

ROSIE GREEN

Aurora

THE SUNSHINE SISTERS



Little Duck Pond Cafe

THE SUNSHINE SISTERS:

Aurora

Little Duck Pond Café

A gripping and emotional story, the first in
an exciting new trilogy

ROSIE GREEN

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(LITTLE DUCK POND CAFÉ)

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PROLOGUE

Night had crept in. A cold February moon hung in the clear, star-studded sky.

As I went to pull the blind, I glanced down briefly at the square of back lawn and the bushes encircling it. There wasn't a breath of wind and the spiky branches of the hawthorn tree seemed unnaturally still, as if a creature of the night had swooped down and cast a petrifying spell on it.

A little shiver ran along my spine.

Why was it that a garden – loved in daylight – could transform into such a sinister and alien landscape when cloaked in darkness?

And that's when I noticed it.

The hawthorn tree. It looked odd somehow and I realised it was the shape of the trunk. It seemed distorted, bulging slightly to one side.

At first, squinting into the darkness, I thought I must be imagining that a person was standing there, half-hidden by the tree. As humans, we're hard-wired to see faces everywhere – in clouds, on the surface of the moon, in the froth on our coffee – so surely, I was conjuring a body out of the darkness, in order to make sense of the eerie garden at nightfall.

And then suddenly, the shape separated from the tree and my heart gave a giant lurch of shock.

It had moved only fractionally.

But it was enough for me to realise that there was someone out there, standing silently in the shadows, staring up at me . . .

One month earlier ...

CHAPTER ONE

‘Guess what? We’ve found a house we like and we’re moving.’ Ellie leaned over the café counter towards us, pink-cheeked with excitement.

‘Really?’ Jaz, stirring her coffee opposite me, looked delighted for her friend. ‘Ellie, that’s fantastic.’

I smiled. ‘Congratulations!’ I knew that Ellie and her husband, Zak, had been searching for a property for a while now. The flat above the café was too small for them, what with Zak’s ten-year-old daughter living with them and their fond hopes of providing her with a little brother or sister in the not-too-distant future.

‘So what’s this house like, then?’ Jaz asked.

‘Well, it’s got four bedrooms and a lovely modern kitchen-diner, and a nice big garden. It’s in Orchard Close, just a five-minute walk from here.’

‘That’s a cul de sac, isn’t it? Safe for kids.’ Jaz hesitated. ‘Perfect for a growing family,’ she said carefully.

A shadow fell over Ellie’s face. But next second, she smiled and nodded. ‘Yes, perfect. So we’re moving. At last!’

‘That’s brilliant.’ Jaz got up, went round behind the counter and drew her into a tight hug. But I saw the tears in Ellie’s eyes and I knew this hug wasn’t just about the new house.

Ellie had been unable to conceive after more than four years of trying, so she and Zak had decided to embark on IVF treatments. So far, they’d been unsuccessful, but they’d decided to put the last of their savings into one final attempt. I knew Ellie was scared this last try would fail, just like the others.

They broke apart and I found I had a lump in my throat.

Ellie pulled herself together and smiled at me. ‘I guess you’ll be looking for somewhere to live yourself, Rori? Or are you too settled at Milo’s to want to move?’

I swallowed on the lump, still feeling ridiculously emotional on her behalf.

Not that this was unusual. I was a neurotic bundle of nerves these days after everything I'd been through with Nash over the past few years, culminating in my escape to Sunnybrook. Convinced I was being followed, I'd run all the way home last week from my shift at Roastery, Milo's café. But when I arrived back, my lungs in agony, and I gasped my suspicions to Milo – saying I was sure someone was following me – he gently persuaded me that there was no one there.

'We could have a drive around if you like?' he'd offered, grabbing his car keys from the dish on the hall table. 'If that would make you feel safer?'

But back with Milo in the warmth of his house – the place that had been my sanctuary since I'd arrived there before Christmas – I'd shaken my head. 'I'm just being paranoid. Nash knows where I'm living. If he wanted to talk to me, he'd knock on the door. Like he did the last time.' I shrugged ruefully. 'Well, *bash* on the door is more like it . . .'

Milo had grunted. 'Jaz said he woke the neighbours up, all the fuss he was making.'

'It was scary,' I'd agreed. 'He was always like that when he was angry – full of threats and curses.'

Milo had held up the car keys. 'Are you sure?'

The concern in his eyes had almost been enough to start the tears flowing. But I'd forced a smile. 'I am, Milo. Honestly, I can't go on like this, suspecting evil is about to jump out at me around every corner.'

We'd exchanged a rueful smile. Milo knew as well as I did that this wasn't the first time I'd run home in a panic, thinking there was someone there when clearly, there wasn't . . .

I knew I couldn't stay with Milo forever. It was time to be brave, shrug off the past and start thinking about what my future would look like.

So I smiled at Ellie and said, 'Jaz's lovely man has made me so welcome, but it really is about time I gave them some

space.’

Jaz laughed, a blush rushing to her cheeks. Since she and Milo got together at Christmas time, she’d been wrapped in this lovely blissful glow, like a character in one of those old porridge adverts on TV, and I was so delighted for them both. After the split from her previous boyfriend Harry, who was also the father of her daughter, Emma, it had taken a long time for Jaz to accept this second chance at love, but now it was as if she and Milo had been a couple forever.

‘I keep telling you, Rori,’ Jaz said gently. ‘Stay at Milo’s as long as you need to. He can always come over to mine if we fancy – um – a romantic night in.’

‘Yes, but even so. It’s high time I had a place of my own.’

She chuckled. ‘A place without Milo’s sweaty gym gear on the bathroom floor and the toilet seat in a permanently “up” position? I don’t blame you.’

‘Milo’s definitely not the tidiest of people,’ I admitted with a fond smile. ‘For someone who’s so organised and precise when it comes to his Roastery café business and getting the glamping site up and running, he can be incredibly haphazard at home.’

‘It’s his one flaw,’ agreed Jaz. ‘But somehow, I think I can put up with it.’

Milo, an old friend from uni who I bumped into again by chance a couple of months ago, had been great, letting me crash at his place and providing a much-needed shoulder to cry on – and giving me a job at his café in the village, which had been a real lifeline.

When I’d fled from Nash in the middle of the night, I’d quickly realised that I’d left my cash card behind. I could picture it in the pocket of my waterproof, which was hanging in the hall cupboard, and I’d panicked. It had taken me long enough to make my escape. There was no way on earth that I was going back there!

All I’d had in my handbag was my birthday money in the card (wrongly addressed) from my mother, Ada (even from an

early age we were told off for calling her ‘Mother’ or ‘Mum’). It was enough cash, though, for a rail ticket to get to London and my lovely Auntie Christine. (Ada lived nearer but I knew that pouring my heart out to her would be useless. She’d just pat my back awkwardly and advise me to pick myself up and box on, before dashing off to support her latest noble cause.)

‘I haven’t seen Milo since last week,’ said Ellie. ‘Has he finalised the new glamping website yet?’

I nodded. ‘Just about. He wants you to have a look at it. We’ve been working on it like crazy over the past week, so it should be ready to launch on Friday.’

When Milo took me in, he not only gave me a job at Roastery, he’d also offered me a job as his assistant in the glamping venture he was starting with Ellie, who was his business partner. I’d been working alongside him since December, helping them to get the glamping business off the ground. There was so much to do, I’d had to give up my job at Roastery. The plan was I would eventually take charge of the admin, the bookings and the daily housekeeping once the glamping site was open for business, including keeping the shower and toilet block spotlessly clean. The block was currently under construction and would hopefully be completed in good time for the opening of the site in April.

Milo was worried at first that the job didn’t exactly make use of my degree, which was in molecular biology, but I’d reassured him that a complete change was exactly what I needed, and that included my old job, working in a research lab.

What I didn’t tell Milo was that actually, being with Nash – coping with his angry outbursts – had eventually worn me down so much, I’d ended up a nervous wreck and a shadow of my former confident self. I’d been signed off work for stress, and when I’d finally left Nash, I’d known I wouldn’t be returning to my job so – with a heavy heart because I’d been enjoying the work – I’d resigned.

Ellie rubbed her hands together. ‘A website on Friday? So exciting. At least, it *will* be if we have lots of customers

desperate to come and spend their holidays here when we open.'

'I might rent one of your shepherd's huts myself,' joked Jaz. 'They're so cute and cosy.'

'I know.' I smiled, forcing the past and its horrors from my mind. 'Roll on opening day. April 1st.'

'April 1st? Really?' Jaz looked horrified. 'You're going to open the glamping site for business on *April Fool's Day*? Are you sure that's a good idea?'

Ellie and I looked at each other and laughed nervously. 'I never even thought about that,' she admitted.

'Only joking.' Jaz grinned. 'I have a really good feeling about this glamping site. It's going to be a big success for you and Milo.'

Ellie made a funny face, looking somewhere between petrified and ecstatic. Then she went off to serve a customer.

Later, as Jaz and I were leaving, Ellie ran over and joined us at the door.

'Can I have a quick word, Rori?'

'Of course.' I assumed she wanted to ask me something about the glamping site, so I was surprised when she brought up my current living arrangements again.

'The thing is . . . well, I was wondering if you might like to rent the flat when we move out?' She nodded upstairs.

'Oh. Gosh.' I was taken aback. I'd been assuming she and Zak would sell up. But the flat was up for *rent*? 'Um . . . can I have a think about it?'

'Of course you can. It's got two bedrooms and the kitchen-diner's nice, if a little small. And it's really cosy in winter with the heat from the café down below.'

I nodded, my heart beating a little faster. 'And getting your hands on breakfast probably won't be too taxing, either.'

She grinned. 'Absolutely. We open at nine. Cappuccinos and lattes or hot chocolate if you prefer. Croissants and

pastries fresh from the oven daily.’

‘Sounds perfect.’

‘Well, have a think about it. Your hair looks great, by the way. Have you done something different to it?’

‘Oh, thanks.’ My hand flew self-consciously to smooth down my choppy blonde locks. ‘Yes, I . . . fancied a change.’

‘Well, it’s lovely. I wish mine would behave itself like that. Within an hour of blow-drying it, it’s already doing its own mad thing and making me look like a poodle in need of a grooming session.’ She grinned. ‘Anyway, have a think about the flat.’

‘I will. Thank you so much for suggesting it.’

I walked across the village green with a spring in my step. Staying at Milo’s had been just what I needed, but it really was time I got a place of my own. I’d been worried that moving too far from Sunnybrook would leave me feeling isolated, at a time when I was still feeling pretty vulnerable.

But living above the Little Duck Pond Café?

You couldn’t get more central than that!

I walked the rest of the way back to Milo’s, my mind working feverishly, and by the time I arrived, I’d already decided I’d have my old grey sofa recovered in a bright and cheery post-box red . . . and there were those gorgeous curtains I’d spotted that time in a home store in Guildford. They weren’t expensive and I had a feeling they would tone in beautifully with the décor I was planning . . .

CHAPTER TWO

‘Nice place.’ Milo, carrying a stack of boxes, glanced approvingly around the compact kitchen-diner of Ellie and Zak’s flat, before setting down his load of crockery and cutlery boxes on one of the counters.

Following him into the kitchen with my ironing board, I smiled happily. ‘I know. I can’t believe I’m actually going to be living here. I can get out of your hair at long last!’

‘Don’t be daft. It’s been great having you staying at mine.’ He grinned. ‘I’m going to miss our late-night discussions about life, over a bottle of red.’

‘I’ll miss them, too. You’ve honestly helped me so much these past few months, Milo. I was in such a state when I first arrived but you’ve got me through the absolute worst time in my life.’ I smiled ruefully. ‘I’d probably have gone off the rails completely without your support. You should write a book on how to remain sane.’

‘I guess staying well away from Nash would be my first chapter,’ he murmured drily.

I snorted in agreement. ‘Second chapter: Don’t get involved with such an angry man in the first place.’

‘Quite. Not that you were to know.’

I nodded sadly. ‘He was so very charming when I first met him.’

‘And then he very definitely wasn’t,’ Milo growled. ‘Seriously, after what he put you through, it’s probably best I never actually get to meet the scumbag in person.’

Feeling the ironing board was about to clatter from my grip, I set it quickly against the wall. My hands were trembling and I felt all shaky inside just talking about Nash.

With an effort, I pushed him from my mind, determined he wasn’t going to spoil this lovely new start of mine, in a place all of my own. He was *not* going to ruin this, like he’d ruined everything else in my life!

Jaz came in, her arms full of cushions. ‘Where do you want these? Living room?’

‘Yes, please.’ Some removal men were bringing the big items from my lock-up, but Milo and Jaz had very kindly offered to help with the smaller stuff on moving day. ‘The kettle’s in one of these boxes. Why don’t I liberate it and get the refreshments going?’

We sat on cushions in the living room drinking hot coffee and watching our breath steam in the freezing January air (I hadn’t yet figured out how the heating system worked) and talking about how homely the flat could be with just one or two extra little touches, like pictures on the walls and some cosy lighting. And I thought how lucky I was to have made friends already in Sunnybrook, and to be thinking of a future without fear . . . a future where I was happy and could be totally myself.

A future where I wasn’t always walking on eggshells, trying to keep Nash happy.

Milo got up and went to the window, checking the lock. ‘This place is a little fortress,’ he said, turning to smile reassuringly at me. ‘All the windows are secure and you’ve got a double lock on both the main door downstairs and the flat entrance. No one’s getting in without your invitation.’

I swallowed hard. ‘Thank you. Both of you. For everything.’

‘You’re entirely welcome. Any more biscuits going?’

‘Of course. In the kitchen. Help yourself.’

Milo went off, whistling tunelessly, and Jaz heaved herself up. ‘Right. I’ll just bring up the rest of the cushions from the van and then that’s about it, I think.’

‘Thank you.’ I took the empty mugs into the kitchen, where Milo was standing demolishing chocolate digestives in two bites. ‘You’re a star,’ I called to Jaz, dumping the mug in the sink.

She really was.

One evening, when I'd first moved into Milo's house, he was away overnight at a works Christmas party and Nash had come looking for me, yelling and banging furiously on the door. I'd cowered inside, terrified, and eventually he'd left, realising I wasn't going to open the door and presumably worried the neighbours might report the disturbance to the police. I don't know what I would have done if Jaz, who lived next door to Milo, hadn't heard the threats he was shouting and come to find out what was going on. She calmed me down and stayed over that night, sleeping on the sofa to keep me company until Milo returned, and I would always be so grateful to her for that.

Nash had somehow found out where I was living, and I never felt completely safe at Milo's after that. It was the main reason I was over the moon when Ellie suggested I rent this flat above the café. Living here, I was really hopeful Nash wouldn't be able to find me.

And I'd finally feel safe.

But as I said goodbye to Milo and Jaz, a weight seemed to settle in my heart. I was alone in the flat but it was what I wanted. Wasn't it?

Milo ran down the stairs but Jaz lingered.

'Are you okay? You look ... worried.'

'No, no. I mean, yes, I'm fine. I think I'm just tired.' I smiled, trying to ignore the feeling of dread that was churning my insides. 'A good night's sleep and I'll be right as rain. Honestly.'

She didn't look convinced. 'It's bound to feel a little strange, living by yourself.'

'Of course.'

She smiled. 'You'd better make the most of the peace and quiet, though, because you won't be on your own for long. Milo's already talking about a night out at Carlo's for pasta and a catch-up. How does Friday suit you?'

'Friday?' I perked up, feeling a little better already. 'Well, obviously I'll have to check my packed diary.'

‘Obviously.’

‘But I think I can safely say that Friday would be perfect.’

‘Excellent. Well, give me a ring if you need anything . . . or just for a chat, okay? I’m going to miss you being next door at Milo’s.’ She leaned in for a last hug and as she ran downstairs to join her boyfriend, a warm, almost happy feeling surged through me. I might be alone in the flat but I had friends and I was going to be just fine.

As I retreated inside, closing the door and double-locking it, my eye fell on the floral watercolour Milo had put up for me in the hallway. Depicting dusky pink hellebores against a brilliant blue sky, it was one of my own paintings and I was particularly fond of it. It had almost gone up in flames in the fire, and I shivered now as images of that terrible night flashed through my mind. Luckily, ‘Hellebores’ was one of the few paintings I’d managed to save.

At one time, long before the fire, I’d thought of using this hellebore image to create a range of greetings cards to sell online . . . perhaps having it printed onto gift items . . . aprons, oven gloves and cushions.

But then I’d met Nash and all my exciting plans seemed to get buried under his own wishes and desires. Not that I realised this at the time, of course. It didn’t happen immediately. I guess he was on his best behaviour when we met and it took a while for his explosions of anger to start emerging.

Looking back now, I felt such a fool.

I glanced in the mirror on the hall wall and a young woman with a pale complexion and anxious green eyes stared back at me. I leaned closer, flicking at my blonde hair and thinking I looked weird. I had a fringe now, for the first time in my life. Had it been a costly mistake?

In an agony of frustration, I whipped off the wig and forced myself to look at the thin, wispy blonde hair beneath. The real me.

My hair had started to fall out soon after that night and the fire in the summerhouse. The doctor said it was probably the shock but that it would likely grow back. Well, so far, there was no sign of that, and just recently, the fall-out had been getting worse, not better. Every time I showered, I ended up having to clear a distressing amount of hair from the plughole and all over the shower cubicle. Now, I washed my hair only when I needed to – but that didn't stop it coming out. My pillow showed evidence of the alopecia every morning, and I tried to avoid combing my hair. I'd thought buying a wig would give me back my self-confidence – help me get back the pre-Nash me – but of course a simple hairpiece alone couldn't possibly accomplish that! Every time I caught a glimpse of my new choppy bob in a mirror or a shop window, I felt it was taunting me. It was a reminder of all the bad things that had happened and the emotional and psychological consequences I was still living with.

It was funny looking back. Everything had seemed so rosy and perfect at the start. I'd genuinely believed – in those first few months of being with Nash – that I'd met the man I was destined to share the rest of my life with . . .

CHAPTER THREE

I first met Nash three years ago when he was playing the role of Bottom in a local amateur production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

I was living on the outskirts of Guildford at the time, working in the research lab, and I'd won two tickets for the show in a Christmas raffle. I wasn't even sure I wanted to go as I'd always considered Shakespeare boring (based of course on studying him at school, which I knew wasn't entirely fair). I almost gave the tickets to my younger sister so that she could impress her latest boyfriend with her love of culture. At thirty-one, Nigel was ten years older than Blossom – a 'proper grown-up' was my sister's laughing description of him. (Nigel owned an 'important' gallery filled with paintings and sculptures and other work by local craftsmen, and he moved in rather arty circles. I thought he was rather full of himself, but I was prepared to like him for my lovely sister's sake.)

But then my friend Heather persuaded me that the production might be a laugh – it was one of the Bard's *comedies*, after all, she reminded me. So we went along and I found myself enthralled with Bottom as soon as he entered stage right. He was quite simply the star of the show, making the audience laugh uproariously, and when – after the performance ended – we were ushered backstage to meet the actors and enjoy a drink with them (part of my raffle prize), Bottom had removed some of his costume and I was impressed to discover that he was really rather handsome under that enormous donkey's head, with his mop of dark blond hair, easy smile and lively blue eyes.

He introduced himself and the other cast members there, and he chatted to us about the performance, and I just remember he made us both laugh non-stop, over glasses of prosecco, with murmured tales of backstage gossip. I thought at the time that he probably shouldn't be telling us all this, but that was one of the things that first attracted me about Nash. He was funny, daring and mischievous, and he didn't seem to give two hoots about what people thought of him. Even at that

first meeting, I sensed he was probably a Marmite sort of person.

While Heather was chatting to Titania and admiring her incredible wings, Nash quietly asked me if I'd like to have dinner with him the following evening, and I said yes straight away.

Dinner was lovely and Nash kept me laughing all night with his funny stories. He owned a building company that specialised in high-end, luxury properties in countryside locations, and I recognised the name – Hardman Homes – having seen the flags flying over a small but exclusive development near where I lived.

His mobile kept ringing during dinner. But each time it did, he looked at the name and ended the call, apologising to me for the interruption and saying it was business. When he said it was about time I told him about me, I laughed and asked what he wanted to know. I'd been quite happy to just sit and listen to him as he talked on so entertainingly.

'Well . . . what are the three things you love most in life?' he said with a grin. 'I mean, apart from the obvious friends and family.'

'Oh, well ... chocolate. Of course. And lazy Sundays. And ... painting watercolours.' I shrugged.

'What do you paint?'

'Landscapes and flowers, mostly.'

He nodded, looking impressed. 'Are you good?'

'Erm ... not bad.'

He grinned. 'Modest as well as gorgeous. Favourite flower to paint?'

'That's easy. Hellebores.'

'Hellebores.' He shook his head, mystified. 'Never heard of them.'

'Oh, they're beautiful. Their petals can be pink or purple . . . sometimes green. And they look really delicate because the

blooms kind of nod on their stems, as if they're feeling a bit bashful. But actually, they're incredibly hardy plants. They bloom during the winter months. Oh, and you might know them by their other name,' I added, blushing slightly because I was now talking way too much from nerves. 'The Christmas rose.'

He smiled. 'I've never heard of that, either. But they sound amazing. Like you.'

My blush deepened at that and I felt a bit stuck for words. Then his mobile rang again and this time, he answered it.

'Can't you take a *hint*?' he demanded loudly, making me jump. 'I'm in the middle of dinner. Call me tomorrow first thing.' He ended the call and threw the phone down with such force, it skidded across the table and landed on the floor.

Startled, the woman on the next table bent to pick it up, and Nash, looking embarrassed, stood up and went over to her. 'Thanks so much. It's been that kind of a day.' He grinned sheepishly and the woman smiled back and said it was fine; she'd had a bad day at work herself.

He sat back down, leaned over to touch my hand and apologised for flying off the handle. 'I just wanted one evening when I wasn't pestered with questions about work. I told Jim I was taking someone special out for dinner and I didn't want to be disturbed, but apparently there's some urgent problem with the team we've hired to fit the bathrooms.' He shrugged. 'It can wait until tomorrow.'

'Are you sure?' I asked. 'Because I really don't mind if you want to call . . . Jim . . . and sort it out?'

'No, no. I think he got the message.' He grinned ruefully.

I smiled back. 'I think he probably did.'

I'd been shocked when Nash had barked liked that and thrown down the phone. But then again, he *was* the boss and if he'd already issued instructions about tonight, I didn't blame him for getting annoyed at being constantly interrupted. And actually, I felt quite flattered. Tonight was obviously important

to him. He'd wanted to make a good impression and Jim's constant interruptions had knocked him off his stride.

It's funny how a red flag can sometimes appear without you realising it's there. It's only when you look back weeks or even months later that you can see it for what it was – a clear warning of things to come.

The first few months of our relationship were a dream come true. Nash was everything I'd ever wanted in a partner. He was handsome, funny, clever, considerate and incredibly romantic into the bargain.

I'd been used to him making me feel like the most beautiful, fascinating and witty woman in the world. So when, about three or four months into our relationship, he flew into a rage with me, it was such a shock to my system, it felt like a body blow . . .

It was a week night and we'd planned to go to the local pub for a drink and a bite to eat after work, but I was running a little late when he arrived to collect me. He sat and watched TV for five minutes while I rushed around getting ready, and the walk to the pub seemed perfectly normal. But then once we'd got our drinks from the bar and were sitting down, Nash went strangely silent. He wouldn't answer my questions and eventually, I asked him if there was something wrong. And that's when he exploded at me. His eyes were hard and full of fury as he accused me of ruining the night by not being ready, and to my dismay, he got up and stormed out of the pub.

Feeling shaky, I ran after him and apologised but he told me to shut up because I was making things worse. Back at my place, he marched straight upstairs and I stood there in a daze in the kitchen, trying to work out what I'd done that could have affected him so badly – apart from being five minutes late for our date. Because it had to be more than that, surely, for him to have totally lost his rag like that, in front of a whole room full of people . . .

A minute later, he ran down the stairs and I saw that he'd collected his wash bag from the bathroom and the book he'd left on the bedside table.

‘I’m leaving,’ he said shortly, not even looking at me. And then he was gone.

I was so shocked and bewildered by what had happened, I spent the night in tears, going over and over what I could have done differently.

My lovely romance was over.

And I was gutted because I’d really thought Nash was The One.

Next day, I felt low and completely washed out, after little sleep. Yesterday, my world had been all the colours of the rainbow, full of exciting possibilities. Now, all that had gone. It was a drab, grey Thursday morning and I just wanted to stay in bed and forget the world.

I phoned work and told them I’d caught a stomach bug of some kind. It wasn’t far from the truth. I felt sick and shaky every time I recalled Nash’s eyes flashing angrily at me before he stormed out of the pub.

We were over. He’d made that perfectly clear last night. I would just have to forget him.

Mid-morning, my phone rang and it was Nash. He asked me if I was all right, and I was so surprised to hear his voice, sounding back to his normal self, I told him I was okay. I suppose I was waiting for him to apologise and explain why he behaved the way he did the night before. Sounding hesitant, he asked me if I still wanted to go to his cousin’s wedding at the weekend, and I could tell he thought he’d blown it.

He started telling me a story about the last time he went to a wedding and although I was still feeling shell-shocked by everything, I found myself laughing because actually, it was really funny. That was the thing with Nash. He could always make me laugh . . .

He said he wanted to take me out for dinner to my favourite restaurant that night and after a bit of persuasion, I agreed. We’d have a chance to talk about last night. It had obviously been a blip in our blossoming relationship, but we could move

on from it. Of course we could. The fact that we weren't finished, after all, made me feel quite weak with relief. I was madly in love with Nash by this time and one little bump in the road wasn't going to change that.

At dinner that night, he gave me my favourite flowers. Hellebores. And I was really touched that he'd remembered. The previous night was forgotten as we talked and laughed and drank some delicious wine. It had been a blip. That was all.

Looking back, I can see so horribly clearly what a fool I was to dismiss it as a one-off, telling myself it would never happen again . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

I'd been so positive and clear-headed earlier, when Jaz and Milo had helped me move into the flat. But now, with night creeping in, I was back to feeling vulnerable. Thinking about Nash always seemed to set me back emotionally.

I tried hard not to dwell on the past, but sometimes your mind just went its own way and there wasn't a thing you could do about it. And as I unpacked boxes in the kitchen, I found myself jumping at every strange noise or creak of a floorboard, and reflecting ruefully that if ever a person invented a machine that could programme you to think only calm, happy thoughts, that person would be lauded as a modern-day saviour!

In the end, I decided I needed the sound of the TV to drown out all other unfamiliar noises. Getting engrossed in the soaps would hopefully calm me down because right now, I was as jumpy as a vibrator salesman at airport security.

But just as I was settling down on the sofa, mug of tea in one hand, remote in the other, the door buzzed twice into the silence.

Heart beating frantically, I held my breath, deciding to pretend there was no one in. As the buzzer sounded again, three more times, I closed my eyes in a panic. Whoever it was would surely give up and go away if I didn't answer.

But what if it was Nash?

He wouldn't give up that easily. What if he'd somehow managed to track me down to this flat?

The buzzer sounded again but I could hear voices outside now, calling up to me. Nipping into the darkened kitchen, I crossed to the window which overlooked the main door, pulled the side of the blind and tried to see who was there. And my heart gave a jolt of sheer relief.

It was the girls from the café. And Sylvia.

