, stepping out of my knickers before I chickened out of going the whole hog, ‘I’m sure.’

‘Okay,’ he laughed as he hastily joined me in the raw.

He pushed his pile of clothes to the side of the jetty with his foot and I did the same with mine, making sure I didn’t knock them in.

‘I think I’m going to need a run up,’ said Alex, already shivering. ‘Is it deep enough for that?’

‘Yes’ – I swallowed, looking over the edge – ‘it’s definitely deep enough for that.’

‘Come on then,’ he said, reaching for my hand and pulling me along with him. ‘On three we start running.’

There was no time to back out.

‘One, two, three!’ Alex yelled.

We set off still holding hands and we both jumped as high and as far as we could when we reached the end of the jetty.

‘Here we go!’ I squealed and Alex laughed.

I braced myself knowing that the water I was about to plunge into was going to be bitterly cold, but the sensation would be exhilarating too, and best of all, Alex was going to be there, ready to pull me into the safety of his arms and that made me feel secure and very happy indeed. As I hit the icy water and let out a screech,

I felt ecstatic in the knowledge that my life had turned a page and I was starting a thrilling new chapter.

Acknowledgements

Having already embraced a whole raft of life changes at the beginning of 2022, I felt more than ready for the professional challenge my wonderful editor, Clare Hey, offered me after I had submitted *A Christmas Celebration*. My first standalone read was what she had in mind and a perfectly timed Netflix binge with my daughter ensured inspiration almost instantly struck and here we are, not all that many months on, spending summer in the Lake District on *The Book-Lovers' Retreat*. Thank you so much for picking it up. I hope you have enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it, because I had a total blast!

As always, there are numerous people to thank for making the process a pleasure. Along with Clare and the rest of the Books and The City team, my fabulous agent, Amanda Preston, has been just a phone call away whenever I've needed her. Thank you, my darling. You really do go above and beyond!

Thanks also to my Famous Five, to whom this book is dedicated. I'm not going to reveal their identities but they know who they are. Thank you, my loves, for both your friendship and support, especially over the past twelve transformative months.

Huge thanks too (as always) to Sue Baker and Fiona Jenkins for their seamless running of the Heidi Swain and Friends Facebook Book Club and to the many, many club members who make the space such a wonderful place to be. Thanks also to the numerous bloggers, librarians and newsletter subscribers who are still waving a banner with my name on and have found me many, many more readers over the past few months. As you know, I love to connect

with you all and my social channels are always buzzing with pics and posts.

Thanks also to my mum, who I have seen more over the past few months than I have in many years. She has been a total rock and we've spent hours laughing as well as setting the world to rights, which is always time well spent.

Congratulations to Catriona Merryweather who has been waiting to see her name in one of my books since December 2021! I hope you like the part you have played, my lovely, and thank you for your patience. Such is the schedule attached to writing two titles a year, I know you've had an extraordinarily long wait but, that said, it really does feel like this one was the right fit for you.

And last but by no means least, I reserve a huge thank you for you, dear reader, for picking this book up. I hope to see you again in October for a book that's going to be packed full of festive frolics! In the meantime, may your bookshelves – be they virtual or real – always be filled with fabulous fiction.

With love,

H x

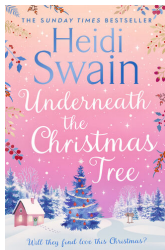
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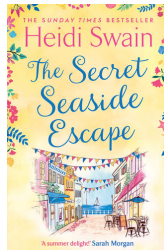
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Heidi Swain lives in Norfolk. She is passionate about gardening and the countryside, and collects vintage paraphernalia. *The Book-Lovers' Retreat* is her sixteenth novel. You can follow Heidi on Twitter [@Heidi_Swain](https://twitter.com/Heidi_Swain) or visit her website: heidiswain.co.uk
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-3985-1951-0

eBook ISBN: 978-1-3985-1952-7

Audio ISBN: 978-1-3985-1953-4

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