Ellie saw me peeking out and called, 'It's just us, Rori. We come bearing flat-warming gifts. But we can go away again if

you're busy unpacking?'

'No! Come up!' I pulled the blind and grinned down at them, then I dashed to the door to let them in. Holding the door open, I listened to their jolly chatter and laughter as they approached in single file, their footsteps echoing on the stone stairs.

'What a lovely surprise,' I called down.

Ellie arrived first, brandishing a boxed candle in each hand and presenting them to me with a flourish. 'May you always have light through the darkest of times!'

Laughing, I ushered her in, just as Katja appeared behind her, bearing a luscious-looking Victoria sponge cake on a platter with Happy New Home in silvery icing on top. 'May you always enjoy the sweetness of life!' she announced with a grin. 'Shall I pop this in the kitchen?'

'Great. Yes. Thank you so much.'

'May your home always be filled with life,' smiled Sylvia, coming in with a vibrant green umbrella plant and placing it on the little hall table.

'And last but not least,' said Maddy, bringing up the rear and waving a bottle about, 'May your home always be filled with . . . oh, hell, I can't remember any of this clichéd nonsense Sylvia's told me to say. Just get the glasses out, eh?'

'Great idea,' I agreed, as everyone laughed, including Sylvia, and we all piled into the kitchen.

There was a hunt to find the glasses, but eventually they were located in a stack of boxes in one of the bedrooms. While Maddy organised the drinks, Sylvia took me to one side in the kitchen and pulled a bottle of prosecco out of her bag.

'That's for you to enjoy yourself,' she murmured, opening a cupboard door and popping it inside, out of the way.

'Oh, thanks so much. That's so kind of you.' I blinked away the tears that were threatening.

Sylvia once ran the Little Duck Pond Café herself. But then she'd become firm friends with Ellie and when she'd retired,

she'd placed her beloved café in Ellie's hands.

'I've never once regretted my decision,' she told me, when she heard I was going to be renting the flat. 'Not for a minute. Best thing I ever did, in fact. The café's gone from strength to strength under Ellie's direction and I'm so proud of her.'

I'd nodded my agreement and said I loved the café's relaxed atmosphere. And the cakes, of course.

'Fen, Katja and Maddy are all such good bakers. And even Ellie can bake a decent Victoria sponge cake these days!' she'd added with a wink.

Now, I smiled at Sylvia. 'I can't tell you how grateful I am to Ellie and Zak for letting me live here. It's so lovely. But of course you know that since it used to be your flat!'

'It did indeed,' said Ellie, joining us with a smile and putting her arm around Sylvia. 'I've loved living here and I'm going to miss it, although I'm excited about having more space and a big garden at the new place.' She rubbed at a corner of one of the cupboard doors with a frown. 'They could do with a bit of a spruce up. A coat of special paint, maybe?' She gave the room a critical once-over. 'Actually, I think the flooring could do with being replaced as well.'

'No, it's fine!' I protested.

'Well, it's okay,' she conceded. 'But I've always thought we should have a power shower put in. You have to run around in the one that's in there in order to get wet!'

I laughed. 'I'm just glad to have a shower that's all mine. I used to feel terrible holding Milo up if I was in the one and only bathroom.'

'Hey, come on, you three,' called Maddy. 'It's drinky time.'

We all sat around the kitchen table and they toasted me, and Maddy started talking about wedding venues and how the one they were favouring had offered her and her fiancé Jack a fabulously discounted midweek deal, spa and dinner included, so that they could get a proper feel for the place before possibly booking their reception there.

Then somehow the talk turned to babies, and inevitably, the subject of Ellie and Zak's IVF treatment came up.

Ellie, who'd been nursing an orange juice while we drank the champagne, smiled a little wearily. 'Well, I'm having the hormone injections at the moment to help my ovaries produce more eggs, so we'll just have to wait and see. There's a whole *lot* of anxious waiting, I'm finding. It's egg-stremely frustrating!'

I chuckled at the awful pun along with everyone else, but in my heart, I knew it wasn't really funny. Ellie was putting on a brave face and making a joke. But she must be terrified the treatment might fail again.

I opened another bottle and we talked some more about the wedding.

And as I waved them all off later, with the promise of seeing them soon in the café, I thought about how excited Maddy was about her forthcoming nuptials, even though December was still a long way off.

To think, in the early days, I'd actually imagined one day walking down the aisle with Nash . . .

I think I'll stay single, thank you very much.

CHAPTER FIVE

Over the following few weeks, after I'd moved into my new home in Ellie's flat, I settled into a routine that suited me.

Milo and I would have a catch-up meeting every few days, at which we'd discuss progress with the glamping site and make a list of items that needed attention, including sourcing the various interior design elements, project managing the building of the shower block, and balancing the books. Milo was employing me part-time as his admin assistant and it was up to me when I chose to do the work.

Every morning, I'd be up early, and after a quick shower and breakfast, I'd be at my laptop at the kitchen table until early afternoon, working through phone calls and emails, logging receipts and liaising with the builder over any supplies that were needed.

Ellie was organising what she'd promised and the flat was being given a make-over by a handyman, Saul Goodrich, who lived in the village. At first when she said a man called Saul would be spending time painting the kitchen unit doors, installing a new power shower and replacing the flooring throughout the flat, my heart had sunk into my boots. The makeover sounded lovely but having someone – a total stranger – invading my space, whistling and hammering and drinking endless brews while I was trying to work? I wasn't sure about that at all. I'd probably rather just put up with the slightly down-at-heel kitchen for the time being.

But as it turned out, I'd been completely wrong about Saul.

In fact, Saul Goodrich was one of the calmest, most unobtrusive, most likeable men I'd ever met. I hardly knew he was there when he was busy, and his work was first class. Whenever I made coffee for myself, I'd suggest he might want a break and he'd smile and give me the thumbs-up. He was into nature, liked Pre-Raphaelite art and read all sorts in his spare time, from the classics to popular thrillers. I always came away from one of our fascinating chats rejuvenated and

feeling that being alive would be a whole lot more peaceful and enjoyable if everyone went around ‘being a Saul’.

He told me he liked working with his hands. He’d built a cabin in the woods from materials he’d rescued over the years from tips and skips, and I had a feeling that he’d be out there far more often than just weekends – communing with nature, among the trees and the wildlife – if it wasn’t for this pesky thing in life called ‘earning a living’. Saul wasn’t working to make his fortune, like so many people were. He wasn’t interested in the trappings of wealth – house, expensive car, holidays abroad. He didn’t even have a car. He cycled everywhere and used a rusty old van for work, and he took on jobs that he wanted to do, mainly for people he liked. He had a lot of respect for Ellie and she for him.

When Saul met an obstacle in his work, he didn’t get angry. He just shrugged and made some wry comment about the unpredictability of life, then calmly went about finding a solution to the challenge. He was handsome, too, in a rugged sort of a way, with striking pale grey eyes, strong, rather chapped workman’s hands and a head of thick, wheat-coloured hair. When he smiled, the corners of his eyes wrinkled into lovely craggy lines. I guessed he must be about forty.

He was interested in my passion for painting watercolours and told me about a class in the village that was starting up.

‘I haven’t painted for ages.’ I glanced down ruefully, thinking that painting was just one of the many things I’d given up to spend more time with Nash. What had I been *thinking*? I’d been in love, of course, and love was addictive and could skew your entire view of life and fool you into thinking a relationship was worth fighting for . . .

‘Why not?’ Saul asked.

I’d shrugged. ‘I suppose . . . life got in the way,’ I’d told him sadly.

‘A relationship?’

‘Yup. A *bad* relationship.’

‘But he’s out of your life now?’

‘Oh, yes. Yes, definitely.’ I swallowed and looked away, wishing rather than knowing that this was true.

‘So maybe now’s the time to get back to the watercolours? This one here is lovely . . . the detail is incredible.’ I followed him into the hall and looked where he was pointing.

‘You like my hellebores?’ I smiled, delighted.

He nodded slowly. ‘I do. You’ve got talent, Rori. You shouldn’t waste it being bogged down by the past.’

After he left for the day, I thought about what he’d said. Then later, screwing up my courage, I phoned the village hall and booked a place on the watercolour painting course. I celebrated by opening the bottle of house-warming prosecco Sylvia had given me. A little thrill zipped through me as the chilled bubbles hit my throat, making me laugh. My old life was over and my new life had just begun. Saul was right. I’d allowed myself to get completely bogged down by the past. Well, this was my chance to make up for all the time I’d wasted.

It was time to start living life to the full once more!

I was full of hope, finally motivated enough to move forward with the painting classes.

But then a few days later, something happened that sent me hurtling back in time, forcing me to confront the past and those deeply entrenched fears all over again.

CHAPTER SIX

A freezing January had slipped into an even colder February.

I'd arranged to meet Milo in the Little Duck Pond Café at four-thirty that afternoon to talk interior design touches for the magnificent Bedouin-style tent. Ellie would join us once business was starting to wind down for the day.

Milo was in high spirits. His new branch of Roastery in Manchester was finally finished and he was heading to the city the following morning for the official opening, taking his daughter Mabel, and Jaz and Emma with him.

After a quick chat about their trip over mugs of warming hot chocolate, we got down to business, discussing the sleeping accommodation in the Bedouin tent. It would have a beautifully dressed double bed in situ, but with the option to install more beds depending on the size of the party. Ellie joined us with a coffee and together we decided on a stylish wrought-iron bed frame, which I said I would order the following day. Then I realised I'd forgotten to bring down the brochure showing details of the bed linen I'd thought would look beautiful and yet be practical at the same time.

'I'll go and get it.' I stood up. 'It's so nice being able to just nip upstairs.'

'I remember it well,' groaned Ellie. 'Don't get me wrong, I absolutely love the new house. There's so much *space*. But I do miss being able to roll out of bed and come down to the café in my dressing gown to check lists and things in the morning. It was so blissfully handy.'

Smiling, I left by the door marked 'private' which led upstairs to the flat.

The brochure wasn't where I thought it was. Then I remembered I was reading it in bed that morning, so I dashed through to the bedroom, retrieved it and ran back down the stairs, entering the café just as a young woman was coming in. She smiled and looked round at the door as it jangled behind her, and I caught her profile.

My heart nearly lurched out of my chest.

Janey?

Quick as a flash, I stepped back and pulled the door closed.

I could feel my heart thudding against my ribcage.

Had she seen me?

What the hell was she *doing* here?

My mouth felt as dry as dust. I'd been living in dread of seeing anyone I knew from my old life – for one reason and one reason only: I didn't want Nash to know where I'd moved to.

He'd already been back a second time to Milo's, looking for me, although luckily, I was out that time. Jaz had answered the door and she recognised Nash from the time he came round that night yelling threats and banging on the door. She'd told him she didn't know where I'd gone exactly but she thought I might be staying with friends in Cornwall. This was quick thinking on her part. She'd obviously remembered I'd told her that my best friend from school now lived in Truro. Nash would know this, too, although he'd have no idea where exactly she lived. So there was no danger of him hot-footing it down to Truro to try and track me down.

But now, Janey – who I'd got to know through Nash – was right here in the café!

I stood outside the door, my mind racing, feeling trapped. I couldn't go back in. Janey had been Nash's friend first so her loyalty would likely be to him. She'd be sure to report back to him that she'd seen me here . . .

Janey and Nash had had a fling before I met him but it hadn't lasted, although they'd stayed friends, and the last I'd heard, Janey was still going out with her new boyfriend, Lance.

At first, when I'd started seeing Nash myself, I'd worried there might still be something between him and Janey. Nash always claimed he was the one who broke up with Janey. But after a while, when I'd got to know what Nash was really like,

I'd begun to suspect that maybe it was Janey who'd ended it. And I'd been right. Months later, I'd learned from Janey herself that it was she who'd called time on their relationship. She'd decided she couldn't cope with his endless dark moods and explosions of anger, and that being friends with him was far better all round.

Sensible girl ...

I hadn't actually seen Janey and Lance since the day last summer when we'd walked up to Tumbling Dell Waterfall together. It was the night after the terrible fire and I was still in a real state, so when Janey had suggested I needed to get out, I'd agreed immediately.

She and Lance would have heard from Nash that we'd since split, but I hadn't told anyone who knew Nash – including Janey – where exactly I was living.

What if she'd seen me coming down from the flat?

Janey was lovely but she had no clue about the trauma I'd been through with Nash. She might have suspected it was his mood changes that caused the split, but she'd gone out with him for such a brief time, I doubted she'd have any idea of the terror he'd stirred in me, the frequent target of his terrifying rages.

What if Janey told Nash, in all innocence, that the Little Duck Pond Café was where he could find me?

I couldn't go back downstairs. Not until Janey had gone.

I couldn't face her questions. And the fear that she'd reveal my whereabouts to Nash was churning my insides up and making me nauseous.

Feeling terrible for lying, I texted Milo and said that an emergency with my sister Blossom had come up and I needed to talk to her, but that I wouldn't be too long. I knew he and Ellie had plenty to talk about. Then I slumped down on the sofa, lay back and stared miserably at the ceiling, hoping Janey wouldn't stay too long . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was the day of my first art class and I was trying to psyche myself up to go along.

But giving myself pep talks about already being fairly good at painting watercolours just wasn't working. I was *scared* . . . scared of getting out there among strangers who'd judge me . . . scared of being useless and making a fool of myself . . . just scared of everything these days, really . . .

I'd managed the work at Roastery by volunteering to carry out the tasks in the kitchen that no one liked doing. It suited me well because it meant I didn't have to be out on the floor, greeting the customers and serving them their drinks. Milo could tell I was terrified at first and he was really kind and made allowances for me. If it had been any other job, I'd probably have been sacked on the first day. Now, working mostly from home meant I was in my safe place, so I felt much better.

But as I forced myself to walk over to the village hall, my heart was pounding so hard, I worried it was about to make a break for it and burst through my chest.

I hesitated at the door and – hearing the chatter and laughter coming from inside the hall – I almost lost my nerve altogether. But a little voice was in my ear, stopping me from walking straight on, past the building, instead of going inside. The voice was struggling to make itself heard over the din of self-doubting chatter that was going on in my head. But it made sense.

If you walk away, Nash has won.

Don't let him stop you getting on with your life!

I swallowed hard, took a deep breath and walked into the hall.

The room where the art class was happening was cosy and welcoming. Children's paintings – bold and colourful – were pinned up around the walls, presumably the results of the community kids' art competition I'd seen advertised recently.

A dozen or so easels and stools had been set up in the middle of the room, several already claimed by the students. They were smiling and chatting together, so I slipped in and took a seat in the back row, happy to be inconspicuous, but then the teacher – sitting behind a trestle table at the side, reading a pamphlet – noticed me, took off his reading glasses and came over.

‘Hi! Welcome to the class. I’m Cal.’

‘Aurora.’ I stood up. ‘Well, Rori. Call me Rori.’

Cal looked to be in his late twenties. He had an abundance of glossy, caramel-coloured hair, which he kept sweeping back from his brow, and his eyes were kind and friendly beneath the round glasses.

He smiled. ‘Lovely name. Have you experimented with watercolour before?’

‘I have, actually. It’s my favourite medium. But I’m . . . well, a little bit rusty.’

‘Right, well, I hope you’ll have fun here, Rori. That’s what my classes are all about.’

‘That sounds great.’ I smiled, sitting back down and feeling my shoulders relax a little.

Cal glanced at his watch. ‘Right, I’ll give it another five minutes for people to arrive and then we’ll get started.’ He turned at the sound of someone entering the room. ‘Speaking of which . . . hi there! Come in and find a pew.’

I turned, feeling happy now to greet the newcomer myself.

But the welcoming smile froze on my face.

Janey?

‘Hi! Sorry I’m late. We’ve just moved here and we’re still living out of boxes.’ Janey smiled apologetically, and my heart sank.

She and Lance were living in Sunnybrook now?

‘You’re not late at all,’ Cal said cheerfully.

Suddenly catching sight of me, Janey's eyes opened wide. 'Rori? Hi there! What a surprise to find *you* here.'

I pasted on a smile and nodded, and Cal said, 'You two know each other? Well, I'll leave you to catch up.' He pressed my shoulder then went to the door to greet another two students, just arriving.

My heart thumping, I turned to Janey, who was setting her bag down at the easel next to me. 'So you've moved here?' I swallowed. 'Gosh, it's a small world.'

She sat down, shook back her long dark hair and smiled. 'It is, isn't it? No, Lance was working in Guildford, as you know, but things changed and he's able to work from home now, so we decided to move further out. Get away from the busy city and all that.'

'So you're in Sunnybrook now?'

She shook her head. 'We're renting a flat in Buntingford, just along the road? We'll probably try and buy eventually, but this is fine for now.' She laughed. 'Actually, I was in Sunnybrook the other day and I popped into the Little Duck Pond Café and I thought I saw you, but I wasn't sure. I don't think you saw me?'

'Oh. Really? No, I don't think I did see you. I mean, I definitely didn't.' I could feel a blush starting to suffuse my cheeks, heat rising up from my neck. I was hopeless at lying.

'So was it you? Are you working at the café?' she asked.

'Erm, no. I . . .' *I can't lie to her. I'm going to have to come clean.* 'I'm actually living in the flat above the café. Just moved in. My head's all over the place right now, trying to get organised and settled in.' I shrugged, adding feebly, 'That's probably why I didn't see you.'

'Makes sense. You're hair's different these days. It's nice. That's probably why I didn't instantly recognise you.' She beamed at me. 'So . . . we'll be near neighbours! We'll have to go out for a drink some time, you, me and Lance, and have a catch-up.'

'That would be great.'

She frowned. ‘So how are you, anyway? Nash told us that you’d . . . gone your separate ways. Are you okay? I’ve been meaning to phone you but I’ve been so busy.’

‘Oh, don’t worry. Yes. I’m fine,’ I said cheerily. Then I shrugged. ‘I mean, obviously at first it was . . .’

‘Yes.’ She was looking at me intently. ‘So was it . . . his decision to break up? Or was it a mutual decision?’ She gave a funny sort of apologetic grimace.

I sighed. There was no point trying to hide the truth from Janey. She’d gone out with Nash once upon a time and then finished with him . . . so she knew . . .

‘It was me. I left in the middle of the night.’ I shrugged uselessly. I hadn’t talked to anyone about what it was like living with Nash, except for Milo – mainly because I felt embarrassed and so ashamed of myself for having put up with his nonsense for so long. ‘I should have walked long before I did. Looking back, I really don’t know why I stayed so long.’

Janey’s eyes closed for a second in sympathy. ‘I probably know the answer to that. Nash can be bloody charming at times. And funny. But he’s moody as well, and if there’s anything I can’t stand in a man I’m with, it’s moodiness.’

I nodded, thinking that really, Janey didn’t know the half of it. She’d only gone out with Nash for a month or so . . .

‘We bumped into Nash at the pub just before Christmas and that’s when he told us. He said he’d missed you, and I got the feeling he’d like to get back with you.’ She hesitated, looking at me uncertainly. ‘Which I gather isn’t going to happen?’

‘Absolutely not.’ I shuddered at the thought. It was typical of Nash to save face by pretending he was the one who ended things! ‘He . . . came to see me one night in December when I was staying at my friend Milo’s, but I pretended I wasn’t in.’

‘Good for you. The trouble with Nash is he wants everything his own way.’ She grinned. ‘You know, once he got all moody with me in the middle of a restaurant just because I’d ordered a dish with parsnips by mistake and I laughed and

said I didn't actually like parsnips. It was like he thought I'd spoiled the whole night or something.'

I felt a little shiver of fear, remembering Nash's livid complexion when he got angry . . . the way his eyes would become like ugly black dots in his face . . . 'What happened? Did he storm out of the restaurant?'

'Oh, yes.' She grinned sheepishly. 'That's when I realised I had to get out. And I don't just mean out of the restaurant.'

I nodded, feeling sick, remembering the times Nash had stormed out on *me* in a restaurant or some other public place, leaving me feeling shaky and stupid, and painfully aware of the puzzled or sympathetic looks I was getting from strangers who'd seen him explode at me.

'The ridiculous thing is,' said Janey, 'once we weren't actually together, things got back to being fine. Nash is a lot of fun as a *friend*. It's just being in a relationship he can't seem to handle. It's like if he finds himself getting too close to a woman, he has to sabotage it by behaving badly.' She twisted her lips. 'And I'm pretty sure he was still seeing other women during the short time we were supposed to be a couple.'

'Bet you're glad you found Lance,' I said, wanting to be off the topic of my ex.

'I am. He's the complete opposite of Nash, really. Nash was your typical flirty party animal whereas Lance is . . . well, quite shy and modest. He doesn't speak unless he has something important to say, and I like that. Plus he's *kind*.'

'Nice,' I said, genuinely meaning it.

She nodded, looking rather dreamy-eyed.

And then Cal, the teacher, called for attention and the class began.

As we packed up after the class, I plucked up the courage to ask Janey the burning question.

'You . . . won't tell Nash where I'm living now, will you?'

She looked shocked. ‘No, of course I won’t. The last thing you need is him turning up at your door trying to persuade you to go back out with him.’

I breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Thanks, Janey.’

She shrugged. ‘He said he’d call in for a coffee some time, to see our new place. But I promise I’ll be suitably vague about where you are, okay?’

‘I’d really appreciate that.’

When we walked out of the village hall, Lance was waiting for Janey.

He got out of the car when he saw who she was with and came round to give me a hug. ‘Good to see you, Rori.’

‘And you.’ I smiled up at him.

‘Glad you got shot of Nash,’ he murmured, still holding my arms. ‘You’re looking good on it, too.’

‘Thank you.’ The warmth in his brown eyes – and my chat with Janey, who understood – had lifted me a little. I felt a lightness of spirit that I hadn’t felt in a really long time . . . as if maybe I was on my way back to being the fairly strong, well-balanced person I was before I met Nash.

At that moment, I made a decision: I would definitely continue with the watercolour classes.

‘Can we give you a lift?’ Janey was saying as Lance held the door for her and she got into the car.

‘Oh, no.’ I shook my head. ‘Thanks, but I’m only over there.’ I pointed at the café. ‘It’s just a two-minute walk.’

Janey peered across. ‘It’s quite misty on the green, though.’

‘Get in and we’ll drive you round,’ said Lance, and he opened the back door.

‘Well, thanks.’ Smiling, I slid into the seat. ‘It’s really nice of you.’

‘Rubbish,’ said Janey. ‘What are friends for?’

They dropped me off at the door and I stood and watched them leave. It felt good to know I had friends . . . people who cared about me. It gave me a lovely warm feeling inside.

‘See you next week at the art class,’ called Janey as they drove away.

‘You will,’ I called back as I waved them off.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A few days later, I was waiting outside the Little Duck Pond Café when Blossom drew up in her old red Fiesta.

My younger sister worked as a gardener, and for the past five months, she'd been part of a team restoring the gardens of an old stately home in Devon. I'd seen her briefly at Christmas when she came home for the holidays, although I'd been working shifts at Roastery most days, and she'd returned to Devon the day after Boxing Day. So we hadn't had much opportunity for a proper chat.

But she was back in Guildford now, and today would be our first proper face-to-face catch-up in forever!

She waved madly and braked right at the door. Leaping out, the engine still running, she rushed around the car and pulled me into a tight squeeze, and I hugged her back for all I was worth, tears of relief soaking into the furry lining of her parka.

'Let me look at you,' she gasped at last, pulling away and flicking back her flaming red locks. 'Ooh, lovely hair! It really suits you.'

I grinned. 'It's a wig. My hair started falling out with all the stress. But hey, it's never looked so good, so I guess that's the silver lining!'

Her face fell. 'Oh, Rori, love, I wish you'd told me sooner what was going on with Nash. I feel so terrible that I wasn't there for you and you had to cope all on your own.'

I shrugged, not really knowing how to answer. I'd kept Nash's problem with anger to myself, not telling anyone how much it was slowly destroying our relationship. I knew most people's reaction to hearing about it would be a puzzled, '*Why on earth do you stay with him?*'

They wouldn't understand that it was more complicated than that. I loved the Nash who, most of the time, was caring and kind and made me laugh. I told myself that he had a problem, and it would be heartless of me to leave him because of something he had no control over.

Eventually, after a lot of gentle persuasion on my part, he'd agreed to get help, and he'd begun a course of anger management counselling. I remembered being so happy as I waved him off for his first session. I was convinced this would be the making of him and at long last, we'd have the sort of calm, happy relationship I longed for. So I was devastated when, after just two sessions, Nash declared that the counsellor had said he was cured and that he wouldn't be going back for any more sessions.

I felt sick when he told me this. He was clearly in denial about his anger, although I clung to the hope that some good had come of the sessions he'd had. But just a few short weeks later, he exploded at me – worse than ever before – over something completely illogical, and that's when I knew it was no use and I had to get out.

Blossom's blue eyes were full of questions and sympathy, but I couldn't face raking over the past, trying to explain my actions to her.

The truth was, when I left Nash, my head was a mess and it took me a long time to process what had happened. I wasn't ready to talk about it to anyone – not even Blossom. It was only last week that I'd finally confessed to her in a long phone call the whole sorry tale.

But I didn't want to talk about Nash right now. This was a happy occasion, having my sister back. So I changed the subject. 'How's Ross, anyway?'

At Christmas, Blossom had been all excited about Ross, who she was working with down in Devon. They'd been out on a few dates and it had looked promising.

She snorted. 'Ross? Oh, he's history. Turned out he was two-timing me all along with another girl in the team called Pauline. She's a decade older than him and now she's pregnant with his kid. So . . .'

She shrugged and grinned. 'Just the latest disaster in the hopeless love life of Blossom Sunshine, that's all.'

'I'm sorry.'

‘Hey, it’s fine. I dodged a bullet. Apart from anything else, he picked his toenails in front of the TV.’

I grimaced. ‘Ugh! Never mind Pauline and the baby. If he does that, he *has* to be toast.’

‘Exactly.’ She chuckled. ‘Anyway, let’s not talk about that scumbag. I’m just so happy to see you, Sis. Let me buy you a latte and an iced bun in the café and then you can show me this gorgeous flat you’re renting.’ She glanced at her watch. ‘We might just have time before Ada gets here.’

‘I thought you’d be driving over together.’ Blossom still lived with Ada in the old family home near Guildford.

‘Oh, she stayed at Geoffrey’s house last night so she’s coming straight from there.’

‘How is Geoffrey?’ I pictured Ada’s kind, mild-mannered partner, who she’d been seeing since the summer. I’d met him briefly at Christmas and I’d liked him a lot. Ten years older than her, with grizzled grey hair and glasses, Geoffrey was an accountant, which seemed altogether too boring an occupation for our mother. And yet she seemed happy enough.

Ada had enjoyed a number of interesting relationships over the years. There was the fellow activist (they’d got to know each other while tied to adjoining trees which the council was poised to axe), and a ‘resting’ actor, who’d sponged off her until she’d finally seen sense, bundled all his belongings together and chucked them out of her bedroom window. There had also been a colourful but penniless baronet, whose father had apparently gambled away the family fortune. (I’d quite liked Hector. His big old draughty mansion had as many leaks in the roof as he had holes in the elbows of his green cardigans, but he’d treated Ada like a princess. But she’d dumped him for the tree protestor, who she declared was herself in male form and the love of her life – until it transpired that he actually preferred to be female in form and she caught him one day at her bedroom mirror, modelling her baby doll nightie and Manolo Blahnik wedges.)

But while Ada sometimes talked about her disastrous relationships, there was one man she never talked about. And

we all knew why.

Antonio, Blossom's father, had been the real love of her life.

Sadly, after a brief few months of bliss, they'd been forced to part. Antonio was married. His wife had dementia and was in a care home, and he'd been crucified with guilt over his betrayal of her. Ada had hoped the birth of Blossom would make him change his mind, but she'd eventually been forced to accept that it could never work between them.

It was why Blossom was extra-special to her. She was a child born of true love. I could see that quite plainly, and I wished Skye could, too. But my older sister was full of bitterness at Blossom for being 'the favourite'. I was sad that Blossom had never met Antonio, her father.

I had a feeling the reason Ada kept busy all the time was partly to fill the aching gap left by Antonio, the love of her life. It was really sad. But at the same time, I couldn't help wishing she'd focus on her children a bit more instead of pouring all her energy into her 'good causes'.

Blossom, who obviously knew Geoffrey better than I did as he was a regular visitor to the house, said Ada seemed more content and less restless these days, and she put that down to her having Geoffrey's calming influence in her life.

'Geoffrey's lovely,' said Blossom, 'and he seems to adore her. But Ada treats him as if he's her personal assistant.'

I groaned. 'If she's not careful, he'll get fed up and find someone nicer.'

'I know. That's what I'm worried about. Anyway, let's continue this chat inside over coffee, shall we?'

I grinned. 'I think you'd better park the car first.'

She swung round, alarmed. 'The engine's still running! I was just so excited to see you. Won't be a mo.' And she dashed off.

I watched her fondly. Blossom could be so scatty at times, but it was part of her charm. People – men and women alike – had always been drawn to her warmth and cheerful outlook on

life, and it amazed me that she still hadn't found that special someone to share her life with. Blossom had plenty of lovely male friends, but she wasn't nearly as lucky when it came to romance. She sometimes joked that she was following in our mother's footsteps, choosing the wrong guys, and I did wonder if there was some truth in that. (My own romance record wasn't much better, to be fair.)

'Where's *your* car?' She joined me back at the door.

I groaned. 'In the garage having the rust treated. Big job.'

'Oh, well, everything you need is in walking distance here.' She glanced at the shops across the green.

'Exactly.'

We went in and ordered at the counter. Blossom's eyes flicked uncertainly at me as we found a table with our loaded tray. 'You don't need to talk about Nash, by the way. Not unless you want to.'

I shrugged. 'I don't mind. Just like Ross, he's history.'

'Good,' she said, with feeling. 'I've been so worried about you, Rori. From what you've told me, he was a complete and utter nightmare with his horrible rages and his – ' She broke off guiltily. 'Oh, shut up, Blossom. Honestly, here I am saying you don't have to talk about him, and what am I doing? Talking about him!'

'It's okay. Really.' I gave her a sheepish look. 'The truth is, I should have left Nash ages ago, but he sort of brainwashed me into believing we were meant to be together. When we were good, we were *very* good, and he always managed to talk me round after one of his outbursts.' I shook my head wearily. 'It's weird thinking about it now, from a safe distance. I can sort of be objective these days. But at the time, I thought I loved him and I felt like I was trapped and I was never going to be able to escape.'

'You poor love.' Blossom shook her head sadly. 'I thought I must have upset you when you were keeping me at arm's length. You never seemed to be available to meet up for one reason or another. I thought I'd done something wrong.'

‘No!’ I shook my head. ‘Not at all. It was . . . well, it was all me. It was my fault.’

She snorted. ‘*Nash’s* fault, you mean. Honestly, if I’d known he was keeping you from seeing people . . .’

I gave a shaky sigh. ‘He didn’t keep me from seeing people exactly, but he made it clear he didn’t like me spending time away from him, so I was constantly tip-toeing around him, wanting to keep him sweet so that he wouldn’t fly into one of his rages.’ I shivered, remembering. ‘It was all about how *Nash* was feeling. I turned into someone I didn’t even recognise, and to be honest, I’m still having a hard job finding the old me again. I feel so *anxious* all the time. It’s almost as if he’s still around.’ I glanced behind me, as if Nash might be there now, spying on me through the café window.

Blossom frowned. ‘You *have* got rid of him, though? Nash, I mean. He’s definitely out of the picture?’

‘Yes.’ I swallowed. ‘I hope so.’

‘You *hope* so?’ She looked horrified.

I stared at her miserably. ‘The thing is, I bumped into an old friend of his – Janey – and she said he misses me and she thinks he might want me back.’

‘Oh, no!’

‘But there’s no chance of that ever happening,’ I reassured her quickly, trying to ignore the feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach. Why did I feel like my guts were being put through a blender every time I thought about him? Probably because deep down, I didn’t really believe it was over . . . not for him, anyway. I’d known this when he’d come looking for me, and Janey had confirmed it, saying he wanted me back. Nash wasn’t the sort of person to take no for an answer and walk away without a fight. He might be planning something even now . . .

But for Blossom’s sake, I forced a smile. ‘Really. You don’t need to worry. That scumbag is out of my life forever.’

She took my hand and squeezed. ‘Good, because you deserve to be with someone strong and funny and caring . . . a

man who knows exactly how wonderful you are and treats you accordingly.’ She smiled wistfully. ‘Only the best for my big sis.’

‘Well, so do you,’ I mumbled, a lump in my throat. ‘Deserve all that, I mean.’

She raised her cup. ‘To new *healthy* relationships and a sparkling future for both of us.’

I clinked with a smile, hopeful in spite of everything. ‘A sparkling future.’

‘Have you heard from Skye lately?’

I shrugged. ‘Not a peep. She’s obviously having far too much fun living the high-life as a famous actress down in London to spare the time for her family back home.’

‘There was a bit about her in the paper the other day. One of the gossip columns. Did you see it?’

‘No. What was it about? Some ridiculous “nothing” story, no doubt.’

‘Skye was photographed coming out of a restaurant with a fellow actor which of course means they *must* be a couple. Talk about jumping to conclusions.’

‘I can never keep up with her love life.’

‘It might not be fact, of course. Remember the last time?’

‘That’s true.’ Blossom smiled ruefully. ‘Don’t believe everything you read in the tabloids.’

The last time our older sister Skye’s photo had appeared in one of the newspaper gossip columns, it was because she’d apparently dumped some lord or other after finding him cheating. But when I phoned her to find out if she was okay, she laughed and said the ‘lord’ was actually her painter and decorator, and his surname was ‘Lord’. She’d had to sack him from the job because she’d caught him stealing the silver!

I drained my cup and was about to suggest I show Blossom the flat, when the door opened and a flushed-cheeked Maddy burst in.

‘Erm, there’s a very weird blonde woman out there, shouting at some boys,’ she announced to Ellie. ‘And I think she might be heading this way.’

‘Shouting?’ I exchanged a worried glance with Blossom, and Maddy looked over at us.

‘Well, *lecturing* is probably a better description. In a very loud plummy voice.’

My sister and I scraped back our chairs as one and went to the door. Blossom pulled it open and with a sinking heart, I stared at the confrontation that was taking place on the village green.

The woman Maddy had described was tall and dressed in a long sea-green coat and black biker boots, her ash-blonde hair scooped into an elegant up-do. She was presently waving what looked like a vape machine just out of reach of a young teenager who kept trying to make a grab for it. Four or five of his mates in school uniform, schoolbags on their backs, were standing there staring in awed amazement at the sight of their friend being given a public dressing down by a stranger – a rather glamorous stranger, at that . . . a woman who wouldn’t have looked out of place on a catwalk.

The boy made another attempt at retrieving his possession but it was snatched away in a flash, followed by sniggers from his schoolmates.

‘I will return it, young man.’ Her strident tone carried across the green, attracting interested head-swivels from a couple of dog-walkers in the distance. She held the vape over her head, just out of his reach. ‘You can have it back on one condition. You give me *one* good reason why you’re smoking this *heinous contraption* and thereby wilfully compromising your precious breathing apparatus, while you’re still just a mere *baby!*’

The boy, who looked about thirteen, had been putting up an indignant fight, trying to get the vape kit back. But at the honking laughter from his mates following the ‘baby’ label, he looked suddenly defeated, as if all the air had been squeezed out of the compromised lungs in question.

‘He might as well give up,’ muttered Blossom next to me. ‘Because *she’s* obviously not going to.’

I nodded. ‘Fearsome or what?’

‘Repeat after me!’ Her stern order split the air. ‘Repeat after me: It’s an utterly *filthy habit*.’

The boy made another half-hearted swing for his prized possession, but you could tell his heart wasn’t in it.

‘It’s an *utterly filthy habit*. What is it?’

The boy scowled at his mates who by now were hanging onto each other, practically on the floor with laughter.

‘What *is* it, young man?’ She waved the vape tantalisingly close to his face but he didn’t even try to grab it this time.

‘It’s a filthy habit,’ he mumbled.

‘Aha! Yes! Give this boy a gold star. Now . . . if you know what’s good for you, my lad, you’ll dump the entire caboodle in that bin over there and proceed to live a happy, healthy life. Emphasis being on the word *healthy*.’

With a humourless smile, she held up the vape and dropped it from a height. Startled, its owner sprang forward, only just managing to catch it in time, at which point his tormentor turned and marched off.

It would have been a really rather impressive exit had she not managed to trip over her own feet, staggering slightly to one side amid much guffawing from behind her.

‘Oops.’ I held my breath as she managed to regain her composure.

‘Did you see that?’ she snapped, joining us at the café entrance. ‘Boy was barely out of his night-time training pants.’

Blossom grinned. ‘And of course you couldn’t possibly have just walked past without sticking your oar in.’

‘No, of course not.’ She glared at Blossom. ‘*Someone* has to take action against this terrible new teenage fad.’

She turned to me, lips twisted in a frown. ‘And I suppose I’ve embarrassed you.’

Sighing, I flicked my eyes to the sky. ‘Not really. I’m well used to it by now.’ I held the door wide and ushered her in. ‘Let me buy you a coffee, Mother.’

‘Please don’t call me “Mother” – you know it makes me feel ancient. Let’s sit over there.’ Ignoring where we were already sitting, Ada marched to a table with a view over the green and plonked herself down, leaving Blossom and me to move the crockery and cutlery over.

She raised her eyebrows at Blossom. ‘Get me my usual, will you?’

‘No problem.’ Blossom grinned. ‘Any cake with that? I can thoroughly recommend the lemon drizzle with whipped cream. And Rori’s triple chocolate brownie looked absolutely melt-in-the-mouth gorgeous.’

Receiving just a curled lip in reply, as she knew she would, Blossom winked at me and went over to the counter to order.

I watched Ada hunt in her handbag, I presumed for her sweeteners. There was a reason she was sylph-like and elegant, and often mistaken for a woman in her forties (she was fifty-seven). She never snacked between meals and only seemed to pick at her food when she did sit down to eat. The thought of her plunging her fork with relish into a slice of lemon drizzle cake was quite unimaginable.

I often marvelled at how my sister, a self-employed gardener, could have lived with Ada her whole life without ever once being tempted to slip something herbal and possibly ever-so-slightly poisonous into her morning tea. But I knew the answer, really. Blossom had the sunniest, most level-tempered nature of anyone I knew. (She was the only member of our family who actually deserved the ‘Sunshine’ surname. It was a cliché, but she literally lit up a room when she entered it.) She had a talent for accepting people for exactly who they were, and not judging, and I think she felt sorry for Ada,

who'd lived a haphazard sort of life. Blossom always seemed like the adult in that relationship.

'So how are you, Ada?' I shuffled my seat closer to the table. I knew I wouldn't get an honest answer but I asked the question anyway.

'Perfectly fine, thank you.' She directed the comment through the window, while continuing to fumble in her bag and keeping a beedy eye on the group of schoolboys. They were now ambling over the green as if they had all the time in the world and weren't due in class in about a minute and a half.

I stared at her profile, swallowing down my bitterness.

How about asking how I am, Ada? Showing just a little bit of concern for your daughter who's just been through one of the worst times of her life?

When I'd fled to London to my Auntie Christine's, she'd phoned Ada to tell her what had happened with Nash, and next day, Ada had called me to see if I was all right. But I'd known she wouldn't want to hear the details of what I'd been through, so I just told her we'd split up and I was feeling down. She made a few brisk comments along the lines of: well, life was never supposed to be fair; and hadn't I heard the theory that what didn't kill you made you stronger? In the end, I changed the subject and we talked about the weather and her latest protest.

The exchange left me feeling rather hollow and sad. Not that I was surprised. But shouldn't a mum be the person you instinctively turned to when you were feeling bad? Instead, it had been Auntie Christine who'd wrapped her arms around me and told me everything would be okay. Ada hadn't exactly said, *for goodness' sake, stop being a wimp, Rori, and get on with it!* But she might as well have . . .

I felt sorry for Geoffrey. He couldn't help not being Antonio.

He enjoyed visiting garden centres at weekends, and I had high hopes that his placid nature and kindness would rub off

on her. According to Blossom, he was already having an effect. She didn't seem quite so frantic about her good causes as she used to be, and she and Geoffrey were even planning a coach tour to Spain in the summer, something that seemed so out of character, I thought Blossom was joking when she first told me.

I hoped Ada would hold onto Geoffrey. He was good for her.

To my relief, Blossom got served quickly and was back at the table even before the sweeteners had been located – a task which, to Ada, was clearly of far greater importance than talking to her emotionally vulnerable daughter, whose life had recently been turned upside down! (Not that I was bitter or anything.)

I wasn't going to mention Nash but Blossom started talking about how lovely Milo had been, taking me in and helping me and giving me a job when I was in such a bad way. Ada listened without comment, sipping on her black coffee and glancing out of the window every now and again with a stern expression.

I could feel the familiar resentment creeping over me. Blossom always said Ada's cold aloofness was a defence mechanism. She'd been hurt herself too often and preferred to distance herself from emotional anguish, particularly where her daughters were concerned. And I could see Blossom's point. But it didn't stop me wishing Ada could be like other mothers and just put her arms around me and hug me for once in her life.

And then, just as I was thinking this, she surprised me by murmuring, 'You'll be fine now, Rori,' and giving my hand, resting on the table, a quick squeeze.

But next moment, she was on her feet, pacing to the window. 'Those bloody silly boys are at it again. Puffing away like demented chimneys. I've a good mind to report them to the school.'

'Sit down, Ada,' urged Blossom, shaking her head wearily at me. 'Haven't you been listening? Rori's been through hell,

for goodness' sake.'

She turned with a bemused look. 'Of course I've been listening. But dwelling on what's happened in the past isn't going to do any good, is it? The sooner we move on from the bad stuff, the better for everyone.' She glanced irritably at her watch. 'Where the *hell* is *Geoffrey*? He was supposed to be here to pick me up by now.'

CHAPTER NINE

It was only after Blossom had driven off to visit a friend in Buntingford that Geoffrey phoned to say his car had broken down and he was waiting for roadside assistance to rescue him.

‘I’ll walk you to the station,’ I said to Ada. ‘I think there should be a train to Guildford in about half an hour.’

I glanced out of the window, hoping I had enough time to get back before it got dark, and we set off, having to hurry so she wouldn’t miss the train and arriving on the platform in the nick of time. I waved her off, then I walked back through the industrial estate, thinking about my weird family set-up.

Before Nash, I was self-assured and independent, I guess because of my rather unconventional upbringing. I grew up being able to look after myself. And so did my sister, Skye, who was ten years older than me.

At school, I scoffed at the kids whose mums did absolutely everything for them, while secretly, I sometimes envied them. Neither Skye’s father nor mine were in the picture. And with a mother like ours – always busy working, going on protest marches or on dates with unsuitable men – we’d had to be able to take care of ourselves. By the time I started primary school, I’d already learned the mysteries of the hob and the toaster while perched on the little Mickey Mouse stool from my bedroom, and I was fully clued up on how to open a can of baked beans without snagging my hand on the sharp bits.

I realised much later that our mother was bitter because her life hadn’t turned out the way she’d hoped. She’d dreamed of going to drama school and being an actress but giving birth to Skye at the tender age of sixteen had put paid to all that. (The boy – to whom she lost her virginity after drinking cider sneaked into the end-of-year school disco – didn’t want to know and neither did his parents, or hers for that matter, so she was completely on her own.) Skye had never had any interest in finding out who her father was – even in later life, she just

accepted that she was the product of a single mother and that was that. She was neither curious not bitter about her birth, and I envied her for that.

Ada was twenty-six when she had me. By then, she was working for a charity supporting single parents, and when I was seven and old enough to understand, she sat me down and explained that she'd fallen for a man called Johnny, who she'd worked with. Johnny had been handsome and clever and very funny but ultimately a huge disappointment like a lot of men were. He had promised her the moon and the stars but had failed to come up with the goods when she'd found herself pregnant.

My attitude? Johnny hadn't wanted me, his daughter, so I was determined that *I* didn't want *him* – which was just as well, really, because by the time Ada told me these scant details about my father, 'Johnny' had already emigrated to New Zealand with his wife and family, so clearly I was never going to meet him, anyway.

It rankled for a long time that my father had rejected me without even meeting me, but I told myself it was his loss. I had the occasional dream in which I met him and I told him what I thought of him for abandoning Ada and me. But as the years went by, my bitterness lessened and I just got on with my life. These days, I barely thought about him.

We were okay, Skye and I. We may have had a part-time parent, but we never went short of anything. And Skye was there for me when I was little, making sure I ate properly and got to school on time in clean uniform. We had cleaners to keep the house tidy, which was just as well because Ada didn't have time for housework. When I left for school in the morning, she was invariably already up and out at work or boarding a train with her placard, bound for a protest rally about a war somewhere or river pollution or equal pay for women. Very occasionally, she'd still be in bed after a night out with another unsuitable man.

But it was fine because Skye was always there for me. And I was so proud, having her for my big sister. I remember Ada and I going to see her in the school musical. I don't remember

much about it because I was only five, but Auntie Christine told me that it was *The Sound of Music* and Skye was playing the lead, Maria, and she was brilliant. I only have two memories of that night: the noise of everyone clapping furiously at the end when my big sister came on stage; and looking at Ada and seeing that there were tears pouring down her face.

That was the first time I remember seeing Ada cry.

Even at that young age, it must have seemed odd because my mother was normally so cool and reserved and didn't get emotional about anything. I guess that's why it always stuck in my mind afterwards.

It made sense, though, that Skye would go to a special acting school. She was really talented and she used to tell me she was going to be an actress when she grew up, but first she'd have to go to a special school where they taught you ordinary lessons but also the skills she'd need to be a performer.

So when I was six and Skye was sixteen, that's what happened. Skye went to a prestigious drama school in Edinburgh, and Ada moved up there with her to support her. She had to leave her job at the charity, which she loved, but she said Skye's future was the most important thing. She was determined that Skye would have the opportunities she never had.

During the time they were away in Scotland, I went to stay with my Auntie Christine, which I loved.

I was six, nearly seven, at the time, and I loved it at her house. I was friends with my cousins, Layla and Molly, who were around my age, and it was fun walking to school with them every morning. We did fun things all the time like barbecues and going swimming in the river nearby, and we were allowed to stay up late during the holidays, watching movies in our room.

I missed Skye and Ada, of course, but I was having too good a time with my cousins to be too sad. Ada would come down from Scotland to visit us occasionally, and I always used

to hope she'd bring Skye with her. But Auntie Christine explained that the school in Edinburgh was very expensive and Skye was also having extra coaching lessons during the school holidays to help her achieve her dream of becoming an actress.

'Your mother has given up a lot to help Skye,' said Auntie Christine. 'So your sister must make the most of this opportunity while she's there.'

But then about a year later, everything changed again.

Ada and Skye returned from Scotland, and I went home.

Skye had been expelled for repeatedly breaking school rules and staying out late at night after curfew, and it was clear that Ada was furious with her. Their already volatile mother-daughter relationship became even more fraught. I remember being in bed and hearing them arguing downstairs at night.

But something else had happened when I left Auntie Christine's, which I didn't fully understand, but which made life for me at that time full of wonder and excitement.

I had a new baby sister.

I remember clearly getting back from Auntie Christine's and Ada saying she had a surprise for me. So I followed her upstairs and there, in a cot by Ada's bed, was the prettiest baby I'd ever seen. Ada said she was called Blossom and she was my new baby sister.

Right from the start, I adored Blossom and the feeling was mutual. I looked after her as much as I could, feeding her and changing her nappies and bonding with her, to the extent that she would often cry when our mother picked her up. She'd reach out to me and would be placated only when she was back in my arms, with me fussing over her and singing to her.

I was too young to really understand where babies came from. The first time Auntie Christine, Ada's sister, came over to see Blossom, I burst into the kitchen and found Ada in tears, weeping over the table and her sister trying to comfort her. When I appeared, their faces changed and they smiled at me,

and Ada mopped her face with a hanky and asked brightly if I'd like some hot chocolate.

I'd known then that despite having Blossom, Ada was very sad. But it wasn't until a few years later that Skye told me what had happened to make her sad.

Ada had found real love in Edinburgh – with an Italian man called Antonio – but their relationship had been doomed from the start.

They'd met after Ada and Skye moved into a flat next-door to Antonio's elderly parents. He was older than Ada and he had a wife who had dementia and was in a care home. Thrown together in their loneliness, they'd fallen deeply in love, and later, Ada would describe those first few months they had together as the happiest time of her life.

But then she'd discovered she was pregnant and everything changed. She told me much later, when I was old enough to understand and I was asking questions about Blossom's father, that Antonio had been honourable in the end and stayed loyal to his poor wife in the care home. She'd wanted them to bring up Blossom together, but he'd refused, although it had broken his heart that they could no longer be together. Ada said she'd loved him even more for making that decision, but she'd been utterly devastated by the loss of him.

Once, when I was about ten, I found her in her bedroom gazing at a photograph of Antonio in the special frame, which she kept in her bedside drawer, and she was sobbing her heart out. And I knew then that Antonio, Blossom's father, was the true love of Ada's life and I hugged her tightly and she hugged me back until my face was wet with her tears.

I understood then that Blossom would always be special to Ada because she was born out of real love. The love of a lifetime.

But while having Blossom in our lives brought me closer to Ada, it did nothing for her relationship with Skye, which had always been difficult. And one day, less than six months after Blossom arrived, my world was rocked again. But in a bad way this time.

Skye left home for boarding school in Yorkshire.

It came to a head between Ada and Skye one night. I heard them having a blazing row, screaming at each other, and next morning when I went downstairs for breakfast, it was already decided. Skye was going to finish her education at Ada's old boarding school in Yorkshire.

Before she left that same week, Skye sat me down and told me that she was going away to school but that she'd be back to visit me as much as she could, and she was true to her word. She'd come back and we'd spend a whole Saturday together, then she'd get the train back up to school in Yorkshire on the Sunday.

But things continued to be strained between Skye and Ada – even more so after that terrible row the week before Skye left for Yorkshire.

Neither of them have ever talked to me or Blossom about that night.

Skye finished her education at boarding school and then earned a place at a drama school in London, and the rest – as they say – is history.

But in my mind, that row between Skye and Ada, the week before Skye was shipped off to Yorkshire, was the moment everything changed.

Something had been simmering between them. Something big. And that night, it exploded out of control. That something drove a wedge between them that's never been resolved, even to this day.

Knowing how stubborn and pig-headed they both were, I knew it probably never would be.

Thank goodness for Blossom.

Blossom was different to me. She was different to most people. From being a baby, she'd been such a sunny-natured child and that had never changed as she grew into adulthood, despite having some awful knock-backs in relationships with

men. My theory was that Blossom was far too nice and forgiving of people, which meant the men she went out with tended to take advantage of her kind nature, sometimes walking all over her. (It didn't help, of course, that she tended to be attracted to 'bad boys' – the extrovert type with a horde of female admirers and a roving eye.)

On many an occasion I'd instructed her to toughen up and be a little mysterious, instead of blatantly wearing her heart on her sleeve all the time. But she always laughed off my advice, saying what was the point of pretending to be someone you weren't?

'When I meet the man for me, he's going to love me for exactly the way I am.' She'd smile and shrug. 'And if I never meet that person, I'll be sad but I'll still be okay.'

'You *will* meet the right person for you one day.'

'How do you know?'

'Well, by the law of averages? I mean, even the most horrible people manage to find love, so I fail to see why someone as lovely as you wouldn't.'

She smiled. 'You're assuming that life is fair, and as we all know, it's not.'

'True.'

'You just have to accept your fate with a smile. What else are you going to do? Get all bitter and twisted like Ada?'

As I walked on, I thought about what Blossom had said. She had a point. Life wasn't fair, and Ada had drummed that message into us from being tiny. I'd never thought of it before. But perhaps Blossom's sunny outlook on life was somehow a reaction to the confusion, chaos and occasional darkness we'd experienced at home as children?

A noise behind me made me start.

It had sounded like a car door closing, but when I turned around to look, there was no vehicle in sight. The buildings around me on the industrial estate were dark and deserted. I shivered and quickened my step. It was almost seven and the

office-workers had gone home. Up ahead, I could see the lights of the village, but I was still a five-minute walk away from civilisation.

Then I heard footsteps behind me and my heart lurched.

I looked around and thought I glimpsed a figure disappearing into the shadows . . . behind a pillar at the entrance to the deserted car showroom I'd just walked past.

Now I was scared.

If there really was someone following me, I needed to get to the high street, where there would be people . . .

Breaking into a run, I raced along, my handbag bouncing awkwardly at my shoulder. It was dark and I knew that the pavement beneath my feet was uneven, but I couldn't afford to slow down. Running up a side alley, I burst onto the high street, horrified to find that it was dark and deserted, too.

Now what?

If I ran across the village green, I was asking for trouble. It was pitch black and what if I didn't make it home? What if my stalker caught up with me and dragged me into the trees beside the duck pond? Would anyone hear me scream?

There were lights on in the properties circling the green, so I crossed the road and kept running, until I got to the residential area. A woman was bringing her bin out for collection day and we said 'hi' and I slowed right down, feeling safe at last but panting painfully.

Almost home!

Turning, I was half-expecting to see someone following me, but the street was empty and as I walked backwards a few paces, still scanning the hedges and parked cars for moving shadows, a feeling of relief surged through me. There was no one there. Had it been my imagination working overtime again?

Next moment, though, still walking backwards, I felt a shock as my back collided sharply with something rigid and solid. Knocked off balance, I half-turned, grasping for

something to keep me from falling. But all I managed to do was topple the dustbin I'd bumped into. It went flying to the ground, taking me with it, and disgorging its smelly contents all over me.

And as I struggled to a sitting position – my hand landing on something stomach-churningly squidgy on the pavement – a tall figure appeared, looming over me in the semi-darkness . . .

CHAPTER TEN

I sat there, panting, frozen to the spot.

The man, who to my relief wasn't Nash, uttered an expletive and moved towards me and I flinched backwards, scrabbling around on the pavement in a panic for something with which to defend myself.

'Come any nearer and you'll be sorry!' I shouted, brandishing the first item I touched. It was a long thing with a handle. It felt like it was made of plastic, so not the most robust of weapons, but it would have to do . . .

'It's okay. Look, give me your hand and I'll help you up,' he barked, steely blue eyes boring into me. He pointed. 'You've got a bit of lettuce on your head.'

Still, I hesitated. I didn't know this man from Adam. Had he been following me? I tightened my grip on the object in my hand. 'Just go away,' I muttered in what I hoped was a threatening tone. Feeling for the lettuce with my free hand, I finally located it lodged behind my left ear.

The man sighed, long legs in dark jeans planted firmly on the pavement in front of me.

'This is my house and that's my bin you've just knocked over. So I'm not going anywhere.'

'Oh.' This confused me. But then I thought: *Does he really live here? Maybe he's bluffing. Maybe it's just a ruse to lure me into a false sense of security before he goes in for the kill?*

He stepped closer and held out his hand again, and I caught a glint of amusement in his arresting blue eyes.

'I would seriously think about laying down your weapon,' he murmured. 'That thing's probably been to places you really wouldn't want to go.'

'What?' For the first time, I glanced at what I was holding. '*Ugh!*' I dropped it in horror. The thing I'd been hoping to fight him off with was actually an *old loo brush?*

A smile softened his features, making him look almost human. Quite a handsome human, truth be told. ‘Not mine, by the way.’ He shrugged. ‘It was in the downstairs toilet when I moved in and I’ve just got rid of it.’

He held out his hand and I was about to grasp it, then I changed hands at the last minute to spare him germs from the old loo brush, and he hauled me to my feet. But the brisk movement must have disturbed the air because the sickly scent of rotting rubbish intensified and I almost gagged and had to turn away for a moment. When I glanced back, my rescuer was hunkered down, scooping up black bags and throwing them into the mouth of the bin, which was still lying open on its side. ‘Jeez. That’s some stink.’

‘I know.’ Suddenly, I felt guilty. One of the bags had burst open, disgorging its contents all over the pavement and me, which presumably accounted for the escaped lettuce. ‘Let me help you.’

But he was already on his feet, lifting the bin up and throwing the last of the bags inside.

I spotted a couple of rusty old teabags by the fence and hurried over to do my bit. Then I rescued my handbag from the gutter where it had landed, and quickly stuffed the contents that had fallen out back inside. After he wheeled the bin to its proper position for collection day, he helped me pick up the last odds and ends, including a few of my lovely new business cards. He inspected one. ‘Glamping, eh? Interesting.’

‘Keep it. We open in April.’

He grinned. ‘Nice. I’ll spread the word.’ He straightened up, towering over me by a good head-and-a-half. ‘Are you okay? No bones broken?’

I shook my head. ‘No bones broken.’

‘So what were you doing, anyway? How did you manage to knock the bin over?’

‘Well, I . . . I wasn’t looking where I was going and I sort of bumped into it.’

He grinned. ‘Kind of hard to miss a big black thing like this half-blocking your path. What were you doing? Gazing at the stars or something?’

‘No, I was . . . well, I was walking backwards and I sort of collided with it.’

He gave me an incredulous look. ‘So do you make a habit of that, then? Walking backwards?’

I laughed, embarrassed. ‘No!’

‘Glad to hear it.’

I looked back along the street, wanting to explain. But there wasn’t a soul in sight and I decided that telling this stranger that I’d been running from a possible stalker who wasn’t actually there might make me appear even more unhinged than I already did.

‘Anyway, sorry about that,’ I said instead. ‘I’d better go home for a shower.’ I peered at something brown and revolting on my sleeve and held it out to show him. ‘I’m a bit wiffy.’

‘Oof, you’re not kidding.’ He reared his head back in shock. ‘In fact, if you wouldn’t mind standing downwind of me a bit . . .’

Cautiously, I sniffed the stain. ‘It’s not that bad, is it?’

He started laughing then, which I found really irritating because it wasn’t funny at all. In fact, I was feeling like a first-class plonker for having knocked over his bin and then reacting to his offer of help with such melodrama, suspecting him of being a mass murderer or something.

‘You’re very easy to wind up,’ he said. ‘Who are you, anyway?’

‘My name’s Aurora,’ I said tartly, not appreciating the bluntness of his question. ‘But my friends call me Rori. I . . . er . . . won’t shake your hand.’ Instead, I wiped the gunk on my jeans, making a metal note to get the washing machine on and the shower running the instant I got home.

‘Nice to meet you, Rori. Even if it was in rather *unsavoury* circumstances.’ His piercing blue eyes crinkled into a smile.

‘My name’s Kurt. But my friends call me . . . Kurt.’

I gritted my teeth. He was making fun of me now. But he might not find it *quite* so hilarious if he was the one who had last week’s mayonnaise forming a slimy trail on the left leg of his best jeans. (I was desperately *hoping* it was mayonnaise.)

‘Nice to meet you, *Kurt*,’ I said icily, and mustering the few shreds of my dignity that remained, I turned and walked off.

‘Look, I’m sorry, Rori,’ he called after me. ‘I didn’t mean to laugh but you must admit, it *was* pretty funny.’

I raised my chin and walked on, not even inclined to dignify this with a response. Tripping slightly over a raised paving flag, I only just managed to steady myself. Typical! No doubt he’d seen that and was now having a good old chortle at my expense.

I knew I was probably being irrational, but the man had got right under my skin for all the wrong reasons. Right now, I needed to be under a blissfully hot shower with my shampoo and lime body wash – and as far away as possible from the dangerous glint in those electric-blue eyes . . .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

That night, scrubbed clean, I lay in bed thinking about the footsteps I'd heard following me on the way back from the station.

Had I imagined them?

And what about 'Kurt'? It was strange how he'd suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and thinking about it now, I hadn't actually seen him go into the house he claimed was his. I'd marched off while he was still standing there on the pavement. If there *had* been someone following me at a distance, could Kurt have been the mystery stalker?

He'd seemed genuine, though. And funny as well. (Not that I'd been amused at the time, standing there smelling like a rubbish tip.) I was on the ground so I didn't see which direction he'd appeared from. But he probably came out of the house when he heard the commotion outside, the bin being toppled.

I fell asleep at last and dreamed that a bin lorry was chasing me along a Spanish beach and I was running so fast, my chest hurt. And then a man with eyes the exact same blue as the Mediterranean emerged from the sea and pulled me to one side, and we watched as the out-of-control bin lorry suddenly sprouted wings and took off, flying into the big blue yonder.

Strangely, when I woke up, the part of the dream that lingered with me wasn't of a bin lorry that could miraculously fly, but a pair of brilliant blue eyes . . .

Maybe it was my dream of Spain but the next day, I decided it was high time I renewed my passport. I had zero plans to holiday abroad, but you never knew when an opportunity might arise and it wouldn't do to be unprepared.

I always used to love exploring new places, but Nash had hated flying, which meant we never went anywhere more exotic than a weekend in the Lake District. But as I stood in the queue at the post office, clutching my hideous passport

photos, I thought that maybe having thoughts of foreign travel was a sign that I was finally ready to move on from my disastrous relationship.

When it was finally my turn, I could sense the long queue behind me. There was only one cashier operating and she was taking her time, being as slow as the proverbial snail, and it was a lengthy business, renewing a passport. There were probably people behind me just wanting to buy a stamp and as the process dragged on, I felt increasingly guilty.

And then some wisecrack person behind me leaned over my shoulder and murmured, ‘These people who hold everyone up!’

My face burning with embarrassment, I turned – and found myself looking up at the smiling face of the man whose bin I’d had a fight with only the night before.

Kurt.

As I reacquainted myself with those mesmerising eyes, I could feel my stomach performing a series of energetic somersaults. And then the cashier cut into my reverie: ‘How are you paying for this?’

‘I’ll come back later,’ murmured Kurt in my ear and I turned to watch him leave with his parcel, distracted for a moment by his very attractive rear view in blue jeans. At the door, he flashed me a grin and winked, and then he was gone.

‘Erm, excuse me? How are you paying for this?’ repeated the cashier wearily.

‘Oh. Sorry. Card.’ Flustered, I dropped it on the floor and had to retrieve it, all the while imagining the queue of foot-tappers behind me looking at their watches. ‘I’m paying with a card.’ I held it up in triumph, paid as quickly as I could and hurried out clutching my passport.

A while later, after picking up a few groceries from the village store, I was checking the address on a birthday card, ready to post it, when the engine of a car parked right next to the post box suddenly burst into life. The driver gave a jolly

honk of their horn – not once, but three times – making me almost leap into next week and drop the envelope.

‘Sorry,’ called a voice. ‘Couldn’t resist.’

Him again?

I glared at Kurt through the open car window. ‘Are you following me?’ Maybe he *was* the one stalking me last night?

He grinned, leaning over towards the passenger seat window. ‘Not guilty, Ma’am. You just seem to keep showing up where I am.’

‘Right.’

‘It’s obviously Fate.’

I laughed. ‘Is that what you call honking your horn right in my ear and making me drop my card?’

‘Sorry.’ His eyes flashed mischievously. ‘It was payback for you making me smell like a rubbish dump. Even after I’d taken two showers.’

I swallowed, rendered temporarily speechless by a vision of Kurt in the shower.

‘So anyway, I’m very pleased to see that you’re walking normally today,’ he added.

‘What do you mean by that?’ I snapped, bemused.

‘Well, you were walking backwards last night. Hence the collision with my bin. And you still haven’t told me why.’

‘And I’m not going to, either!’

‘Ooh, suit yourself. So how do you fancy apologising to me by buying me a drink some time?’

‘I’ve got nothing to apologise for.’

‘True. Okay, then, *I’ll* buy the drinks. Just name the day.’

I studied him balefully. The man was irritating in the extreme! But in spite of this, I couldn’t help grinning. ‘Name the day? How about the first of never?’

‘Ouch, that hurt.’ He looked crestfallen. ‘Okay, I take the hint. Try not to knock any garbage bins over on your way home.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ I retorted, as he waved and prepared to drive away. ‘At least I’ve never made an arse of myself by driving away with my coffee on the roof of my car!’ I called after him.

I watched him brake and stop, which made the cup wobble, roll across the roof and plummet to the pavement. Grinning, I posted the card and walked on. And when I looked back a moment later, he was out of his car, rescuing his coffee cup. Catching me looking, he shrugged those broad shoulders at me then upended the empty cup on his head with a grin, seeming oblivious of the weird looks he was receiving from passers-by.

I stood there, grinning back and asking myself why I’d refused his offer of a drink.

I liked his quirky humour and the fact that he seemed to approach life with a smile. I didn’t know him at all, of course, but I sensed that Kurt wasn’t the moody type. And I had plenty of experience with the moody type . . .

I started walking towards him and he straightened up and looked at me in surprise.

‘I just wanted to thank you for making me laugh,’ I told him. ‘Because up till now, I haven’t had an awful lot to laugh about . . . what with one thing and another. Well, a really bad relationship, actually.’

He nodded, studying me thoughtfully. ‘Glad I was able to help.’

‘You have.’ I hesitated then I added sheepishly, ‘I’m not in the right headspace yet for that drink, though.’

‘It’s just a drink. Not a marriage proposal.’

‘Even so. I’d rather not . . . go there.’ I shrugged apologetically.

He nodded. ‘Understood. I suppose a friendly coffee is out of the question as well?’

I smiled at him. He looked so hopeful . . . and actually, unbearably cute.

His mobile rang at that moment and he registered the caller's name with a frown. 'Sorry, I'm going to have to get this. Look, what's your number?'

'My phone's dead,' I lied.

'Okay.' He pulled the passenger door open, reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a notepad and a pen, then he answered the call. 'Hi, Colin. Can you hang on just a sec?' He scribbled his number on a page, tore it off and handed it to me. 'In case you change your mind,' he said with a little smile.

As he turned his attention to his phone call, I pocketed the number, smiled at him and walked away.

I'd made the right decision, saying I wasn't ready for anything romantic. Because I really wasn't. It was far too soon after Nash. And a 'friendly coffee' was hardly going to work, either, judging by the frisson of electricity that seemed to spark every time we met. How soon would it be before a 'friendly coffee' became something more?

On the other hand, there was another school of thought that said I shouldn't let my bad experience with Nash put me off getting to know someone lovely like Kurt . . .

Oh, hell, why did life have to be quite so complicated?

CHAPTER TWELVE

That night, back at the flat, I found a box in the second bedroom that I hadn't unpacked, and opening it, I saw it contained Christmas presents I'd received from Milo and Jaz, including a bottle of Irish Cream.

I'd never fancied the drink myself, thinking it would probably be too sickly for my tastes. But I opened the bottle and tried it and actually, it was delicious. So I filled a small glass and took it into the bathroom where I was planning a nice long soak.

I lay there among the bubbles, thinking about Kurt and sipping my drink. It was so creamy and delicious, and after thinking for so long that I'd hate it, it seemed to be slipping down very easily indeed. When I got out of the bath to top up my glass, my head swam a little, probably because it was quite steamy hot in the bathroom. I didn't stay in for too long after that, mainly because I'd got a serious attack of the munchies. I stood in the kitchen in my dressing gown wolfing down a family-sized packet of crisps, and it was only when I glanced at the bottle of Irish Cream (the level had sunk a bit by this time) and saw to my disbelief that it was actually a liqueur and fairly alcoholic, that I realised I was properly drunk for the first time in years.

Laughing at myself and feeling nicely woozy, I fell asleep in front of the TV then woke around midnight with a banging headache. Still unsteady on my feet, I managed to find some painkillers then I crawled into bed and was out like a light as soon as my head touched the pillow. I woke exactly four hours later and couldn't get back to sleep, so I lay there thinking about dustbins and post boxes and men with sexy smiles and a wicked line in banter. And then, in my drunken daze, I started worrying that I might never see Kurt again.

What if our accidental meetings were like buses? Three in quick succession and then no sightings at all for the next ten years!

This was such an alarming thought that I switched on the light and struggled to a sitting position. Kurt had given me his phone number for if I wanted to go for a 'friendly coffee' but where had I put the scrap of paper he'd written it on?

Staggering out of bed, I searched in the obvious places: handbag and coat pockets. But there was no sign of it, so I tipped out the contents of my bag onto the bed and raked through it, knowing how often it happened that it wasn't there the first time you looked, but then magically, it turned up on second inspection.

Still not there.

Damn!

What if I'd lost it? At least I knew where he lived. I suppose I could always go and knock his bin over again to get his attention . . .

I finally located the precious scrap of paper in the kitchen. It was sticky with liqueur and had to be peeled off the worktop, but at least all the numbers were legible. Relieved, I was about to go back to bed, when I suddenly thought: What if it gets lost again? What if I forget it's there and I wipe down the benches in the morning and it gets chucked out along with the biscuit wrappers? My head spun woozily. I was desperate to fall back into bed. But I knew I needed to get him in my phone address book before anything bad happened.

Luckily my phone was where I thought it would be. On the bedside table. So I sat down and placed Kurt's paper with the number on it beside me on the bed, then I very carefully keyed the details into my phone. Autocorrect renamed him 'King Kong' but that didn't matter. I didn't know any King Kongs, so I'd obviously know it was Kurt. It took me three attempts to jab the number in correctly, mainly because my fingers didn't seem to be communicating with my brain. But finally, it was in there.

Job's a good 'un!

Now to save it, lock the phone and get some sleep . . .

The sound of a phone ringing at the other end was bemusing to start with. I couldn't quite work out where the noise was coming from. Then I saw the message, *Calling King Kong*, and my heart nearly leaped out of my chest. Instead of *saving*, I must have somehow *called* him instead. Stabbing at 'end call' in a panic, I glanced at the time as I sank back on the bed.

It was four-twenty-two.

The whole world was asleep – well, apart from the folks in Australia and the like – and I'd just called Kurt! How *embarrassing*. Hopefully, the few rings hadn't actually woken him up. But he'd still see a middle-of-the-night missed call from someone when he looked at his phone in the morning.

He wouldn't know it was me, though. Would he?

No, it would just be a number he didn't recognise . . . so that was all right. I'd have hated him to think I was some kind of weirdo bunny-boiler, disguised as someone normal.

I shoved the offending phone in my dressing-gown pocket and went to the bathroom to clean my teeth (I'd fallen into bed earlier without bothering). Looking at my bleary-eyed reflection in the mirror, I swore to myself that I would never drink industrial quantities of Irish Cream liqueur ever again in my life . . .

Trailing back through to the bedroom, I flopped back on the bed, exhausted. All this phone malarkey had totally worn me out. (Nothing to do with the alcohol, of course.) I could just roll over on my side like this and go to sleep right here.

I was dozing off when a sound broke through the sleep haze.

Was it my imagination or was there a phone ringing somewhere? Could I be bothered to answer it? No, I could not. I just needed to sleep.

'Hello? Hello? Are you there?'

A jolt of panic shot through me at the familiar voice emerging from somewhere in my dressing gown.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I sat up, fully alert now. The phone was in my pocket. I drew it out, and sure enough, I had apparently called King Kong again.

Oh, hell, I must have butt-dialled him when I rolled over.

And this time, he'd actually picked up. At four-thirty-three in the morning.

'Rori? Are you okay? Did you phone me?'

I froze. *How the hell did he know it was me?*

Then I remembered. He'd picked up some of my glamping business cards, which had my name and number on them.

'Are you in trouble? Or does this silence mean you've butt-called me?'

Right, there was only one thing to do . . . I faked a snore.

'What's that noise? Look, I'm worried about you, Rori. I'm going to phone the police if you don't answer. Hang on, is that you *snoring?*'

I did a few more snuffling pig-like noises then I snorted loudly, as if I'd just woken myself up. 'Hello? Hello?'

'Rori! Are you okay?'

'I'm fine. Sorry, I think I must have butt-called you by mistake. I'm really sorry.'

'That's okay. You can call me any time. Butt involved or not.'

'Even at four in the morning?'

'Even at four in the morning. Now, if you'll excuse me, I really need to get some sleep. I've got an early meeting in the morning.'

'Yes. Sorry. Of course.'

'Night-night, Rori. Sleep tight.'

'You, too. Sorry again.'

‘Stop apologising.’

‘Okay. Goodnight, then.’

‘Goodnight.’

Call ended, I snuggled down under my duvet and instantly fell into a dreamless sleep.

When I woke next morning, after my disturbed night, my hand was still curled around my phone, and my mind went straight to King Kong and the butt-dial drama. Groaning with embarrassment, I was almost tempted to pull the covers over my head and try to pretend it had never happened.

But thinking about it a little more, Kurt hadn’t seemed *that* annoyed about having some weird woman calling him in the dead of night. He had a sense of humour. Maybe he’d even found it quite funny?

Clinging to that thought, I decided I really ought to call him and apologise. Then I remembered he said he had a meeting this morning. Even better! I’d just have to leave a message in that case.

My heart beating a frantic rhythm, I found King Kong in my contacts.

He answered a second later. ‘Hello. Rori? How are you this morning?’

‘Oh. Hi! I’m fine, thanks. I thought you’d be in a meeting.’

He chuckled. ‘That’s nice. So you thought you’d phone and not have to speak to me?’

Dismayed, I squeezed my eyes tight shut. This man was too quick by half!

‘No, no. Well, yes. I was just going to leave a message apologising for last night. I . . . um . . . hope you’ve forgiven me for disturbing your beauty sleep last night?’

‘Absolutely. And by the way, it’s ten-thirty and the meeting’s over.’

‘*Ten-thirty?*’ I sat up in alarm. I’d thought it might be a little later than my usual wake-up time – but not that much!

‘Ten-thirty,’ he repeated. ‘Why do they call it “beauty sleep” anyway? When in reality, you wake up looking as if you’ve gone ten rounds with a psycho hairdresser.’

‘Speak for yourself.’

‘I am. Of course. He said chivalrously and not at all hoping for an invitation to drink coffee.’

Chuckling, I gave in and asked him if he was free later.

‘It just so happens I’ve got a meeting in Sunnybrook this afternoon, which should finish around four/four-thirty? Any good?’

‘Perfect.’ *That gives me roughly six hours to have yet another shower, wash the memory of manky lettuce from my hair and make myself presentable.* ‘Shall I meet you at the Little Duck Pond Café at four-thirty, then?’

‘Yes. See you later.’

‘Great.’ I hesitated. ‘Erm, looking forward to it.’

‘Me, too.’

Someone shouted his name and he covered the phone and replied briefly.

‘Better go. That meeting went better than expected. We’ve just landed a lucrative contract, so the coffee’s definitely on me. Might even stretch to a celebratory slice of cake.’

‘Ooh, I can hardly wait.’

He laughed and we ended the call, and when I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror, I was blushing enough to put the windows in Amsterdam’s Red Light District to shame. But hopefully my cheeks might have calmed down a bit by the time I met Kurt later . . .

When I went down to the café just before four-thirty, Ellie and some of the girls who worked there seemed to be having some

kind of get-together.

I knew Madison, Katja, Jaz and Fen already – I'd got to know them when I'd helped out with the magical Christmas fair back in December – but there were two others there who I didn't recognise. They were both glamorous with long blonde hair, and when I glanced over again, I realised they looked almost identical. Of course. Maddy had told me she had twin sisters.

'Hi, Rori.' Greeting me with a smile, Ellie stood up. 'What can I get you? Are you meeting Milo?'

'No, not today. I . . . well, I'm meeting someone else.' I glanced out of the window. 'Actually, here he is now. I'll just wait and see what he wants?'

'Okay.' Ellie sat back down and I noticed the others glancing over with interest to see who was joining me. 'Just let me know when you're ready.'

'Thanks, Ellie.' My heart was thumping at the thought of seeing Kurt again, and when the door opened and he appeared, I gave him an awkward little wave, as if he wouldn't have noticed me standing there like a lemon, in the middle of the café!

He glanced around him approvingly, then he indicated a table by the window with a look that said, *Is this okay for you?*

'Great!' I hurried over, feeling ridiculously self-conscious knowing we had an audience. I knew for sure the girls would be wondering who the handsome stranger was.

We settled on lattes and chocolate cake, although bringing it back to the table, I did wonder how on earth I'd manage to eat such a large slice. My appetite seemed to have deserted me the instant Kurt walked through the door.

After serving me, Ellie rejoined the others, and then Primrose rushed in, apologising for being late and Kurt's phone started ringing. He grimaced and asked if I'd mind if he took the call. It was to do with the new contract they'd just won, so I told him to go ahead, and he wandered outside to talk.

Meanwhile, Ellie had got up again to make Primrose's 'usual', a hot chocolate with whipped cream. And once they were all gathered, Maddy cleared her throat and said she had an announcement to make.

I stirred my coffee and looked out of the window, not wanting to be nosy.

'Right, the thing is,' said Maddy, 'as you know I've been having a hard time thinking about who I want as my bridesmaids – apart from my gorgeous sisters, of course, who have both faithfully promised not to outshine me on the Big Day.'

The twins nodded their gleaming blonde heads solemnly and everyone chuckled.

'Obviously, I've known Ellie and Katja from the day I first arrived in Sunnybrook. Not that they liked me very much to begin with. But I *think* I've managed to convince them I'm actually all right.'

Katja looked at Ellie quizzically. 'What do you think?'

'Yeah, she's okay.'

'Gee, thanks, girls.'

Ellie laughed. 'You know we're winding you up.'

'It would make sense to have Ellie and Katja as your two other bridesmaids,' pointed out Primrose. 'Mind you, four is quite a lot. You have to choose a dress that suits everyone, remember?'

'Yes, well, I'm not having *four* bridesmaids,' said Maddy. 'I'm having seven.'

'Seven?' squeaked Fen. 'Crikey!'

Maddy shrugged. 'That's why I asked you all here today. I wanted to ask you if you'd do the honours on my special day?'

There was an astonished silence, and then everyone started laughing and talking at once, and saying that of course they'd love to be a bridesmaid.

‘Right, that’s good.’ Maddy looked flushed with delight. ‘So the next thing I wanted to ask was: Will you come for a spa day at the hotel we’re thinking about booking?’

She glanced around and everyone seemed really keen.

‘As long as I can get a babysitter, I’m there,’ said Fen, stifling a yawn. ‘We’re teething at the moment so I could really do with a lazy day of pampering with my best buddies. How much is it?’

‘Well, that’s the best thing about it. It’s absolutely free.’

Ellie laughed. ‘For *all* of us? How on earth did you manage that?’

Maddy gave a wicked grin. ‘Well, the hotel’s obviously desperate for our booking. That’s why they’ve offered Jack and me a cheap midweek package, including the spa. So . . . I sweet-talked the manager, who looked about twelve by the way, and I asked him if I could bring my bridesmaids along to enjoy the spa as well. After a bit of hedging, he agreed. Then he asked me how many extra people I’d be bringing, obviously thinking a couple of bridesmaids, three at the most. Bless him, his face when I said *seven!*’

‘That’s terrible,’ said Fen, smiling and shaking her head at Maddy’s cheek. ‘The poor man.’

Maddy snorted. ‘Poor man, my arse! Do you know how much they charge for their wedding packages? An absolute arm and a leg. So excuse me if I don’t feel the slightest bit guilty wrangling a few free spa passes out of them. And let’s face it, it’ll be worth it for them in the long run when we eventually book them for our wedding reception.’

Kurt came back in at that moment and heard the tail end of Maddy’s speech.

He grinned quizzically at me and I shrugged and smiled.

‘Listen,’ he said, stirring his coffee and looking away for a moment, ‘I’ve got to go in a minute. That call was about the contract. We’re meeting at their offices in Guildford to hammer out the details. But . . . well, I just wondered if you’d like to help me celebrate – maybe tomorrow night?’

I raised my eyebrows. ‘What did you have in mind?’

‘All the fun of the fair?’ He grinned. ‘What can I say? Fairgrounds are my weakness. Every time I see a waltzer or a ghost train, I just have to go on it. And there’s a fair in Buntingford this week.’

I laughed. ‘Well, that’s a first. I can honestly say I’ve never had a date on a ghost train.’ I swallowed. ‘Not that it would be a date.’

His blue eyes flashed wickedly. ‘Wouldn’t it?’

‘Well, I don’t know. Would it?’

He shrugged. ‘I’d like it to be.’

‘Well . . . since I woke you up in the middle of the night, *twice*, I think the least I can do is say yes.’

‘I don’t want an apology date.’

‘It wouldn’t be.’

‘So you’re saying you’d actually *like* to go to the fair with me? For no other reason than that you think we might have a good time?’

I smiled. ‘I think we’d have a great time.’

‘Yes!’ Grinning, he punched the air. Then he looked at his watch. ‘Look, sorry, I need to go. But I’ll call you about tomorrow night, okay?’

‘Okay.’

In a happy daze, I watched him go.

All my worries about it being too soon after Nash to start dating seemed to have evaporated into thin air. Saul would definitely approve when I told him tomorrow.

I was going on a date to the fair with Kurt!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I was getting ready for my watercolour class later, when my mobile rang.

My foolish heart leapt, thinking it might be Kurt, phoning to make arrangements for the following night. But it was Janey, asking if I'd like to come round for dinner after the class.

'I never feel as if we have time for a proper chat while we're painting,' she said. 'And of course, the fact that you seem to be teacher's pet doesn't help.'

'What? Of course I'm not!'

She laughed. 'I'm joking, Rori. Although you did seem to be having quite a deep discussion with the lovely Cal at last week's class.'

'Oh, about Steve Hanks, yes.'

'Steve Hanks? Is he a famous artist, then? I thought he was an actor.'

'That's Tom Hanks. Steve was actually related to him. And yes, he was very famous. He was arguably one of the best watercolour painters ever.'

'Oh, well. Excuse my ignorance.'

'Don't be daft. I've been painting watercolours for years. I *should* know about Steve Hanks. You've only just started.'

'Yeah, and I'm not much good, either. But hey, so what? I'm having fun and that's the main thing.'

'Absolutely. And yes, I'd love to come over to yours for dinner. As long as Lance doesn't mind listening to us catching up on gossip?'

'Oh, don't worry about Lance. He'll probably go off to his study after dinner, anyway, leaving us to chat.'

'Great. Well, see you later.'

I enjoyed the art class and then Janey drove us over to Buntingford, to the cute, two-bed semi-detached house in a new development that she and Lance were renting. My car was still in the garage, so I was planning to get a taxi home later.

Dinner was delicious and so was the wine I'd brought. Janey had made a cottage pie, served with buttery peas and broccoli, just the sort of food you wanted to eat on a cold February night.

We avoided the subject of Nash for the most part. But then Lance mentioned they'd been on a walk up to the Tumbling Dell Waterfall at the weekend, and Janey pointed out that that's where we'd gone the last time we'd been together, the three of us.

She frowned, remembering. 'You were so upset that day, Rori. All your lovely paintings gone up in flames.'

'Not all of them,' said Lance. 'Thank goodness.'

Janey smiled sadly. 'At the time you thought Nash had started the fire in the summerhouse deliberately, but of course he'd never do that.'

'It could have been Nash.' Lance shrugged.

Janey glared at him. 'Well, he might have left a cigarette burning by accident, but he'd never have started the fire on *purpose*! It was obviously just a terrible accident.'

I shivered, remembering. 'I suppose I'll never know. Not for sure.'

'But Nash wouldn't do that,' Janey insisted. 'He might have a temper but he's certainly no arsonist.'

I said nothing but when I looked at Lance, I could see he had the same doubts as I did about the incident.

He grinned. 'It's no use, Rori. Janey won't hear anything bad said against Nash.'

She shot him a sharp look. 'What do you mean by that?'

He looked bemused. 'Nothing at all, love. I just mean you're always loyal to your friends, which is one of the things

I really love about you.'

'And that's what Nash has always been, really. A friend,' she snapped.

He grinned. 'Janey was a tiny bit jealous when you started going out with Nash.'

'What?' Janey coloured up. 'No, of course I wasn't!'

'I'm just saying you were in love with him at the start.'

'Actually, I wasn't if you must know. Nash and I weren't together long enough for my feelings to be that deep. I got out pretty quickly when I realised what a temper he had.'

Lance, realising he'd upset Janey, reached out a hand to her. 'Hey, it's okay. It's not important.'

'It's *not* okay, Lance. It's really not. I was *not jealous*.' She scraped back her chair. 'I'll go and get dessert. It's cherry cheesecake. Is that okay for you, Rori?' She gave me a quick smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, threw a furious glance at Lance and walked out of the room.

Lance, looking uncomfortable, got up from the table. 'I think I put my foot in it,' he said sheepishly. 'I'd better go and make sure she's still talking to me.'

After he'd gone, I sat there thinking about Janey's very over-the-top reaction to Lance's light-hearted statement about her feelings for Nash. What if she *had* been in love with Nash and she'd resented me for taking her place in his affections?

She'd never given me any indication that this was how she felt. She'd always talked about Nash as being just a friend. But then again, people didn't always reveal exactly what was going on in their hearts.

What if Janey was in love with Nash even now?

Thankfully, she seemed fine when she came back in with the cheesecake, Lance following with a jug of cream. They were joking with one another already, the brief upset obviously

forgotten, and I felt relieved. It was so awkward when a couple had a spat right in front of you.

When it got late and Lance was tidying up in the kitchen, Janey called a taxi for me.

As I left, they stood together at the door waving me off, and when I looked back a moment later, I could see them in the glow of the doorway, arms around each other, kissing. And I smiled, happy to see it because it meant Janey had forgiven her lovely boyfriend for his casual comments earlier about Nash.

Back at the flat, I made myself a hot chocolate and took it up to bed, thinking about the evening and how enjoyable it had been. Whether or not Janey had been in love with Nash, it was clear she and Lance were really good together.

I crossed to the window. A cold February moon hung in the clear, star-studded sky.

As I went to pull the curtains, I glanced down briefly at the square of back lawn and the bushes encircling it. There wasn't a breath of wind and the spiky branches of the hawthorn tree seemed unnaturally still, as if a creature of the night had swooped down and cast a petrifying spell on it.

A little shiver ran along my spine.

Why was it that a garden – loved in daylight – could transform into such a sinister and alien landscape when cloaked in darkness?

And that's when I noticed it.

The hawthorn tree. It looked odd somehow and I realised it was the shape of the trunk. It seemed distorted, bulging slightly to one side.

At first, squinting into the darkness, I thought I must be imagining that a person was standing there, half-hidden by the tree. As humans, we're hard-wired to see faces everywhere – in clouds, on the surface of the moon, in the froth on our coffee – so surely, I was conjuring a body out of the darkness, in order to make sense of the eerie garden at nightfall.

And then suddenly, the shape separated from the tree and my heart gave a giant lurch of shock.

It had moved only fractionally.

But it was enough for me to realise that there was someone out there, standing silently in the shadows, staring up at me . . .

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

My heart was hammering against my ribs.

I swished the curtains shut and stumbled backwards onto the bed, where I sat rigidly upright on the very edge, staring in frozen horror at the window.

Who *was* it out there?

Was it *Nash*? But how had he found me? And what reason would he have for lurking in the back garden? If he wanted to see me, surely he would just come to the door?

Unless he was trying to scare me. And if so, he was doing a bloody good job of it.

I was gripping the edge of the mattress so tightly, my fingers were starting to hurt but I couldn't let go.

Nash had never been a master of subtlety. If he wanted something, he went after it. There had been no subtlety at all in the way he'd pursued me at the beginning, wining and dining me, and presenting me with gifts and flowers in a charm offensive that had been almost guaranteed to win me over. Hiding silently in the garden to scare me wasn't Nash's style . . .

But what if he was angry because he knew I was avoiding him? What if he was frustrated because he wanted to get back with me, but was unable to reach me?

That didn't make sense either. If he wanted me back, knowing I was in now – with the lights on in the flat – he would surely come straight to the door and try to talk to me . . . endeavour to tempt me back with his smooth flattery, protestations of love and the funny one-liners that used to work miracles in that first year we were together . . .

The sudden ping of my phone in the silence sent my heart rate flying into orbit.

A message!

What if it was from Nash, threatening that if I didn't open the door and let him in, he'd –

Snatching up the phone, I blinked at the name that had flashed up.

King Kong.

Laughing with relief, I pounced on it.

Sorry I'm late. Are you still up? To chat?

With trembling fingers, I phoned him, and at the sound of his warm familiar voice, relief flooded through me. I could hear the echo of his feet on the pavement, which threw me a little. He was walking really fast.

'Hi, Rori. Thanks for phoning. I've had a weird day. Loads of meetings. I'm just arriving home now. I didn't want to phone you if you were already asleep.'

'No, it's fine.' The words sounded like a gasp. I forced myself to take a breath. 'I wasn't asleep. I've just got back in myself.'

'Right. Well . . . are we still on for that fairground date tomorrow night?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Great!'

I could hear in his voice that he was smiling broadly, and that made me smile, too. Kurt might not be here with me, but just talking to him was making me feel safer.

All the same, I'd *rather* he was here with me.

Standing up on wobbly legs, I went to the window. 'Actually, Kurt, I . . . I'm in a bit of a situation.'

'What's that?'

'There's – um – someone in my back garden.' My heart racing, I braced myself to pull back the curtain.

'*What?* Are you okay?'

'A bit scared.'

‘Do you know who it is?’

‘No, it was too dark to make out their face.’

There was a beat of silence. Then Kurt said, ‘Right, I’m coming round. I’m back at the house now, so I can be there in a minute or so?’

‘Okay,’ I said faintly. ‘Thank you.’

Emboldened by the thought of Kurt on his way, I forced myself to pull open the curtains and look out.

I focused on the tree.

A shaft of moonlight was illuminating it now. I could see it much more clearly than before.

I swallowed. The sinister figure had gone.

Frantically, my eyes swept around the garden, looking for suspicious shapes . . . for someone lurking in the shadows of the hedge, just out of sight.

But there was no one there now and I felt my breathing steady. They’d gone, whoever they were. The danger was past and now Kurt was buzzing for me to let him come up to the flat.

But now, as I opened the door and heard his footsteps echoing on the stone steps and getting closer, a different fear was starting to take shape within me.

What if my overwrought mind had been playing tricks on me again? What if it had *conjured up* this disturbing vision in the back garden and it wasn’t actually real?

What if there had been *no one out there*?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I'd known deep down, after a year of trying to make the relationship with Nash work, that it was hopeless. But I was in love with him and so I stayed, choosing to believe him every time he made a promise that things would be different this time.

And they *would* be different. He'd make an effort to be extra-nice to me for a few weeks; sometimes even a whole month would go by without a flare-up. But then they would start again, the angry outbursts, and they'd become more frequent until I'd had enough and we had a huge row, and I'd tell him I was leaving.

But then things would calm down and Nash would be distraught, practically on his knees begging me to give him another chance. He'd be better in future. It would never happen again.

And so the whole destructive cycle would begin all over again.

Then one night, something shifted in my head. He'd yelled right in my face about not emptying the dishwasher and, shocked at the suddenness of his attack, I staggered back, lost my balance and fell to the floor. Stunned, I could feel tears pricking at my eyes. I looked up at Nash but he didn't even hold out his hand to help me up. He just looked at me in disgust and walked out of the kitchen.

Trembling, I went straight upstairs and started to pack.

That was it. No more. It was over and I really meant it this time.

I'd moved into Nash's place the previous year but luckily, I still had my own house, although I was currently renting it out. But the one-year lease was up in four months – the tenants were buying a house – so I'd be able to move back in there eventually . . .

Nash came into the bedroom while I was in the en-suite bathroom, clearing my toiletries into my washbag, and he was

in tears, sitting helplessly on the bed and telling me how sorry he was. But I was determined this time to ignore his pathetic show of contrition, and I told him straight that this time, I was going.

And that's when, for the first time, he threatened to harm himself if I left him.

By the time I went out to the car, he'd started slugging back whisky and smoking furiously and saying he didn't care if I left because he wouldn't be around much longer anyway.

I drove away and parked nearby, and in desperation, I called Janey because I knew she was the one person who might understand. She'd gone out with Nash for a short time. She knew how horrible his moods could be.

Janey was lovely. She said I was doing the right thing, leaving him, and she was sure Nash was just issuing threats of suicide to make me stay. She was certain he wouldn't actually do anything . . .

'You sound awful,' she said. 'Look, come round, Rori. Lance is out tonight at the pub with a mate so it'll just be the two of us and we can chat, okay? And don't worry about Nash. He'll be perfectly fine and so will you.'

So I drove over to Janey's house in Guildford, and she welcomed me with a large glass of wine and said only half-jokingly that I should get drunk and stay over in the spare room.

I laughed and took a large gulp, but then I put it back down because it made me feel even more nauseous, and then Janey's mobile rang and it was Lance. She told him she was looking after me because I'd finally walked out on Nash, and I heard Lance cheering in the background, which made me smile.

Clearly, they'd both been thinking for a while that I should leave.

'Nash is apparently getting pissed as we speak,' Janey told her boyfriend, with a weary look at me, 'and smoking like a chimney, despite the fact he's meant to have given up the fags.'

But I've told Rori she has to stay here and I'm going to order pizza.'

She stuck her thumb up at me, and even though I had zero appetite, I responded with a nod and a smile. I'd been thinking I'd have to stay the night in a hotel, but this was so much better.

I managed some of the pizza when it finally arrived but I was too exhausted for a lengthy conversation about the details of my failed relationship, and Janey could see that I was drooping and didn't want to talk about it. So she ordered me to bed at last, brought me a comforting hot chocolate and said that things would look a lot brighter in the morning.

I was so tired, I managed just a few sips of the drink before I had to put it down and sink into sleep.

It was dark in the room when my phone began to ring.

Confused, I looked at the time as I answered it. Eleven-thirty.

It was Nash and he sounded drunk, and I was about to hang up on him when I heard the words, *fire in the summerhouse . . . all your paintings . . .*

'What? Nash?' I sat up in bed, fumbling for the bedside light switch. He was clearly drunk. 'What are you saying?'

I'd started using Nash's summerhouse in the garden as a sort of art studio. I painted my watercolours in there and Nash had had many of them framed and put up on the walls.

'The summerhouse is on fire. I called the fire brigade,' he said more distinctly, and my heart leapt into my mouth. Hearing the sirens coming closer, I scrambled out of bed and started pulling on my clothes, the phone still to my ear. 'Nash? Are you all right?'

'Yes, yes. I'm fine. I don't know how it started . . . I went in there after you left . . .'

'You went into the summerhouse?'

‘Yes. I was . . . just sitting looking at your watercolours, having a drink.’

‘So you were in there when the fire started?’

‘No. No, I saw it was ablaze from the window when I was going to bed.’

‘So how did it start?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Were you smoking in there?’

‘Well, yes, I suppose I was. Maybe I dropped a lit ciggy . . . I really don’t know, Rori.’

‘Right, I’m coming over.’

Janey was awake, having heard me talking urgently on the phone, and I explained what had happened as I headed for the door.

‘I’ll come with you. Or Lance? He’s just back from the pub.’ She called through to Lance. ‘A fire’s started in Nash’s summerhouse.’

‘Really? Was it an accident?’

‘I suppose so. Well, it wouldn’t be *deliberate*, would it?’

I shook my head. ‘It’s fine, Janey. I’ll be okay myself. I just want to make sure . . . you know . . .’

‘Yes, okay. Well, here’s a key. Just let yourself in when you come back, okay? And phone me if you need anything.’

I called out my thanks and dashed to the car, thankful I hadn’t got drunk as Janey had suggested I should. I was perfectly clear-headed, although my mind was whirling with confusion, wondering how on earth the fire could have started.

As I drove, I thought about what Lance had said. *Was it an accident?*

If Nash had started the fire with a stray ciggy, it must have been an accident. There’s no way he’d ever have started it *deliberately*.

But he *was* very angry with me for leaving. Could he have started the fire out of spite, to destroy all my watercolours?

I shook my head to get rid of the thought.

No, no. He would never do that. Would he?

The scene when I got there was heart-breaking. The pretty summerhouse had practically burned to the ground, and all that remained of my paintings were half a dozen that apparently had been saved. They were propped forlornly against the neighbour's wall, so I rescued them and retreated to my car which was parked at a distance, and I sat there staring at the chaos. It was all so awful.

But at least Nash was all right.

And miraculously, my favourite of the watercolours was among the few that hadn't gone up in flames.

It was called 'Hellebore'.

Next morning, I woke up at Janey's and over a gloomy breakfast, Lance said we all needed some fresh air and he suggested we take a walk up to Tumbling Dell Waterfall, a short drive away.

I nodded. 'Great idea.' The last thing I wanted to do was return to the scene of the fire. Not yet. A walk would blow away the cobwebs and give me time to think about what had happened.

So we hiked up the steep path to the waterfall, and stood at the top admiring the view and breathing in the glorious fresh air.

There was a narrow ledge at the top of the gushing falls, and Lance dared Janey to slither down the bank and stand on it beside him. She refused, laughing, so he went down there himself and stood there, holding his face up to the spray and accusing us of being chicken.

'Idiot,' grinned Janey. 'Look, are you going to be okay, Rori?'

‘I’ll be fine. I’ll have to go back and talk to Nash. I just want to know how it happened, you know? The fire.’

She nodded. ‘Well, as long as you don’t let Nash persuade you to go back to him.’

‘No, I won’t. This is the start of my new life.’ I grinned. ‘And to prove how brave I am, I’m going to join Lance on that ledge.’

‘No, you’re not,’ she squeaked.

‘Yes, I am. Move over, Lance, and make room for me!’

I scrambled down the little bank, feeling very daring, and joined him on the ledge. It was quite scary because it was slippery with moss and much narrower than it looked from above.

Lance grinned and took my hand and held my arm up in the air in a gesture of triumph, and I laughed and thanked him for the walk because it was just what I needed.

‘I’m glad you’ve left him,’ he murmured. ‘He wasn’t good for you.’

I nodded. ‘I know. I’m glad, too, Lance. I should have left long ago.’

‘Well, you’re here now. And you’re *free!* How great is that?’

I smiled. ‘I wish Nash was more like you. You never get angry.’

He laughed. ‘You haven’t seen me when Janey leaves the top off the toothpaste.’

‘Don’t believe him,’ called Janey, who was now scrambling down the bank to join us. ‘He’s an absolute sweetie all of the time.’

‘Aw, shucks.’ Lance gave a modest grin and we all laughed.

And I thanked my lucky stars I’d had these two on my side at just the right moment, when the going got really tough . . .

I'd planned to leave Nash before the fire happened. But in the chaos of the clear-up and the problem of where I was going to live, I let Nash persuade me to stay at his until the tenants vacated my own house.

It seemed the obvious solution and I knew he'd be on his best behaviour, for a while at any rate. He must have been really scared I was going to leave this time because it was a good few months before he let down his guard and exploded with rage at me again.

And that's when I ran, packing a bag and fleeing one night to take refuge at my lovely Auntie Christine's.

Nash and I were finally over ...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was the night of my date at the fairground with Kurt, and when I ran downstairs and got into his car, the first thing he said was, ‘Are you okay? No more intruders in your back garden?’

‘Oh, no. No, I’m fine, thanks.’

I’d woken up this morning feeling quite embarrassed about phoning Kurt in a panic the night before. Especially when he’d come up to the flat and looked out of my window for himself and there was nobody there, and in my emotional state, I’d let slip that I thought I might have been *imagining* the figure under the tree. I really wished I hadn’t said that. It made me sound a bit deranged.

‘Well, if it happens again,’ he said seriously, ‘I think you should call the police straight away, okay?’

‘Okay.’ I smiled sheepishly. He was choosing to believe that there *had* been someone lurking there last night – and not that I was crazy and imagining things – and I felt grateful for that.

I’d been trying all day not to think about it, and I was so glad to going be out with Kurt tonight. Apart from the fact that I really liked him, enjoying all the fun of the fair with him would take my mind off everything . . .

On the short drive to Buntingford, Kurt asked about my work and I told him about Milo and Ellie, and their exciting vision for a glamping site in Sunnybrook, and how I’d be helping to run it after the April opening date.

Arriving in the village, we followed the makeshift signs to a field, where the fair was being held. It was after seven and already dark, and the bright colours and flashing lights and familiar fairground music whisked me right back to my childhood, when Skye used to take me to a local fair near where we lived. Tears pricked at my eyes at the memory and I smiled, surprised. I didn’t often have pangs of affection for my childhood. Maybe I was growing soft in my old age. Or maybe it was that ever since Skye came to Sunnybrook, I was getting

to know her again – and along with that came all the memories of how she was a proper little mother to me when I was a child.

‘You okay?’ Kurt looked at me anxiously.

Smiling, I brushed away the tears. ‘Yes, yes, I’m fine. Just getting a bit sentimental about going to the fair with my sister.’

He nodded as we wandered over to the waltzer. ‘The music whisks you right back to your childhood, doesn’t it? I love it.’

‘I’m too old to go on that,’ I said, as we stood watching the cars on the waltzer spinning crazily around.

‘You’re scared?’

‘I am!’

‘You’re not chickening out on me, are you?’

‘No.’ I grinned at him. ‘Although you may well have to cart me off mid-ride when I faint. I mean, how *old* is this contraption? Those cars are rattling so much, they look as if they might fly off at any minute.’

He chuckled and I felt his warm breath at my ear. ‘I’m sure they’ve done the safety checks. And anyway, I’m an expert on all things fairground-y. I’ll rescue you if it goes wrong.’ He took a firm hold of my hand and a little surge of desire shot through me at the feel of his warm fingers squeezing mine. Standing there in the moonlight, huddled next to him against the chill of the winter’s night, my heart felt suddenly full and almost bursting with happiness.

With Kurt here beside me, I could face any danger – even a creaky old fairground ride!

The waltzer was already filling up so we decided to wait for the next one. And as we stood and watched everyone laughing nervously and finding seats and pulling across the safety bar, I asked Kurt about his business.

‘I make bespoke kitchens. Well, I don’t make them *myself*. I have a team of highly skilled craftspeople to do that.’

‘Did you always have ambitions to be in business for yourself?’

‘There’s a question.’ He stroked his chin thoughtfully. ‘I think the entrepreneurial streak runs in the family. My dad’s a self-employed accountant and Mum runs her own florist’s shop. And then there’s my sister, Laura.’

‘Younger or older?’

‘Two years older.’ He smiled. ‘Laura’s amazing. You’d like her. She trained as a chef and worked in a few top London brasseries before deciding to open a restaurant of her own.’

‘Wow, how amazing. Where is it?’

‘Over the border in West Sussex, deep in the countryside. She and her husband Tony bought a derelict old house with a walled garden and four acres of land. The house had to be demolished sadly, but they managed to preserve the walled garden and they built the restaurant alongside it. So now Tony works in the garden, growing their own fruit and vegetables, and Laura uses the fresh produce in her food, designing the menu around what’s currently in season.’

‘It sounds incredible.’

‘I know. I’m so proud of her. And Tony. They’ve had a lot of good Press and people travel from miles around to eat there. They have glamping pods on the site as well, so guests can make a proper break of it.’

‘*Glamping?*’ I laughed at the coincidence. ‘Your sister could probably teach Milo and Ellie a thing or two about the glamping business, then.’

He smiled. ‘She probably could. Although from what you’ve told me, they seem to be well on track to making a success of their own venture.’

‘Yep. Not long now till we open.’

As we were talking, a group of teenage girls had ambled over and were standing nearby, being quite loud and boisterous, and I’d noticed people standing watching the waltzer were turning to listen to their chat. To be fair, it was

impossible not to, especially when one of them – a tall girl with long dark hair and glossy make-up – started talking in a loud voice about a girl in their class at school called Roz. She called her a ‘disgusting skank’ and she was making her friends laugh by imitating the girl in a silly high voice: *Oh, Niall, I love you so much. I’ll do anything for you. I’ll give you a blow job if you’ll go out with me.*’

‘But Roz *is* going out with Niall,’ pointed out one of the girls, who was eating candyfloss. ‘They’ve been going out for about three weeks now.’

‘Well, yes,’ she sneered, tossing back her long hair. ‘But only because he knows he’s onto a good thing with the blow jobs. It’s fairly obvious it’s *me* he fancies.’

‘Ooh, are you jealous of her, Mags?’

The girl called Mags, who clearly fancied herself the ringleader, laughed and hotly denied it. But her expression was thunderous, and I looked at Kurt, who was also tuning in now.

‘Me thinks she protests just a tad too much,’ I murmured.

Kurt nodded his agreement. ‘Mags has got the hots for Niall all right!’

We exchanged a smile. *Oh, to be fifteen again, excited about seeing the boy you fancied at the fair!*

Mags snorted. ‘Oh, God, don’t look now but there *is* the little *skank!*’

Naturally, everyone turned to look.

The girl called Roz was standing by the hot dog stall. She wasn’t in the queue. She was just standing there on her own, and my heart went out to her when Mags started laughing and imitating her again, within her earshot, making daft orgasmic noises and panting, ‘Oh, Niall! Niall! I love you so much!’ She turned to her friends and scoffed, ‘I mean, it’s obvious he’s stood her up. I knew he’d finish with her. He needs someone exciting not boring as hell like her.’

‘You mean someone like you?’ grinned the friend with the candyfloss, who clearly wasn’t afraid of standing up to her.

Mags shrugged nonchalantly. ‘Maybe. If he’s lucky.’

The others started cheering and hooting at this, and I felt Roz’s pain, standing there all on her own, with no friends to back her up. It was hard when you weren’t part of the gang at school. I remembered it only too well . . .

‘Do you really think he fancies you, though?’ asked her mate casually, and to my horror, Mags reached over and pushed the candyfloss right in her face and started rubbing it in for good measure, much to the screaming delight of the other girls.

‘What do you think *you’re* looking at?’

She’d turned to me with a belligerent look. But I didn’t bother replying. I just turned away, and she got back to tormenting Roz, who was still standing there alone, staring down at the grass.

At last, the waltzer slowed down and came to a stop, and everyone got off.

But as we all piled on and found a seat, I suddenly had a panicky thought.

What about my wig?

The ride was fast, and the guy in charge was taking great delight in spinning the individual cars, making the inhabitants scream for mercy. What if the worst happened, and the movement of the ride and the rush of the wind dislodged my wig? Why on earth didn’t I think of that before I agreed to go on it with Kurt? It was too late to change my mind now!

‘Look!’ Kurt pointed over to the hot dog stall. The girl called Roz was no longer alone. There was a boy – presumably Niall, who Mags had her sights on – and he had his hands around her waist, kissing her.

I grinned, momentarily distracted from worries about my hair, and stuck up my thumb. ‘Good for Roz!’ I felt ridiculously pleased, watching them together. They were clearly into each other. It didn’t look as if Roz was going to be ditched any time soon.

Gingerly, when Kurt was turned away for a moment, I felt the hairpiece to make sure it was secure. Then as the ride started, I leaned slightly against the side of the car with my hand resting casually on my neck – but really so that I could anchor my hair.

The teenage girls were in the car next to ours and every time theirs spun round, Mags seemed to be looking at me and laughing. I even imagined that she was pointing at me and telling her friends about my wig. But I knew that was ridiculous. It was just my overactive imagination again.

As the ride speeded up, I glanced at Kurt and he gave me an *are-you-enjoying-yourself* look, and I did a funny grimace. He laughed, clearly having a whale of a time himself, then he grabbed me and held me tightly for the rest of the ride. And I forgot about my worries over the wig as I snuggled into him and gave myself up to the intoxicating experience of being flung around everywhere with no control whatsoever.

I was still laughing as we disembarked. ‘That was amazing. I haven’t been on a waltzer for years.’

‘It was good, wasn’t it?’ Smiling, he wrapped his arm around me and our frosty breath made smoky plumes in the night air. Then he kissed me. It was gentle but we lingered over it long enough for me to feel the sizzle of underlying passion, and my heart was racing.

Afterwards, still wrapped in a glow from our first kiss, I was barely aware of someone close by, talking loudly. Kurt’s arm was still around me, and I was using the excuse of being cold to snuggle even closer to him.

Then I heard, very distinctly, ‘No, I bet you a hundred quid it’s a wig. It’s *definitely* a wig.’

I turned just as Mags was saying, ‘My mum’s got one the same. Choppy blonde cut, shorter at the back.’ She looked straight at me. ‘Tell them.’ She indicated her mates, who were all staring over now. ‘It’s a wig, isn’t it?’

‘No!’ I swallowed, horribly aware of Kurt listening. ‘No, of course it’s not.’

Mags laughed. ‘Oh, give over. Of course it’s a wig.’ She turned to her mates and sniggered. ‘She was holding onto it on the ride in case it flew off!’

‘Look, it’s *not* a wig.’ I was trembling with shock and anger. ‘And even if it was, do you really think it’s polite to point it out to a total stranger?’

She looked taken aback at being challenged, but she quickly recovered. ‘Hah! I don’t know why you’re so bothered, anyway. Everybody wears wigs these days.’ She stepped closer and quick as lightning, tugged the ends of my hair and pulled it off.

‘There, I win the bet. It *is* a wig.’ Grinning, she picked it up off the grass, handed it back to me and turned away.

Blinded by tears, I turned away, slipping the wig into my bag, determined not to let them see I was upset. ‘Can we just go?’ I muttered to Kurt, aware that he was staring at my ‘real’ hair, apparently speechless with shock. ‘Please?’

There was a pause. Then he muttered, ‘Of course.’

‘Look, I shouldn’t have lied to those girls,’ I blurted out. ‘It’s just . . . well, my hair’s been falling out so I’ve had to start wearing a wig. But I’ve been feeling too embarrassed to tell anyone . . .’

He grunted, his eyes steely, and my heart sank.

Was this really going to be a problem for him?

Panic was fluttering inside and I felt sick. It was the sort of thing that Nash would get angry about. He wouldn’t think about how *I* was feeling. He would just have gone off on a rant and accused me of not bothering to tell him I was wearing a wig. Or something equally illogical.

I’d really thought Kurt was different, though ...

He let go of my hand and a cold feeling of despair surged through me.

Damn this bloody wig!

‘Erm, Mags? Can I have a word?’

I spun round at the sound of Kurt's voice. The departing gang all turned round as he caught up with them.

I froze.

What was he doing?

I watched as he pointed over to where Roz and Niall were round the side of the hot dog stall, locked in quite a steamy kiss. Mags clearly hadn't noticed them.

Kurt pulled no punches. 'I think you'll find he fancies your classmate Roz quite a bit, actually. I can't see them breaking up any time soon.' He shrugged. 'I'd give up, love, if I were you.'

Then he turned and walked swiftly back to me, a look of thunder on his face.

He put his arm round me, squeezed me tightly and guided me away from the gang. 'Come on. Let's head for the ghost train. It's in the opposite direction. Far away from *that* little witch.'

I nodded as a feeling of relief swept through me. 'Thank you for that,' I said in a small voice, aware that my head was feeling so much cooler without the wig.

He grunted. 'It was pretty childish of me, I suppose. But how she spoke to you and what she did made me so . . . well, protective, I suppose. And angry. Did I embarrass you?'

'What? No! Of course not.' I smiled up at him. 'Actually, I loved it. I thought you were very *commanding*. Really rather sexy, in fact.'

He laughed. 'Maybe I should be *commanding* more often in that case.'

'Er, no. Just be yourself. That's more than good enough for me.'

As we were preparing for the ghost train to leave the station, he looked over at me and smiled. 'And by the way, wig or no wig, it doesn't matter to me because you're gorgeous either way.' He reached over and gently smoothed back a strand of hair from my cheek.

I opened my mouth to protest, but he shook his head.

‘I’m not going to argue the point. You’re a beautiful woman. Full stop.’

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Later, when we drove back to Sunnybrook, I was clutching a cuddly pink rabbit that Kurt had won for me at the rifle range and feeling happy in spite of my clash with the obnoxious Mags.

We drove past Kurt's own house and I realised he was dropping me back at my place, and at once, I felt unsure.

Should I invite him in for coffee?

But what if he took that to mean something *other* than a hot drink with the option of milk and/or sugar?

If he were to come up to the flat, I knew what might happen. And an excited little thrill shivered through me at the very thought . . .

But next moment, I was thrown into panic of a completely different kind.

A dark four by four was haring along the narrow lane leading from the café. It turned at the corner without stopping and roared towards us, its lights on full beam. Gasping, I gripped the seat as Kurt took evasive action, glancing at the pavement to see it was clear before mounting the kerb. Just in time, too. The car zoomed past us, narrowly missing taking Kurt's wing mirror with it, and I caught a glimpse of the driver. Apparently totally oblivious of us, he was staring furiously ahead.

My heart plummeted into my stomach.

I would recognise that angry look anywhere.

It was Nash.

'Oh my God, it *was* him in the garden last night,' I whispered, my hands flying to my face. 'I knew it! Somehow, he's found out where I'm living now.'

'Who?' demanded Kurt, turning with a concerned frown. 'Who's "he"?''

I took a big breath and blew it out very slowly. ‘My ex. The man in that car that almost collided with us. He . . . he’s been trying to track me down.’

‘But you don’t want him to find you?’

‘Definitely not. Far too many bad memories.’ I forced a smile that I really wasn’t feeling.

What the hell was I going to do now? He’d found out where I was living – which meant I could no doubt expect another visit from him very soon.

Kurt was studying me intently. ‘He’s not a danger, is he? Your ex? I mean, you don’t think he would hurt you? Because if you’re worried at all, I can easily stay over.’

I hesitated for just a second, part of me wanting to accept his offer immediately and drag him inside, but a bigger part of me was trying desperately to think calmly and rationally. I’d got myself into this situation. I would have to get myself out of it. Kurt obviously couldn’t move in permanently, just in case Nash were to turn up at my door!

So I shook my head. ‘Thank you. But there’s no need. I’ll be fine.’

‘Are you sure?’ Kurt looked as uncertain about this as I was feeling.

I shrugged. ‘Having realised I was out, Nash isn’t likely to come back tonight.’ I smiled, trying to make light of the situation. ‘So I think I can probably sleep easily in my bed, knowing I won’t have a bitter and vengeful ex-boyfriend banging on my door.’

‘Right.’ Kurt looked thoughtful. Then he sat back in his seat with a frown and stared straight ahead. ‘Hang on a sec. Did you say *Nash*?’

‘Yes. Why?’

He groaned. ‘This wouldn’t be Nash Hardman of Hardman Homes, would it?’

I nodded, staring at him. ‘You know him?’

He heaved a sigh. ‘I know him,’ he said flatly. ‘Just yesterday, I signed a contract to put kitchens into his new properties.’

‘*Really?*’ The coincidence of this seemed incredible. When Kurt had that meeting in Guildford, it was with *Nash*? They were working together? I looked curiously at Kurt. He looked devastated. ‘I really don’t see why that should be a problem, though,’ I said slowly. ‘Why are you looking so grim?’

‘Because . . .’ He turned, blowing out his breath. ‘Because I told him where you were living, Rori.’ He shrugged helplessly.

I stared at him in horror, feeling suddenly icy cold. ‘You did *what?*’

‘I’m so sorry. I’d no idea he was your ex or that there was any bad blood between you.’

He looked guilty and totally crestfallen. But all I could think was that the person I’d been feeling safe with . . . the person I was probably in the process of *falling* for and even shared a kiss with tonight . . . well, wouldn’t you know it? *He* was the one who’d told Nash where to find me.

I gave a bitter laugh. It was Sod’s Law, really. I’d finally started to feel as if I might be able to move on in my life. But the first man I’d put my trust in had made me feel more insecure than ever. It would have been funny if I didn’t feel like crying.

A surge of emotion rose up inside and I grabbed at the handle, trying to wrench the door open.

‘Rori, I’m sorry. Don’t go,’ Kurt pleaded. ‘Let me explain. I want to help you.’

‘You can’t help me,’ I muttered. ‘No one can. I’m completely on my own in this.’

I got the door open at last and scrambled out. Ignoring Kurt’s anxious shouts behind me, I started to run along the road to the flat. After a few seconds, I heard him behind, chasing after me. But I managed to get inside the outer door, just as he reached me, panting.

‘I’m fine,’ I told him firmly. ‘I’ll call you.’

And I turned and ran up the stairs to the flat.

I’m completely on my own in this. That’s what I’d told Kurt.

And that’s exactly how it felt ...

Upstairs, I locked and bolted the door. Then I went straight to the kitchen, took the bottle of Irish Cream liqueur out of the cupboard, poured myself a large glass and drank it straight down. I felt a bit sick because it brought back memories of my hang-over. But at least, I thought, it might calm my nerves.

Because how the hell was I going to get to sleep tonight?

My head was whirling with scary thoughts. What if Nash *did* come back tonight? What if I refused to let him in but he battered the door down and gained entry anyway? I knew I was letting my imagination run away with me. But it was night and it was pitch dark outside.

And I was really scared.

And then, just as I was reaching for the remote and preparing for a long, sleepless night with just the TV for company, a buzzing sound pierced the silence.

My heart leapt with shock and the blood roared in my ears.

I could feel the adrenaline coursing through my body, preparing me for a fight with Nash.

Calm down, calm down, I told myself. *The street level door has a security entrance. I just won’t let him in and he’ll go away again.*

Then I heard footsteps on the stairs.

He was coming up! But how ...?

And then I realised. When I’d fled from Kurt’s car, I was in such a state, I hadn’t made sure the door clicked shut behind me.

As I sat there, frozen to the spot on the sofa, staring into the hallway, I heard the footsteps pause for a few seconds at the

single turn in the staircase and then begin again. They were plodding upwards, getting closer every second.

A sharp rap on the door echoed in the silence, but still I sat there, as the knock came for a second and a third time.

And then a voice yelled, 'For heaven's sake, Squidge, I'm freezing my tits off out here. Let me in before I collapse with hypothermia on your doormat.'

Skye?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

‘What the *hell*, Skye?’

I stared at my normally super-glam elder sister, hardly recognising her beneath the weird purple scarf that was wound around her neck and head, and covering most of her face. Two panda eyes peered out at me, glazed with exhaustion, as she slumped wearily against the doorframe. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?’ My alarm was now focused on her coat. It was cashmere (of course) and the delicate colour of freshly-churned butter, but a big black oily mark had stained the sleeve. ‘Have you got toothache?’ I indicated the scarf over her mouth.

‘Nice to see you, too, Squidge,’ she snapped, heaving herself away from the doorjamb. Straightening with a dramatic sigh to her full five feet eleven inches, she brushed past me and stalked into the flat. ‘And no, of course I haven’t got bloody toothache.’ She whipped off the scarf and turned with a dramatic, ‘Voila!’ She shrugged. ‘It’s a disguise. In case anyone recognised me on the way here.’

‘Right.’ I frowned, thinking rapidly. It must be something serious for my sister to have left her home in London at this time of night looking like this. ‘So what happened? I mean, why are you –?’ But she was already walking away from me, dumping her coat on the hall table as she went and kicking off her shoes. I followed her into the kitchen where she went straight to the fridge and flung it open.

‘I need alcohol. Where are the glasses?’ She grabbed a half-drunk bottle of white and brandished it at me.

I stared at her, still stunned.

It wasn’t the lateness or unexpectedness of her arrival that shocked me so much as the state she was in – which was the total opposite of the image she always presented to ‘her public’. Even for a quick foray down to the local shop, Skye would always slap on the full works, including false eyelashes. But tonight, her face was pale as a ghost. Deep laughter lines were very much in evidence (she looked every one of her

forty-one years, although she definitely wouldn't thank me for saying so) and her normally polished dark hair seemed to have taken on a life of its own, standing up wildly in all directions and waving with static from the scarf. With her mascara having migrated to her cheeks, she looked every inch the witch from *Macbeth* I'd seen her play a few years ago in a theatre group touring the UK.

'Glass?' she queried impatiently.

I swallowed. 'Tell me what happened first. For heaven's sake, Skye. I mean, why are you even *here*?'

She groaned, deflating before my very eyes, leaning against the fridge but still grasping the bottle. 'The truth? I lamped a woman in a pub. But before you ask, she deserved it, okay?'

'You punched someone?' I stared at her in horror.

'I did not *punch* someone. This isn't the Wild West.' She straightened up haughtily. 'No, I lamped her. Quite literally. Which will obviously be a total gift for those sleezy tabloid headline writers.' She shrugged. 'I attempted to hit her over the head with a lamp, which was the nearest thing to hand.'

'Over the *head*? Is she all right? You . . . you didn't *kill* her, did you?'

'No, of course I didn't kill her. That would be murder and I think they'd already have arrested me by now.' She heaved a sigh, looked sadly at the wine in her hand and – glass still not forthcoming – unscrewed it and took a long slug straight from the bottle.

Wincing because my choice of wine was clearly not up to scratch, she set the bottle down on the table, although I noticed she didn't screw the top back on.

'Actually, as a weapon, I wouldn't recommend a table lamp,' she said, folding her arms defensively. 'The she-monster ducked at the last minute so all I managed to do was snag her cheekbone with the conveniently spiky rattan shade.'

'Ouch.' I grimaced.

She grinned. 'Yes, it was a bit.'

‘But why did you do it?’

Her smile vanished, her eyes sliding away. ‘I’d rather not talk about it, if you don’t mind.’

I watched her face crumple for a moment as she relived her nightmare. Quickly, she pulled herself together and gave me a brisk smile. ‘An amusing story for another day, maybe. Well, not that funny. And definitely not one to tell the grandkids.’

‘But you can’t go around *doing* things like that.’ I shook my head in despair.

She made an exasperated noise in her throat. ‘I don’t *go around doing things like that*. You know me better than that. At least, I hope you do. For goodness’ sake, Squidge, I looked after you until you were seven years old and did I ever *once* give you a clip around the ears when you were cheeking me or misbehaving? No, I did *not*! And I never would.’

‘Of course you wouldn’t,’ I said quickly, feeling guilty because she was looking suddenly quite distressed and emotional. ‘You were brilliant, Skye, and I’m never, ever going to forget what you did for me.’

‘Well, good,’ she said sulkily. ‘Because I’m not a violent person. These were . . . well, they were *special circumstances*.’

I nodded. ‘So who *was* this woman? Did she report you to the police?’

‘Probably. I didn’t hang around long enough to find out. But there was a skanky tabloid photographer in the pub – Gerry Jackson, or “Greasy Ger” as he’s known in media circles – and he took pictures of me fleeing the scene. So I leapt in a passing taxi, practically falling onto the bonnet to make it stop for me. Then I bought that hideous scarf from a shop at the station.’ She pointed vaguely in the direction of the hall where the scarf lay on the floor next to her abandoned shoes. ‘Then I caught the first train here. Well, it was the last one, actually. I had to walk all the way here because obviously – this being country-bumpkin-land – there wasn’t a single taxi waiting outside that shed thing that masquerades as an actual bloody station.’

‘That’s a bit unfair,’ I protested, feeling rather protective of my ‘country bumpkin’ status and the ‘shed’ which was actually a rather pretty little station building with pots of yellow and purple crocuses at the front. ‘And anyway, it’s not that far to walk.’

Skye gave a snort. ‘It is when you’re wearing the spindliest heels ever created by man. (Or woman. Don’t @ me.) Anyway, I tried walking across the green in them but I got completely stuck, so then I had to take them off and walk the rest of the way *barefoot!*’ She gazed miserably at her grass-stained stocking feet. Her big toe was poking through a hole.

‘Well, I should think green feet are the least of your problems right now,’ I told her briskly, my sympathy not extending to what was clearly a first-world problem. ‘But at least no one’s going to track you down in this little backwater.’

She snorted loudly. ‘Don’t you believe it. That Gerry Jackson will find me, I’m certain of it. Greasy Bloody Ger is an absolute *expert* at sniffing out the dirt, and he’s never forgiven me for knocking his camera out of his hand once when I was emerging from a nightclub at three in the morning, a guy on each arm. It was all perfectly innocent, by the way. They’re both well and truly out of the closet.’

‘Right. Gosh, what a glam life you lead, compared to mine.’

She sighed wearily, looking the total opposite of glamorous. ‘Gerry Jackson will track me down. I swear, even if I relocated to Antarctica and became a penguin, I’d be waddling about looking for fish and up he’d pop with his stupid camera.’

I laughed. ‘Don’t exaggerate.’

‘I’m not. Not really. You don’t know what it’s like, Squidge, to feel as if you’re living in a fishbowl, your life on view for any old stranger to criticise.’

‘Skye?’

‘Yes?’

‘Can you stop calling me Squidge? I’m not five anymore.’

She shrugged. ‘Okay.’

‘Why did you nickname me Squidge anyway?’

‘Oh, well, you had the *cutest* squidgy nose when you were a baby.’ She smiled, a faraway look in her eyes.

I laughed. ‘Now it’s just my thighs that are squidgy.’

‘Rubbish. You’ve got a great figure. And that hair’s fabulous. Is it a wig?’

Smiling grimly, I reached into the cupboard for two wine glasses and presented them to her. ‘I’ll have one as well, please.’ The wig was actually itchy and sweaty and I didn’t want to talk about it.

I wasn’t the only one keeping quiet. Skye clearly didn’t want to talk about the incident in the pub. Yet. Although I *would* get it out of her.

It was just a massive relief, for now, to know that tonight’s ‘stalker’ was my sister. And she wasn’t actually a killer!

CHAPTER TWENTY

Later, I lay in bed, my mind in a whirl.

Skye had said she was starving ('I don't think I've ever been this hungry in my entire life!') so I'd taken eggs and cheese from the fridge and made her an omelette. While I cooked, she started hunting through my cupboards and munched her way through an entire family-size bag of salt and vinegar crisps (the expensive 'handmade' variety that I was keeping as a treat for the weekend). Then she found an unopened box of chocolate cherry liqueurs that I was also saving for a special occasion, and began working her way through those for afters.

Omelette ready, I swiped the half-empty box from her hand and told her to sit down.

At which point she turned her nose up at the omelette I'd made and said she wasn't hungry anymore, and could I please just show her to her bed because she was so exhausted, she could probably sleep on a tightrope.

Fuming over the uneaten omelette, I felt like ushering her outside to the washing line, as the next best thing to a tightrope. But instead I took a deep breath and reminded myself she'd had the day from hell. Then I forced a smile, grabbed a fresh towel from the pile and showed her the spare room. There was a fresh set of linen in there but I hadn't got round to making the bed, and my heart sank. Wrestling a cover on a duvet seemed a task too far, and it was clear Skye had no intention of helping. She was already getting undressed.

Biting my tongue, I started putting on the bottom sheet. But next moment, Skye was whipping it out of my hands.

'Why are you always such a martyr?' she ordered. 'I don't think it'll kill me to sleep under a duvet without a cover for one night, do you? We can sort all that out tomorrow.'

'Okay. Well, goodnight.' I headed for the door, and when I turned, she was already in bed and turned on her side, eyes closed.

‘Night,’ she mumbled. ‘Oh, Rori?’

‘Yes?’ I looked back.

‘Get me a glass of water, will you, there’s a love?’

I stomped to the kitchen and filled a glass, my heart sinking a little as I recalled her casual comment about sleeping under a cover-less duvet tonight.

We can sort all that out tomorrow, she’d said.

So she was obviously planning to stay more than one night, then. And I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. Yes, it would be nice to spend time with my sister. We hardly knew each other these days. But having her as a house-guest for who knew how long?

It was clear that my lovely new space that I’d made all my own would no longer be my lovely new space with Skye around.

And that wasn’t the only thing on my mind, keeping me from falling asleep.

I kept thinking about Kurt and how he’d told Nash where I was living now.

I’d been overwhelmed by the whole scenario – getting back from my evening with Kurt at the fair, only to find Nash roaring away from the flat, clearly annoyed at finding I wasn’t at home. And then to discover that it was Kurt who’d let the cat out of the bag about where I was living – information that had led Nash directly to my door!

It was no wonder I’d felt the urge to run away and lock myself in the flat. But now, lying here wide awake, there were so many questions I wanted to ask Kurt.

How well did he know Nash for a start? They couldn’t just be new business acquaintances, surely, if Nash had talked to Kurt about our break-up. Maybe Kurt had known all along about my connection with Nash but had been keeping it to himself for some strange reason?

I shook my head. Now I was being ridiculous. Because it had been quite clear from Kurt’s reaction that he’d had no idea

that Nash was my ex.

I sighed with frustration.

I'd liked Kurt almost from the beginning. But I'd already proved with Nash that I wasn't a very good judge of character.

I'd thought I could trust Kurt, and I'd been ready to open up to him about everything that had happened to me.

But could I *really* trust him?

Next morning, I was up at seven as usual, ready for another day of helping to get the glamping site up and running.

I'd thought Skye would probably still be in bed after her shattering day, so I was quite surprised to find her in the kitchen in my dressing-gown, which had been hanging up on the back of the bathroom door, feeling the radiator with a frown.

'Do you always live in a fridge? I'm absolutely *freezing*,' she said, whacking the thermostat on the wall up more beeps than I could bear to think about. It must be on at least twenty-five degrees now! I thought about pointing out that she didn't have to pay the energy bills, but I stopped myself just in time. Skye was a guest in my flat and it probably wouldn't be for long. More importantly, she was the sister I'd managed to lose touch with, sometimes for an entire year at a time. I didn't want to ruin this chance of getting to know her again by falling out over the heating!

'Coffee?' she asked.

'Oh, thanks.' I smiled. 'Yes, please.'

'No, I meant where is it? Which cupboard? I'm useless until I've had my morning fix.'

'Right. Top cupboard on the right.' I pointed. She could make her own coffee. I was *not* going to start waiting on her! 'I expect you're used to proper ground coffee in a cafetière or those machine things?'

‘I’m not fussy.’ She filled the kettle and went to the window, peering out over the green. Then she dashed out of the kitchen and a few seconds later, I heard her call, ‘No sign of anyone out the back, either, thank God!’

‘Who were you expecting?’

‘Newspaper hacks . . . photographers . . . I’m amazed that rat, Gerry Jackson, hasn’t tracked me down already,’ she snapped, coming back in and going over to the kettle to make coffee.

‘Gerry Jackson?’

She took two mugs out of the cupboard. ‘I told you about him last night. Gerry Jackson. AKA Greasy Ger. Freelance photographer, specialising in digging up dirt for the gossip columns. I broke his camera once and he’s made it his life’s work ever since to make my life hell in print.’ She turned. ‘So if you see anyone lurking outside, let me know, okay?’

I shivered, remembering the sinister figure I’d seen standing under the tree under cover of darkness a few nights earlier. Had it been Nash? I still had no idea. And I was still living in fear.

It occurred to me then that my life and Skye’s might have diverged enormously since the day she was packed off to boarding school, but right now, we had something pretty major in common.

We were both in hiding, holed up in this flat and fearing outside forces invading our lives and our peace of mind . . .

She held up a mug. ‘Coffee for you?’

I nodded, about to remind her how I liked it. But she smiled and said, ‘Splash of milk, no sugar.’

‘Nice you remembered.’

She frowned. ‘Of course I remembered. Honestly, Rori, you seem to forget that I looked after you for –’

‘Yes, yes. The first seven years of my life.’ I grinned. ‘The thing is, I wasn’t into coffee back then.’

‘Ah, yes. You were a Ribena girl. I’m surprised all your teeth haven’t fallen out.’

‘Charming!’

She glanced towards the window, her smile vanishing. ‘What time does the newsagent’s open?’

I glanced at my watch. ‘In . . . exactly seven minutes.’

She nodded, took a gulp of coffee and left the room with it. Next thing, I heard the woosh of the shower, and five minutes after that, she came back into the kitchen wearing my parka, which had been hanging on a peg in the hall. It looked a bit weird teamed with her heels and pink Prada bag slung over her shoulder. ‘Don’t *I* look gorgeous?’ she said, crossing her eyes at me. ‘You don’t mind, do you? My coat’s got that fetching black oil stain on the sleeve.’

I grinned. ‘Yes, how on earth did *that* happen?’

‘Tripped over a raised paving slab and fell in a puddle on my way here last night.’

‘Ah, right. Well, don’t tell Ada. Otherwise she’ll be straight down to the council offices, chaining herself to the railings in protest at the shocking pedestrian surfaces.’

Skye gave a half-laugh, half-snort. ‘The longer I can avoid *Ada* the better.’

‘I was going to invite her and Blossom over for dinner tomorrow night?’

She looked horrified. ‘Please don’t. I need to be in a *robust* frame of mind to see our mother.’

‘And Blossom?’

She pursed her lips, her face darkening. ‘I suppose she’s still hooking up with the wrong guys and getting her heart broken? As per usual.’

‘Well, you can hardly expect me to criticise her for that after *my* terrible judgement of men!’ I snapped, while thinking that actually Skye was quite right. Blossom’s latest romance with that gardening scumbag had ended in disaster.

‘At least you’ve got a *proper job*, Rori. You went to uni and worked hard and forged a dream career. Blossom didn’t even bother going to college. She just left school and started cutting next door’s lawn.’

‘I wouldn’t call it a “dream career”. And anyway, gardening *is* a proper job.’

‘It might be a job but it’s not a career. What are the prospects for advancement?’ She shook her head in frustration. ‘Let’s face it, she’s never going to be able to afford to get on the property ladder on the kind of money she’s making right now, is she? The only chance she has of being a property-owner is if Ada leaves her the house in her will.’ She gave a bitter snort. ‘Which actually is highly likely since Blossom’s been the favourite daughter since the day she was born.’

‘Not everyone wants to go far in their career and earn pots of money, you know!’ I was on Blossom’s side in this as I listened yet again to Skye’s frustrated rant about our youngest sister and her failings. ‘Blossom is popular because she’s so sunny-natured and she’s perfectly happy being a gardener. More than happy. She loves what she does. And not everyone can say *that* about their job, can they?’

‘I suppose.’ Skye shrugged listlessly. ‘I have to say, there are times I feel like jacking the whole acting thing in. It’s so bloody exhausting going to auditions and being told you don’t have the right “look” or you’re too old or too young for the part.’ She gave a weary sigh. ‘Honestly, Rori, I’m not sure how long I can carry on. The business can be really grim as you start getting older.’

I gazed at her, taken aback by her weary confession. I’d never seen her look so vulnerable and it worried me, but for her sake, I tried to laugh it off. ‘Yeah, and you’re *really* old, at forty-one, Skye. Practically eligible for your free bus pass, in fact. Shall we spend the afternoon looking at stairlifts online?’

She gave a weary smile. ‘The things I’ve been through, Rori, I wake up sometimes feeling eighty, never mind forty. And now everyone knows I got angry in a pub and clocked someone. Who thoroughly deserved it, by the way.’

‘*Everyone?* I think you might be exaggerating a bit. You’re not that well-known.’

‘Thanks!’ she snapped, glancing at her watch.

‘So who was she, anyway? This woman you “lamped”?’

‘Audrey? Oh, she’s a total psycho. She and her similarly deranged boyfriend kept my friend, Rachel, a prisoner for three days . . . locked her in their garage without food or water.’

‘What? But *why?*’

‘Oh, well, Rachel had started seeing Audrey’s ex, and Audrey wasn’t very pleased about it.’

‘Crikey. Were they good friends before this happened?’

‘No, not at all. They barely knew each other. They finally let her out of the garage but they told her that if she reported them to the police, she’d be dead next time.’

‘That’s terrible. No wonder you lamped her!’

Skye nodded. ‘When I saw her a week later, laughing in the pub with her friends, I just saw red. Poor Rachel still isn’t over the ordeal. I doubt she ever will be.’

I shook my head in disbelief.

Skye looked at her watch. ‘Right. Back soon,’ and she vanished, picking up my keys from the hall table as she left.

‘You *must* be desperate for ciggies, going out looking like that!’ I called after her with a grin, but the door had already slammed shut.

Taking advantage of the silence, I decided to call the builder for an update on the shower and toilet block for the glamping site. Then Saul called me. He was having a week away to install a special composting toilet outside his cabin in the woods, but he said he’d be back in a day or two to finish off the work in the flat for Sylvia. I checked he still had a key for if I was out when he came round, and I made him laugh by joking that I’d be happy to see him whenever he felt ready to

leave the peace and tranquillity of the woods behind and face people again.

I'd no sooner finished talking to Saul than the phone rang again.

King Kong.

Determined to ignore him because I was still feeling confused about everything, I let it ring and got up to make myself a coffee I didn't really want. Then I sat there in the cosy kitchen, wondering what to do about Kurt. Ignoring him didn't last long. I couldn't resist listening to the message he'd left. It was quietly apologetic. He very much wanted to explain about the conversation he'd had with Nash and how my name had come up, and he added that he'd never in a million years have given away where I was living if he'd known the circumstances.

I was about to give in and call him, when I heard the door at ground level being opened and Skye's footsteps running up the stairs. A second later, she burst into the flat.

'Look at this!' she demanded from the hallway, marching into the kitchen a second later. She brandished a folded newspaper at me, eyes flashing with fury, and I saw she was holding a bunch of other newspapers under her arm. 'I bloody *knew* they wouldn't content themselves with "Failed Hollywood actress lamps woman in pub!" alongside the most unflattering picture they could find of me. They just *had* to drag up my *alleged* sketchy past as well!'

She pushed the paper in front of me and I stared at the photo that took up most of the top half of page five, along with the headline she'd just quoted.

She was right. It was a terrible photo. It made my sister, who was classically beautiful, look rough and hungover and at least twenty years older, and my heart went out to her. I took the paper and started to read the story, which sure enough, alluded to the incident in the pub and then went on to dredge up the devastating story from years ago that had ended Skye's chances of a Hollywood career.

She'd been full of hope and excitement when, in her twenties, she'd landed a starring role in a big blockbuster movie that shot her to stardom and made her a dazzling, worldwide star. The fresh new face, whose name was on everyone's lips . . .

... for the best part of a year.

At which point, her ageing male co-star – clearly jealous of being outshone by this dazzling young actress with the world at her feet – published his biography which included a complete hatchet job on Skye, implying that they'd had a steamy, on-set affair and that she suffered from a serious sex addiction and favoured one particular position in particular.

Skye took the actor to court for defamation of character and won her case, but her star was already on the wane. During this traumatic time, we all flew out to be with her, sitting in court every day to support her. It was soul-destroying seeing how it was affecting her. In the end, despite emerging victorious after the gruelling battle with her former co-star, all the acting opportunities dried up and Skye was forced to return to the UK with her dreams of making it big in Hollywood completely shattered.

How she found the strength to carry on acting after such a crushing blow, I'll never know. But she did. With talent on her side and a truckload of dogged determination, she kept on showing up for auditions and eventually started making a name for herself again in the UK, enjoying a steady career as a stage actress, as well as doing lucrative voice-over work and appearing in the occasional advert on TV.

I was so proud of my sister for what she'd achieved in the face of such adversity.

When she returned to the UK, she kept silent about what really happened on-set. She wouldn't even talk to us about what she'd gone through. She said she just wanted to put the whole nightmare behind her . . .

Over the next few days, Skye seemed to sink into a defeated slump.

I told her not to read the stories, but she was like a dog with a bone and couldn't leave them alone. So eventually, I threw all the papers in the recycling and she didn't object.

But then a particularly salacious story appeared in a down-market magazine, reporting that Skye's accuser had dropped all charges but that Skye had vanished from sight and hadn't been seen in public for days. But it wasn't the implication that she must be guilty of the offence if she'd run away that upset Skye.

It was the headline.

'Look!' she demanded, returning from a trip to the local shops and throwing the magazine on the table in front of me.

I read the headline.

'Oh, my God!' I stared at the page. 'Oh, Skye, that's awful.'

She nodded, white with anger. 'Rearrange these words into a well-known nickname for me. *Butt, Girl, Up The*. That's what they were calling me at the time, remember? And now it's come back to haunt me thanks to this *tripe* that passes for a magazine. The worst thing is that none of it's ever been true. *He* made it all up to destroy my career.'

'You should sue the publication,' I said, feeling incensed on her behalf.

She nodded. 'I need to phone my agent. Selena will know what to do.' She growled in frustration. 'This damn slur against my name is in quotes, though, taken directly from that . . . that *thing's* biography. I won't call him a man because he's actually lower in the food chain than a rat! Actually, I take it back. That's an insult to rats.'

She sank into a chair in despair. 'Oh, Rori. I'm going to be known by that horrendous nickname forever more now, aren't I?'

Later, in bed that night, I lay awake thinking about Skye and her roller-coaster life. It was amazing she was still functioning after everything that had happened to her.

And now this ...

At least the police weren't after her. It had been a huge relief to find that she wasn't going to be prosecuted for assault. And after a day spent agonising over the digging-up of her infamous nickname, by that down-market scandal sheet – and Skye spending hours on the phone talking to her agent, Selena – I'd finally got her to see the funny side of it. Selena had eventually phoned with the good news that the magazine had agreed to print a retraction concerning the libellous headline.

I'd promptly opened a bottle of wine to celebrate.

'You never know, it might even be *good* for your career,' I'd murmured as I topped up Skye's glass. 'All publicity is good publicity and all that.'

'True.' She'd smiled for the first time that day. 'I've got an important audition in a few weeks' time. At least they'll all know who I am now.'

I'd replied to Kurt's two messages of apology with not much more than a brief, 'It's fine.' But I knew he'd realise from the tone I used that I hadn't entirely forgiven him for giving away my whereabouts. Which I hadn't. Not quite.

Then a few days after the scurrilous story appeared in the magazine, printing Skye's old nickname, I woke to the sound of the flat's buzzer, followed fairly soon afterwards by someone screeching fit to rival a flock of seagulls flying through my bedroom.

Skye?

I couldn't make out what she was yelling but she was clearly very worked up about something. Had another character-slurring story been written about her?

I leaped out of bed and grabbed a cardigan. Struggling into it, I rushed into the hallway, from where a fierce altercation

appeared to be in full swing.

‘I know your sort of old!’ Skye was shouting. ‘You’ve got a camera in that bag, haven’t you?’ She was red in the face with the effort of pushing her full weight against the door, trying to shut someone out. ‘I’m calling the police if you don’t go away *now!*’ she panted, losing her battle because the person on the other side of the door was clearly much stronger.

‘I come in peace,’ called a man’s deep voice. ‘I only want to do a bit of grouting.’

Saul!

‘Grousing? What’s that, then?’ demanded Skye, as I tried to pull her away from the door. ‘A new form of celebrity-bashing for the pleasure of the rag-reading public?’

‘Erm, no? Can you calm down, please, and get Rori for me?’

She glared at me. ‘I thought it was someone with a parcel. I’m expecting a delivery this morning. I *demand* to know what’s in his bag!’

I finally managed to prise her away.

And then there was Saul, framed in the doorway, looking a mite perplexed but other than that, his usual cool self in old paint-splattered blue jeans and a checked shirt.

He dropped his bag on the ground and calmly pulled out a tub marked Fix & Grout and some kind of spreader tool, which he held up for Skye’s benefit. ‘Grouting,’ he said. Then he picked up the bag, inviting her to inspect inside. ‘No camera. And I wouldn’t be taking any photographs, anyway, even if I had one.’ He shrugged. ‘Shots of drill bits and adjustable spanners tend not to make the front page.’

‘Oh.’ Skye stared at him, looking a mite perplexed herself. ‘You really are a workman, then?’

Saul’s eyes twinkled at her. ‘I really am.’

‘He really is, you dafty.’ I gave Skye a little push and smiled at him. ‘Come on in, Saul. Sorry about my hysterical sister. She’s been having a hard time lately.’

Saul acknowledged her pain with a little ‘sorry’ smile and a raise of his eyebrows. Then he picked up his bag and walked into the flat.

‘Can I get you a green tea while you work?’

‘No, thanks. Just had one.’ He flicked an amused look at Skye. ‘Also, I’d be worried I might end up wearing it.’

He disappeared into the kitchen.

I grinned at Skye, who – after her flight-or-fight trauma – was sagging back against the wall, seemingly speechless for once in her life. ‘Honestly, not everyone is out to get you, you know.’

She pursed her lips. ‘That *man* was making fun of me. And I’ve never in my life heard of a *labourer* drinking *green tea*. Who the *hell* does he think he is?’

Chin in the air, she paused by the mirror to examine her reflection, then she stalked into the spare room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I'd been keeping Blossom up to date with the goings-on in the flat, with Skye here, and feeling terrible that my older sister was refusing point blank to see anyone else but me.

I knew it made Blossom sad that she and Skye didn't have the closeness that I had with her – but as I kept on reminding her, Skye had been like a second mum to me when I was younger, so the continued closeness was only natural. We didn't always like each other, Skye and I, but I hoped we'd never lose the bond that had developed between us – until I was seven and everything changed . . .

Finally, though, after some persuasion, I got Skye to agree to inviting Blossom over for dinner.

I wanted Ada there as well but Skye put her foot down very firmly on that score and I knew she wouldn't budge. Skye and Ada had always clashed. I'd hoped the passage of time would bring them closer. But as the years went by, Skye's apparent bitterness and Ada's subsequent frostiness only seemed to be getting worse, not better.

But at least Blossom was allowed to come over – and when she arrived, my younger sister was full of delight at seeing Skye again, although I could tell she was also a little anxious at how the evening would pan out.

Skye currently had a bee in her bonnet about Blossom being out of work. I'd explained that she'd just finished working on a big project down in Devon and was now back in Surrey and in the process of setting up her own gardening company. But of course that hadn't impressed my elder sister at all. She was convinced it was all pie in the sky.

'Where is she getting the funding from to set up a business?' she'd demanded. 'It costs money to do that, you know.'

'She's applied for a grant and Ada's helping her.'

'Ah! Of course she is. So Ada's bankrolling her, which means Blossom will never get a chance to learn how to stand

on her own two feet.’

I’d sighed. In a way, Skye was right. But couldn’t she give Blossom the benefit of the doubt? This gardening business idea was a risk but it could turn out to be really successful. It drove me mad that Skye could never just relax and *support* her little sister’s endeavours. Instead of always having to express her doubts.

I’d always suspected that jealousy lay at the root of Skye’s behaviour towards Blossom. She was always nit-picking and testing her youngest sister – in a way she never did with me – and finding her wanting in terms of drive and motivation and common sense. Long ago, I’d accepted that Ada had a special fondness for Blossom, her youngest, but it seemed that Skye never had – and of course it didn’t help that Ada and Skye were actually quite alike in many ways. They were both highly intelligent, strong and determined, refusing to let anyone sway them from a path they believed was right for them.

The meal started off quite well.

Blossom was really animated, telling us all about her plans for the gardening business, and I found myself getting excited for her. Even Skye seemed to be nodding her approval, although she seemed to think the fact Blossom hadn’t come up with a name yet for the business was a worry.

‘You need a *brand*,’ she said. ‘And the name you decide on will be crucial to the success of that brand. Surely you’ve had some thoughts by now?’

Blossom, looking a little red and flustered, threw out a few suggestions, but each one was instantly rejected by her sister.

‘Actually, I quite like *Roots* as a name,’ I said, glaring at Skye.

‘Too common,’ was the verdict with a brisk shake of the head. ‘There must be loads of gardening companies with that name. No, you need something original.’

‘Such as?’ queried Blossom cheerfully. I could tell she was getting upset by Skye’s intensive questioning, although she was trying hard not to show it.

Skye shrugged, exasperated. ‘Well, *I* don’t know. It’s not *my* business. You need to get your thinking cap on, Blossom, and come up with an original idea. All by yourself.’

Her unspoken accusation hung in the air: *Instead of expecting others, especially Ada, to do the work for you.*

My heart sank, looking at Blossom’s crestfallen expression. Her chin wobbled a little as she turned away and stacked some empty plates together. I could see her thinking she would never be good enough in her sister’s eyes, and I wanted to shout at Skye to please just shut up and be nice.

But instead, I just said, ‘I expect you’ll come up with a brilliant name when you put your mind to it, love. Now, anyone for pudding? I’ve made a chocolate cheesecake. Skye, can you come and help me serve it up?’

Skye had been drinking the wine at a steady rate – consuming at least twice as much as Blossom and me – and she stumbled a little as she got up from the table to follow me. I sighed, a feeling of dread inside. It wasn’t a good sign. Skye could be painfully direct when she was sober, but with a tongue loosened by alcohol, who knew what trouble we were in for? I didn’t want Blossom upset. I hated seeing her sadness when she knew she’d ‘failed again’ in Skye’s eyes . . .

I decided I’d call a taxi for Blossom as soon as we’d finished our cheesecake.

‘Stop picking on her, will you?’ I hissed at Skye in the kitchen. ‘It’s not up to you what Blossom does with her life. And she’s happy!’ *Probably a lot happier than you*, was what I was thinking, although I didn’t say it.

‘But it’s such a waste. Don’t you think? I just want the best for her.’

I shot her a sceptical glance.

‘It’s true. I want Blossom to achieve her potential instead of just wasting her bloody life living in a fantasy land. As long as Ada’s bailing her out, that’s just what she’ll carry on doing!’

‘Keep your voice down.’

She took another glug of her wine and said in a stage whisper, ‘She’s got a brain. She could have been a doctor or a solicitor. I mean, she’s definitely bright enough. Or she could have worked in publishing . . . she reads enough books.’ She was slurring now. ‘But hey, if she wants to continue grubbing around in the muck, sleeping in her childhood bedroom forever and wasting her love on a succession of useless men, who am *I* to point out that she could be doing so much better for herself?’

‘But she doesn’t “grub around in the muck”.’

‘What’s gardening then, if it isn’t that?’

‘True. But Skye, she’s a self-taught horticulturalist. She knows the names of practically all the plants on the planet, of which I’m totally in awe because I couldn’t recognise a . . . sycamore tree . . . even if it came over, introduced itself and asked me if I’d read Monty Don’s latest book! Plus, she’s started blogging about gardening, answering reader’s questions. It’s brilliant. You should have a look at it.’

‘What’s that?’ Blossom came in at that moment, and I turned to her with a smile.

‘I’m just telling Skye about your blog. And you’re thinking about writing a book as well, aren’t you?’

‘Well, I’m researching it at the moment . . .’

‘A book?’ Skye studied her. ‘Can I read it?’

‘Well, no. I haven’t actually started writing it yet. But I’d really like you to look at it when it’s done. I’d love your opinion.’ She swung around to smile at me. ‘Both of you.’

Skye sighed. ‘Problem is, the market’s already awash with gardening books. I doubt you’ll ever find a publisher willing to take a chance on a complete unknown. Not when there are celebrities out there writing books about growing their own. You’ll have to publish it yourself.’

‘That’s exactly what I’m going to do,’ said Blossom, calmly.

‘Hmm, well. Good luck with that. If you do it yourself, you won’t have a publisher to do all your marketing for you.’

‘Publishers expect the writers to do their *own* marketing these days,’ she said decisively, which was as close as Blossom ever got to snapping at someone. ‘I’ll take these to the table, Rori.’ She picked up two plates of dessert and hurried out with them.

I gave Skye a look. ‘A little encouragement would be nice. You didn’t have to immediately shoot her book idea down in flames like that.’ But she just shrugged and disappeared with the other plate.

Over cheesecake and coffee, I persuaded Blossom to stay over and get the train home in the morning, as it was getting late.

‘Ignore your big sister,’ I told her with a smile as we cleared up in the kitchen together later. ‘She’s in a bad place, what with all these stories from the past being raked over again.’

I’d told Skye she should go to bed because she was drunk, after she’d almost fallen asleep in her cheesecake. She’d raised her wine glass with a smile and taken it with her.

Tears sprang to Blossom’s eyes. ‘Skye hates me. She always has.’

I laughed. ‘Of course she doesn’t hate you! She *loves* you. She just wants what’s best for you. What *she* thinks is best for you.’

‘Maybe.’ She shrugged, clearly unconvinced.

Later, I made sure Blossom was comfortable on the sofa with extra pillows and said goodnight, retiring gratefully to my room. I felt shattered after hours of playing my usual role of mediator with my sisters.

But a while later, just as I was turning off my light, I heard raised voices and my heart sank. Getting wearily out of bed, I went to investigate. They were in the kitchen, arguing, but when I went in, Blossom rushed past me in tears. ‘Why is she always so horrible to me?’ she whispered, running out.

‘What have you been saying to her now?’ I demanded, furious with Skye. ‘Admit it. You’re jealous of her – and you always have been – just because she’s always been Ada’s favourite.’

Skye gave a derisive snort. ‘Jealous! Do you really think I’d *want* to be Ada’s favourite? The favourite of a woman who’s so bloody manipulative and self-obsessed that she can calmly destroy lives without blinking an eye.’

‘What?’ I stared at her. She was drunk, it was true, but there was a fevered desperation in her eyes that brought me up short. ‘Do you mean because she sent you to boarding school? I thought you quite liked it there . . . that you were pleased to be away from Ada? I’d hardly call that *destroying your life!*’

‘Oh, you have no idea, Rori. No idea at all.’

‘What do you mean?’

Skye rubbed her face. Then she sighed. ‘Nothing. Nothing at all. I’m going back to bed. I’ll apologise to Blossom in the morning.’

I stared after her, reflecting wearily that alcohol was to blame for many things – including ridiculous rows.

And not to forget butt-dialling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I woke up next day feeling exhausted after my sisters' emotional wrangle the night before. I was so glad I got on with both of them but it made me sad having to be piggy-in-the-middle all the time, always trying to calm the waters between them.

Keeping the place clean and tidy with Skye around was also starting to get me down.

I'd almost given up because it was clear that Skye's habits were very different to mine. She had cleaners in weekly at her London flat so she never had to bother with housework herself, and that was all too obvious.

She littered surfaces with her stuff, left damp towels after showering on her bedroom floor, and casually dropped her bag and coat anywhere she felt like when she came in from a trip to the shops. I was constantly falling over her shoes in the living room – she just kicked them off and left them lying there – and the flat now looked as if we'd been burgled. By intruders who ate slice after slice of toast (but then failed to restock the breadbin) and left a trail of crumbs and sticky honey or strawberry jam splodges everywhere they went.

When I asked her to start clearing away after herself, she smiled and waved away my concerns as if I was being a little hysterical, and said, 'The place looks fine, Rori. But honestly, I don't know why you don't have a cleaner. They're an absolutely fabulous invention!'

I must have looked as exhausted as I felt because after waving Blossom off on the train back to Guildford, the first thing Jaz said when she met me in the high street (I was heading to the village store for the most carb-filled doughnuts I could get my hands on) was, 'Rori? What on earth's happened?'

I gave a weary laugh. 'In a word. My sister, Skye.'

'Oh.' She grimaced. 'I knew she was staying at yours, but that's been a while now, hasn't it?'

Grinning, I told her the exact number of days.

‘Ooh, it’s like that, is it? And there’s no sign of her going back to London?’

‘None whatsoever. She’s out tonight, meeting up with an old friend from school days, plus she’s joined the local doctor’s surgery.’

‘Ah! She might be sticking around, then.’

‘Well, it was just because her back was playing up a bit the other day. But even so . . .’

Jaz nodded slowly, thinking. ‘Actually, this *might* be your lucky day!’

‘I wish.’

‘What are you doing next Tuesday?’

I grinned ruefully. ‘Apart from clearing up after my sister, you mean?’

‘You need a break. How about a day at a spa, totally free of charge?’

‘What?’ I laughed at the unexpectedness of it. ‘That sounds like bliss to me.’

‘Well . . . Maddy’s managed to wangle a day pass for all her bridesmaids to this really swanky hotel she’s looking at booking for their wedding reception.’

‘Oh, I heard her talking about that in the café.’

Jaz nodded. ‘Primrose can’t go. Baby-sitting issues. So . . . I’m sure Maddy would be fine passing you off as “Primrose” for the day.’

‘Really?’ I stared at her. She was right. I could really do with a break away from everything. For weeks, I’d been plagued by the idea of someone watching me, but not knowing who. It was a horrible, creepy feeling that never really left me, especially at night. Then I’d met Kurt and things seemed to be looking up – until it all went flat. And now Skye landing on my doorstep out of the blue and causing her own particular brand of chaos.

I was bone-weary. My head was all over the place.

A day at a spa in great company was just what I needed.

Later, at the art class, I was working on my new hellebores watercolour, when Cal pulled a chair across and spent a good while talking about my work and saying how he thought I showed incredible promise.

‘From what I’ve seen, you’ve definitely got the talent to make a career of your art. Whether it’s selling your paintings in some form or teaching classes yourself.’ He grinned. ‘I’m doing myself out of a job here.’

I laughed, blushing at his fulsome and unexpected praise. ‘Thank you, but I haven’t painted for a long time so I feel like I’m quite rusty.’

‘Well, if that’s the case, Rori, I can’t wait to see the results when you really hit your stride. They could be quite spectacular.’ His eyes twinkled at me as he walked away, and Janey made a funny face at me behind his back.

‘Teacher’s pet!’ she laughed, when he was well out of earshot. ‘Rori Sunshine, I think you’ve got an admirer there.’

‘Well, he likes my paintings, anyway.’

She gave me a knowing look. ‘If you ask me, I think he likes rather more than your watercolours.’

I shrugged, grinning self-consciously, not really knowing what to say. I liked Cal and I was flattered he’d made the time to talk to me about my art, but surely that was all he was interested in? Even if Janey was right that he liked me (and I didn’t think she was), I still seemed to be rather inconveniently stuck on Kurt . . .

‘Mind you.’ Janey grinned. ‘The poor man probably doesn’t stand a chance with Kurt in the picture. How are things going with you two, anyway? I bet the ghost train was cosy.’

I laughed and blushed, giving myself away instantly.

‘Aha!’ She pointed a triumphant finger at me. ‘I knew it!’

Then, of course, I had to tell her that after a promising start, it had all gone a bit wrong with Kurt after he told Nash where I was living.

She frowned. ‘You mean you didn’t give Kurt a chance to explain?’

I shook my head. ‘I was just so freaked out, seeing Nash driving away from the flat, and then when Kurt admitted it was his fault he was there, I just fled.’

‘You should definitely see him and talk things out.’

‘I know. It’s just with everything else that’s been happening . . . but yes, I will. I’ll text him and arrange to meet him. I just hope he’s forgiven me for being so out of touch lately.’

‘He will if he’s keen. And you can explain that your sister suddenly landed on you so she’s been taking up all your time?’

I nodded, knowing she was right. And as it turned out, I didn’t have to text Kurt at all – because when we came out of the art class, there he was, like magic, coming out of the village store. It seemed like Fate. And not wanting to waste any more time, I explained to Janey, waved at Lance who’d been outside waiting for her, and I walked straight over to Kurt with a smile.

He seemed a little nervous, asking how I was.

‘I’m fine.’ I hesitated. Then I said in a rush, ‘I was just really shocked to find out you’d told Nash where I was living now. I didn’t even know you knew him.’

He shrugged. ‘But I *didn’t* know him. Not until I won that contract to install kitchens in some of his new-build houses, and we had a meeting to discuss the details. You’d never told me the name of your ex, so I had no way of knowing who he was in relation to you.’

‘Okay,’ I said slowly. ‘But how on earth did my name come up in a *business* meeting?’

‘It didn’t. Not during the meeting. But afterwards, we chatted in the car park and I mentioned I lived in Sunnybrook,

and his face sort of lit up and he said he had a good friend he'd lost touch with who was apparently living there now. He really wanted to get back in touch with her, and did I happen to know someone called Aurora? I said I didn't, because of course I only knew you as "Rori" and he looked sad and said he missed her friendship. So at that point, I clicked that it was you, and without thinking, I said, "Oh, the girl who's living above the Little Duck Pond Café now?" Of course, I could kick myself now.'

He shrugged, looking so fed up I almost wanted to give him a hug.

Almost.

I sighed wearily. 'You've no idea what grief you've brought to my door. But I understand now. It wasn't your fault. And I'm sorry I ran off that night without giving you a chance to explain.'

He smiled sheepishly. 'So all is forgiven?'

'It was all a stupid misunderstanding.' I shrugged. 'Of course you're forgiven.'

'He hasn't been back, has he? Nash, I mean.'

'No, no.'

'Are you worried?'

'Oh, no.' I smiled. 'Hopefully, he'll be moving on with his life now – just like I'm trying to do.'

Kurt nodded slowly. 'Speaking of which, any chance you'd let me treat you to dinner some time?'

I smiled broadly, my heart beating a little faster. 'I should think there's *every* chance.'

'Okay. Good.' He flashed me that mischievous smile that made my insides turn lively cartwheels. Then our lips met and I melted. It was brief – we were standing in the middle of the high street, after all – but we held the kiss long enough for us both to know we were back on track.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Janey and Lance emerging with a brown paper bag each from the village store. They were presumably heading back to Lance's car but when Janey saw me in a clinch with Kurt, she smiled and nudged Lance to look. I made a funny face back at her. And then Kurt said he had to dash because he'd arranged to meet Nash over at the housing development to get the ball rolling.

'I won't mention you,' he said, looking sheepish.

'I think the horse has bolted on that score.'

He groaned. 'Don't rub it in.'

'I'm joking.'

'I'll call you to arrange dinner.'

'Okay. Great. Looking forward to it.'

'Me, too.'

He waved and then he was gone.

Feeling light as a feather now I'd sorted things out with Kurt, I floated back along the high street, passing Janey and Lance sitting in their car eating the warm sausage rolls they'd just bought.

Janey waved and opened the window. 'Ooh, Rori, he looks nice. I'm assuming that's Kurt?'

I felt myself blushing. 'It is. We've sorted things out, thank goodness. Nash is a business contact of his and Kurt had no idea he was my ex.'

'That's great.' Smiling, she took Lance's empty bag, crumpled it with her own, and got out of the car. 'Watch this!' she said, aiming at the nearby bin.

She missed first time. Lance got out of the car, too, and we watched, grinning, as she ran to pick the ball of rubbish up and have another go.

'Be careful, Rori,' Lance murmured, and I turned to him in surprise.

He shrugged. 'I just mean you haven't known this Kurt for very long. I'm sure he's a great guy but after what happened with Nash, just be a bit cautious, that's all?'

I nodded. 'I will, Lance. And you're right. I have this awful tendency to jump into a romance head-first which isn't always the wisest thing to do.'

He smiled. 'We're here for you, whatever happens.'

'Thank you. I really appreciate that.'

'You've been looking tired lately.'

'Have I?' I laughed. 'Well, I blame my sister. Skye's been driving me nuts.'

'How so?'

'Well, apart from turning my flat into a total pigsty, she's obsessed with the idea that this freelance gossip column photographer, Greasy Ger, is hot on her tail, and her hiding place here won't be a secret from the world for much longer.' I smiled wearily. 'I love her but it's seriously doing my head in.'

Lance chuckled. 'Greasy Ger?'

'Real name Gerry Jackson, I think. Apparently, she broke his camera once and he's made it his life's work ever since to snap her in compromising positions for the papers.'

We turned at a victory shout from Janey. 'You missed that, you two. I got it in third time.'

Grinning, Lance applauded loudly, and we said our goodbyes.

I walked back to the flat feeling on top of the world. I had friends here who cared about me and I had dinner with Kurt to look forward to. I'd said it before – but maybe my life really *was* turning a corner this time . . .

Back at the flat, I tidied the place up, dumping all Skye's scattered things on her bed. I was determined to made the most of having the place to myself with my sister out for the evening.

The peace was delicious – and so was the lasagne ready meal I ate in front of the TV, while catching up with the soaps. Later, after a lovely long soak in the bath with my book, I headed for bed. Skye wasn't back yet. She must be having a good time . . .

In bed, I tried to read another chapter, but my eyes kept closing so I gave up and put out the light. And then, of course, just as I'd found the cosiest position and was drifting off to sleep, the door buzzer sounded, jerking me fully awake.

Grinning wearily, I hauled myself out of bed, feeling exasperated that Skye had forgotten her key. I quickly buzzed her up and, hearing her footsteps quickly mounting the stairs, I ran in search of my dressing gown. It was chilly in the flat with the heating off and no doubt Skye would want to talk about her evening. My dressing gown wasn't in the bedroom, then I remembered hanging it on the back of the bathroom door.

Pulling it on, I dashed to let her in. Skye hated to be kept waiting.

I opened the door with a grin, expecting to find her waiting and looking pointedly at her watch.

But there was no one there.

What?

I'd definitely heard the buzzer (I hadn't dreamed it, had I?) and I was sure I'd heard her footsteps on the stairs.

'Skye?' I called into the semi-darkness. But there was no reply.

A cold feeling enveloped me, which had nothing to do with the chilly night temperature. Where had she gone? Had I *imagined* the sound of the buzzer . . .

I was about to retreat inside, when my eye caught a flash of colour and I looked down.

There on the doormat lay a single purple hellebore.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It had to be Nash. It *had* to be.

He knew hellebores were my favourite flower. He knew where I lived. Was this his sinister way of creeping into my head, making sure I had no peace and preventing me from moving on without him? Maybe my walking out on him had made him so angry – dented his pride as well, of course – that he still wanted to have some kind of perverse hold over me . . .

Leaving the flower on the mat – I couldn't even bear to touch it – I slammed the door shut and double locked it. Then I leaned against the wall feeling my legs trembling, tears of fear and frustration pricking at my eyes.

Maybe it wasn't Nash. I'd grown used to him reacting with explosive anger to things he couldn't control. But leaving creepy signs like a flower on the doormat? I just couldn't see it somehow.

But if not Nash, who else could it be?

I gave a shaky sigh and went into the kitchen to put the kettle on, not knowing what else to do. Because one thing was certain: I knew I wouldn't sleep.

Whoever was doing this to get into my head ... whatever their motive ... it was one hundred per cent working ...

I was waiting in the kitchen, in the silence, with my mug of tea, when a text pinged through.

It was from Skye.

She'd decided to stay over at her friend's house. She'd catch up with me in the morning.

Shivering, I threw the phone back onto the table and pulled my dressing gown more tightly around me. I felt sick. So that was it, then – I'd have to spend the night on my own in the flat. I'd got used to having Skye around. I'd hardly noticed any weird night-time noises since she'd started sleeping in the

spare room. But tonight, I was back to jumping out of my skin at the flat's every little creak or sigh.

If I'd had another bottle of Irish Cream, I'd probably have drunk the entire bottle, I reflected, as I made doubly sure the door was locked and crept back to bed, hoping dreams would carry me away quickly from my nightmare imaginings. I pulled the duvet over my head, the way I used to when I was little and I'd been reading a scary story just before bed. It made me feel safer somehow, wrapped in a little cocoon.

For all I knew, there could be someone out there in the back garden, staring up at my window like before.

But I wasn't about to look ...

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Next morning, in the cold light of day, the events of the night before seemed like an unpleasant dream. Had it really happened? Or had my mind been playing tricks on me again?

Then I walked into the kitchen and the first thing I saw was the single hellebore in a jug on the table, and it all came flooding back . . . the fear and the disbelief that someone would be deliberately trying to get into my head and freak me out. Skye must have come in this morning without me hearing her. She'd have found the flower on the mat and decided it needed water.

Sure enough, next moment I heard the sound of the shower, and my shoulders relaxed a little. At least I had company again. Skye was home . . .

'Someone's got an admirer,' she commented with a grin, when she came into the kitchen a little later wrapped in her robe. 'A single flower. Very romantic. Who do you think left it?'

I shrugged and tried to laugh it off. 'Who says it was meant for me? Maybe the postman has a crush on you!'

She considered this and shrugged, clearly thinking I might have hit on something. And I smiled to myself, wishing I possessed even a tenth of my sister's self-confidence. Her reaction played in my favour, though: the mystery of who left the hellebore was thankfully dropped.

Later, Skye – who had been going increasingly stir-crazy, cooped up indoors – decided the recent interest in her had probably died down enough for her to catch a train and go shopping in Guildford. She'd bought some clothes online, having dismissed most of the ones I'd offered as completely unsuitable, but she was clearly feeling the need to stock up.

She headed for the bathroom to get ready, and I settled down at the kitchen table to catch up with some work for Milo.

The hellebore in its jug was distracting me and eventually, I moved it to the windowsill, out of sight – and that’s when I noticed a figure in dark clothes and a baseball cap standing smoking, with his back to me, at the side of the green. It was definitely a man. He had a backpack at his feet and as I watched, he sat down beside it on the grass. Was he waiting for someone?

At that moment, he turned his head and looked directly up at the window. He saw me watching him and made to get up, but I ducked quickly out of sight, although it was clear he’d seen me.

I sat at the table, trying to calm down, telling myself he was probably just a stranger out for a walk with his backpack, stopping on the green for a smoke. What could be more natural? I was allowing my imagination to run riot again.

I got up and went to the window. But he was gone. And then Skye came through, wearing a tracksuit, my parka and a pair of large dark glasses.

‘Okay, I’m off. See you later.’

‘How long will you be?’ I called, in a sudden panic.

‘Meeting my friend for a coffee but I’ll be back by six,’ she called. ‘How about I bring something delicious for dinner?’

‘Great!’

After she’d gone, I got back to work, then later, towards café closing time, I met Milo for a coffee to talk about the business.

We were poring over the prices of toilets and showers – the block would be ready to be fitted out the following week – when the café door burst open and Skye appeared.

‘Rori! Thank God you’re here. I’ve been buzzing and buzzing. Let me into the flat, will you?’

‘Are you okay?’ I gazed at her flushed face in alarm. ‘Did you forget your key?’

‘Never mind that! Hurry up and let me in.’ She glanced over her shoulder, out of the window. ‘Bloody Gerry – the creep I

told you about – he’s somehow managed to track me down. I had a feeling someone was following me on the way to the station this morning. You get a sixth sense about it after a while. And then I was coming out of a shop in Guildford with Marie, when suddenly there he was, larger than life and twice as ugly. Biding his time, waiting for me to emerge. And the bastard got *the* snap of his life!’

I stood up. ‘Calm down, Skye. I can’t imagine a picture of you coming out of a shop with a friend is going to have the world’s tongues wagging.’

‘But you don’t understand, Rori,’ she wailed. ‘It was the *particular shop* and the things we’d just bought!’

‘Go on.’ I studied her nervously. It must be something bad to make Skye lose her cool like this. She was actually trembling.

‘Marie’s sister’s getting married and she’s organising her hen party. So we went and looked at all sorts of sexy toys and underwear . . . that kind of thing.’

‘Right.’ I knew the shop she was talking about. ‘And?’

‘Well, when we came out, we were laughing about which . . . *object* . . . would be the most, erm, *satisfying* . . . sizing them up, you know? And then out pops the slimeball of the century, that bloody Gerry Jackson, and takes *the shot*.’

‘Ah.’ I glanced over at Milo, who was hanging on Skye’s every word.

‘The upshot being, tomorrow I’ll be pictured in the paper getting all excited over an unfeasibly large and very pink dildo.’

‘If he’s a freelance photographer, he might not be able to sell it,’ pointed out Milo, who I could tell was trying hard not to smile.

‘That’s true, Milo. Very true.’ I pounced on this sliver of possible comfort. ‘Anyway, let’s get you inside. Do you really think he knows where you’re living?’

Even as I was asking her the question, I was remembering the figure with the backpack and the baseball cap, smoking on the village green. Was that Gerry Jackson staking out the flat? Had he then followed Skye on the train into Guildford?

‘He knows, the scumbag,’ she replied dully. ‘I can’t believe he tracked me down so fast. It’s a record, even for *him!*’

I said a quick goodbye to Milo and hustled Skye up the stairs to the flat, where she flaked out on the sofa and declared she was giving up acting for good this time . . . either that or she was going to have major surgery so people like Greasy Ger wouldn’t be able to recognise her . . .

I told her that might be a little extreme and suggested that maybe she should think about living somewhere else in the light of what had happened that day?

She nodded. ‘I thought about that. Marie offered to let me stay at hers but she’s just got a tiny one-bed flat and her boyfriend’s always there. It would be awkward.’

‘So . . . um . . . why not go and stay with Ada and Blossom for a while?’ I muttered, stating the obvious but already bracing myself for the storm that would surely follow this suggestion.

But to my surprise, she gave a resigned sigh. ‘I guess I’ll have to. If I want to shake him off. Otherwise, I’ll be a prisoner here.’

Later, Skye borrowed a case and packed her things, and I drove her over to Ada’s house.

I called in and Blossom made some coffee and chatted away about her gardening blog, while Skye leaned out of the window and smoked a cigarette.

‘You’d better not let Ada catch you doing that,’ I warned her.

She flicked her eyes to the ceiling but said nothing, and Blossom and I exchanged a grin.

‘Good luck,’ I said to Skye as I was leaving. ‘And try to behave yourself.’

‘Don’t worry. I will. And if you see Gerry Jackson, tell him I’m living in Aberdeen now. That should throw him off the scent for a while.’

I chuckled. ‘Okay. I will.’

I drove back to the flat. It seemed strange without Skye’s belongings cluttering every surface, and I found myself half-wishing she was back.

At least I had the day at Lutterworth Grange with the girls to look forward to . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The spa day arrived, and by the time Jaz drew up to collect me, I was ready to go, bag packed and waiting outside.

It was such a relief to be getting away for the day. It would be a laugh, all girls together, and hopefully the spa treatment Maddy had lined up for us all would help to loosen the knots in my neck and shoulders from being permanently on edge lately.

Maddy was taking Ellie, Fen and Katja in her car, and we were all meeting in reception at Lutterworth Grange, which – according to the photos I'd pored over on-line the day before – was a beautifully restored Georgian country house, set in acres of lush, manicured grounds. Maddy's sisters couldn't join us because of work. They both had modelling assignments in London that day.

I would miss the watercolour class later today, but I'd called Janey last night and explained about Lutterworth Grange, and I'd emailed Cal to let him know I'd have to miss the session.

On the twenty-minute drive to the hotel, I chatted to Jaz about Milo's new Roastery café in Manchester. She'd gone with him to the official opening ceremony with her daughter, Emma, and Milo's daughter, Mabel, in tow, and apparently the two girls had been the stars of the show and in all the photographs.

As we drew into the car park of Lutterworth Grange, Jaz passed me her phone which showed a picture of the four of them outside the new café. Milo, Jaz and Mabel had been snapped chuckling at Emma who was trying her hardest to grab one of the pink and white balloons that were festooning the café's entrance. A happy little family.

Jaz had been through a really bad time over the past few years, separating from Harry, although thankfully, they were managing to remain friends for Emma's sake. But I'd seen the transformation in Jaz since she and Milo got together, and I was so happy for them.

I blinked rapidly, feeling suddenly emotional. ‘What a gorgeous photo.’

‘It was a lovely day,’ said Jaz dreamily. ‘One of those days you think you’ll probably always remember, you know? Mabel had the time of her life eating cake and being fussed over by everyone there, and even Emma was well-behaved – not a single tired tantrum in sight. And I was so proud of Milo when he made his speech.’ She grinned. ‘Mind you, the stars don’t align like that very often, do they? Yesterday, we went to see a film and in one of the tear-jerking emotional bits, Emma threw up all over Mabel. So *that* was fun.’

‘Ooh, I guess you didn’t find out what happened at the end of the film, then?’

She laughed. ‘No, we were out of there before you could say *someone ate too much junk food!*’

I smiled. It all sounded lovely to me. Even the sick bit. Would I ever find this kind of happiness? Or was I destined to always choose the wrong guys?

Kurt was lovely, but was I mad to trust him with my heart?

We were booked for a light lunch in the restaurant at one. After a tour of the hotel and spa, the weddings co-ordinator delivered us to a rather elegant changing room so that we could make use of the spa facilities.

‘Wow, this is gorgeous,’ murmured Fen. ‘Complimentary robes and slippers, and even *body moisturiser* . . . is this floor actually heated or am I imagining it?’

Everyone chuckled.

‘I think it’s all fairly standard these days in posh hotels, Fen,’ said Maddy. ‘Well, maybe not the heated floor.’

Fen grinned. ‘Just shows how often *I* get to stay in posh hotels these days. Not that I’m complaining. It’s just that your idea of luxury gets a downgrade when you have a couple of noisy, energetic twins to look after. Perfect bliss for me these days is *five hours of uninterrupted sleep.*’ She smiled

dreamily. ‘Last night, Rob insisted I sleep in the spare room with ear plugs in, while he did all the night feeds. Oh, it was *amazing!*’

‘I remember it well,’ grinned Jaz. ‘Luckily, Emma’s out like a light most nights now and she sometimes doesn’t wake up till six so I get a bit of a lie-in.’

‘Six o’clock in the morning is a *lie-in* to you?’ Maddy stared at her, aghast. ‘Crikey, Jack’s already talking about starting a family. I think I need to have a word.’

Laughing, we all got changed into our swimwear and following a bit of hilarious confusion finding the right door, we finally emerged pool-side, bagged a row of loungers with our towels and robes, and decided to swim first.

I enjoyed the water and it was a long time since I’d been in a pool like this. Until recently, I would have been worried about my hair but Kurt’s lovely comments about me being beautiful with and without the wig had done wonders for my confidence. I felt I had a choice now. I could choose to wear the wig. Or not. And today, with swimming and sauna on the cards, it had made sense to leave the hairpiece at home.

Jaz could clearly swim like a fish. She was powering up and down, doing the front crawl and making it look so easy. I managed six lengths of breaststroke without stopping, then I gravitated to the side of the pool to join Fen and Katja, who were bobbing up and down, chatting.

I’d noticed a group of guys larking around in the sauna. They were being quite loud and going in and out, and Fen remarked that they seemed to have commandeered it for themselves. It was true that they’d been in there the whole time we’d been swimming – over half an hour – and it didn’t look as if they were planning on letting anyone else have a go. A few older women, who looked like regular swimmers here, had wandered past the sauna, clearly wanting to go in, but seeing it was already occupied, they’d walked on past.

‘Anyone fancy the sauna?’ asked Maddy, arriving back wrapped in a towel and glowing from a session in the steam room.

‘I’m not going in while *they’re* in there,’ pointed out Fen.

‘Oh, you mean those very mature – *ahem* – guys, who look thirty but act like adolescents, leering at everything in a bikini?’

‘Yeah, best to wait a bit,’ said Jaz, who’d just finished her lengthy swim and was now bouncing up and down in the water with the rest of us.

‘But how long will *that* be?’

At a loud whoop from the sauna, followed by raucous laughter, Maddy swung round and glared in their direction. ‘Well, I require a sauna *right now*, and I’m not going to let that bunch of selfish *kids* spoil my day. Come on. Who’s with me?’

Grinning, Jaz started wading to the steps. ‘I’m in.’

‘Me, too,’ said Katja, and in the end it was like a scene from *Jaws* as we all swiftly evacuated the water . . .

‘Room for a few more, lads?’ enquired Maddy opening the door and peering inside, and I almost gagged as the waft of last night’s booze hit my nostrils.

The rowdy chat stopped and all eyes stared in Maddy’s direction.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

One of the guys laughed. ‘Well, I’m sure we can find room for a cutie like you! Budge up, Ryan, and let the girlie in.’ Lounging back cockily, legs spread wide, he patted the bench beside him. ‘Come on, honey, you can squeeze right in here.’

His mates snorted with laughter.

Calling his bluff, Maddy did what he’d suggested and snuggled in next to him, with a cheerful slap on his thigh for good measure. ‘Hey, thanks, big boy!’ she muttered throatily, and his confident smile faltered a little. She gave him a big come-on smile and a wink. ‘Pile in, girls. I’m sure these lovely gentlemen will make way for you all.’

So we moved in as one, forcing the cocky ringleader to lean forward and close his legs to make room.

‘Now, back to what we were talking about, girls. Period troubles.’ Maddy beamed around at us. ‘You’re so right, Jaz. It’s practically impossible to find a pad or a tampon that does the job properly, isn’t it?’

Jaz nodded gravely. ‘It is. My period came on totally without warning the other day and of course I was wearing *entirely* the wrong colour jeans.’

Ellie groaned. ‘Not those white ones?’

‘Oh, yes. Not a pretty sight, I can tell you.’

Fen sighed. ‘What I *really* hate is when you wake up and it all just *gushes out* . . .’

At this, the guys, looking sheepishly nervous, rose one by one and exited the sauna hastily.

And then it was our turn to collapse into fits of laughter . . .

After a delicious lunch in the spa café, we lay on special massage beds for a while before heading off for our mud wrap treatment.

‘It’s supposed to relax and detoxify you,’ explained Maddy. ‘And they wrap you in clingfilm which makes you shrink.’

‘Bring it on!’ said Fen, who was still struggling to fit into her pre-baby jeans.

Ellie laughed. ‘How much shrinkage are we talking about here? I can’t afford a whole new wardrobe.’

We were ushered in pairs into the treatment rooms. I went in with Jaz and our therapists were lovely, settling us onto the beds and talking us through the whole process. The mud felt chilled as it was smoothed on all over. We both got a temporary fit of the giggles when it came to being cling-film-wrapped, but the therapists smiled and took it all in their stride, clearly well used to this reaction.

Later, we were all walking through the reception area, on our way out to the cars, when the receptionist, Avril, caught up with Maddy. ‘There’s been a delivery of flowers . . . they’re behind the desk.’

‘Ooh, how lovely!’ Maddy’s eyes shone. ‘Of course, Jack and I first met at a spa, so he must have thought he’d surprise me and –’

‘Actually, they’re for someone else in your party?’ Avril murmured apologetically. ‘Aurora Sunshine?’

I turned, indicating that it was me, and she smiled. ‘What a lovely name! Yes, a bouquet has just arrived for you.’

‘Ooh, Rori, I wonder who they’re from?’ grinned Jaz, and I blushed. The mud treatment had relaxed me to the extent that I’d found myself telling the girls all about Kurt as we’d chilled on loungers by the pool afterwards.

‘Rori and Kurt sittin’ in a tree,’ chanted Maddy, apparently already over her disappointment that the flowers weren’t for her. ‘K.I.S.S.I.N.G’

Ellie laughed. ‘How old are you, Maddy? *Five?*’

Flushed with pleasure, I took the extravagant bouquet Avril was holding out to me and gazed at them. ‘Wow! They’re

gorgeous.’ The delicate ivory roses and green foliage were the perfect foil for the beautiful hellebores in the centre, in delicate shades of purple and lavender.

Avril smiled. ‘Lucky girl.’

‘Is there a card?’ asked Maddy, her nose practically buried in the expensive-looking blooms.

‘Doesn’t appear to be,’ I murmured. But my heart was singing because I knew they must be from Kurt. Who else?

As we left the spa, I texted him to thank him.

But a minute later, I received a message back from him: *I’d love to claim the flowers were from me but sadly not. You must have another big admirer. Kurt x*

I swallowed hard, stopping in my tracks on the way to Jaz’s car. They weren’t from Kurt? *So who . . .?*

I shivered. The hellebores in the bouquet had taken on a sinister meaning now. Who could they be from? The obvious candidate would be Nash – except how on earth would he know where I was today?

The flowers had to be from someone who knew I loved hellebores. So at a stretch, that had to include Saul, although I couldn’t imagine a man who was so into nature and wild flowers sending a bouquet full of hothouse blooms. Plus, he wouldn’t be sending me flowers, full stop. We got on brilliantly, of course, but just as friends. I’d never felt any kind of romantic spark between us.

Could the sender be Skye? To thank me for letting her stay? Maybe. Although it didn’t really seem like something she would do.

Apart from Kurt and my family, Janey was the only other person who knew I was at the spa today; I’d sent her a text to tell her about my unexpected treat. And Cal, of course, who I’d emailed to apologise in advance for missing the class.

In the end, I had to give up and leave the mystery unsolved for a while longer as I chatted to Jaz on the way home and she delivered me to Sunnybrook High Street.

I was about to step into the village store to buy milk, carrying my lavish bouquet over one arm, when a familiar voice behind me said, ‘Hey, are they for me?’

As my insides rolled over with shock, I turned to find myself face to face with Nash . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

‘Actually, I’ve changed my mind,’ I muttered, turning and walking away from the shop.

But I could hear his footsteps behind me.

‘Rori? How are you? Hey, why are you running away?’

I turned. ‘Did *you* send me these flowers?’ I glared at him challengingly, daring him to lie to me.

He looked bemused for a second. ‘Er, no. Why would I?’ Then he grinned. ‘Maybe I should have said yes to get back into your good books. But then again, I don’t think Shirley would be too pleased. Eh, Shirl?’ He smiled at someone over my shoulder.

I turned to see a slender woman dressed in blue jeans and a green bolero-style jacket. She looked to be in her late twenties, her neat blonde topknot emphasising her pretty, elfin features.

‘What’s that, Nash?’ she asked, coming over with a smile.

‘This is my ex, Rori. Someone sent her flowers but she doesn’t know who they’re from.’

Shirley laughed. ‘Well, they wouldn’t be from Nash, that’s for sure. He’s far too tight to buy a bunch as gorgeous as that.’ She looked teasingly at him and he made a fake shock-horror face at her.

‘So how are you anyway, Rori?’ he asked, turning to me.

‘I’m . . . okay.’ He’d no doubt be on his best behaviour with his new girlfriend present. But I wondered if Shirley had found herself the target of one of his rages yet? If not, the poor girl was in for a shock when it happened. ‘I’m . . . settling in quite well here, actually,’ I added cagily.

Nash nodded. ‘Good. I’m really glad to hear it. I . . . erm . . .’ He hesitated, shuffling his feet. Then he looked up rather sheepishly. ‘You might be interested to hear that I decided to go back for more anger management counselling. I realised I didn’t give it a proper go the first time.’

‘Oh, right. Well, good for you.’

‘Just had my fifth session and it’s going really well.’ He looked at Shirley, who smiled and nodded encouragingly at him.

I stared at them, my mind in a whirl at this news. Nash was having more counselling and it was apparently working? Why didn’t he stick at the sessions when he was with me? I felt quite angry thinking about it. All the bad behaviour I’d put up with from him – and now here he was, calmly telling me how he was getting his life together at last. Well, this Shirley woman was very welcome to him. Very welcome indeed!

‘I . . . saw you the other week, actually. You were driving away from my flat in a tearing hurry,’ I said, challenging him with a hard stare to deny it. I glanced quickly at Shirley, realising I might have put my foot in it with her.

But it was Shirley herself who explained. ‘Yes, Nash has had a bag of your belongings at his place for ages – well, since you left – and once he found out where you were living, I kept saying he should return them to you.’ She smiled. ‘So he did. Better late than never, I suppose.’

‘A bag of my stuff?’ I turned to Nash. ‘How did you find out where I was living? When I was at Milo’s, I mean?’

He grinned. ‘Bit complicated. I spoke to your Auntie Christine and explained I still had some of your stuff and she said you were staying with a guy called Milo who ran a roastery-style coffee shop in Sunnybrook. She wouldn’t tell me any more. I think she regretted even telling me that. But it was easy enough, once I found out Milo’s surname in the café, to find his address on the electoral roll.’

‘So those nights you came to Milo’s looking for me, it was to return my stuff?’ I frowned, not quite sure I believed this.

He nodded. ‘And I wanted to make sure you were okay as well. You ran off into the night and I felt bad that we never got to say goodbye properly. I don’t think you were in the first time I called at Milo’s and when I went back the second time, the woman there – Jaz, I think her name was? – seemed to

think you'd moved to Cornwall. She didn't have an address for you, so I didn't think there was much point leaving the bag with her.' He shrugged. 'I couldn't believe it when I mentioned your name to a business contact of mine in passing –'

'Kurt.'

'Yes, Kurt. Nice fella. He told me he lived in Sunnybrook and I said I knew someone who'd recently moved there but I hadn't been able to track her down. And obviously he knew you were in the flat above the café. I told him we'd been really good friends, you and I, and I was desperate to get back in touch with you.' He gave a guilty grin. 'I left out the fact that you were my ex. He probably wouldn't have been quite so forthcoming with the information if I'd told him that.'

'Right.' I shook my head at his cheek. 'Very sly.'

'Got results, though,' he said cheerfully.

'So where's my bag of stuff now?'

'You didn't get it?'

'Nope.'

'But I dropped it at Janey's.'

'At Janey's? When?'

'Same night I went to your flat and you weren't in.'

I stared at him. Janey had never mentioned Nash dropping off a bag for me, and I'd seen her a few times at art classes since that night. Had she forgotten about it? It seemed unlikely. Maybe Nash was lying. I really wouldn't put it past him, pretending to be all nice and friendly and obliging with my stuff in front of his new girlfriend!

'Right, well, I'll ask Janey next time I see her.'

Nash nodded. 'Good. Well, we'd better go. Shirl's promised to cook steak tonight as a reward for me getting through another scary counselling session.'

Shirley smiled at me. 'He's just joking. He's actually fully committed to the sessions. Even quite enjoys them, don't

you?’ She punched him playfully on the arm and Nash pretended to be wounded, then wrapped his arm around her. It was all quite sickening, really, and I couldn’t wait to get away.

Shirley seemed nice, though. And I found myself hoping she had a better time of being with Nash than I did.

But as for thinking it was Nash doing all those weird stalker things . . . lurking in the garden and leaving a single hellebore on the doormat, following me in the dark on the way back from the railway station, and sending me a creepy bouquet with no message?

It was fairly obvious after that astonishing encounter that it wasn’t Nash at all. He’d moved on with his life. He was having counselling. He seemed happy with his new girlfriend.

But if it wasn’t him, who the hell was doing all these creepy things?

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Why would Janey hold onto my bag?

The question kept me awake that night. Was it possible that *she* could be my stalker? But it didn't make sense. Why would Janey want to scare and unsettle me? When Lance had suggested she was jealous when Nash started seeing me, she'd been uncharacteristically abrupt in her denial, I'd thought. But maybe that was it. Maybe Janey had never really got over Nash and had resented me for taking her place in his life?

Was she doing all these things to freak me out and get her own back because I'd 'stolen' Nash from her?

I decided to give her a quick call and ask her about the bag . . .

'Bag? What bag?' was her puzzled response.

'Nash says he dropped it off with you when I wasn't in?'

'Well, he didn't. If he'd given me your bag, I'd have handed it over to you at the next art class.'

I nodded. 'I know you would. It's so weird.'

She laughed. 'Are you sure he hadn't had one too many whiskeys? Maybe he just *imagined* he'd given me your bag.'

'Weird.'

And it really was. Had Nash been lying about it, then? But why? He'd gone to a lot of trouble to track me down, but according to him, it was because he wanted to make sure I was okay, and to return my belongings. But maybe the 'good guy' act was all just for Shirley's benefit?

Or was it Janey who was the liar? She always came across as sunny and friendly, and it was hard to believe she might have a dark side. But maybe everyone did.

My head was spinning. I felt more unsettled than ever now, not knowing who I could trust.

‘How’s things with Skye?’ Janey asked. ‘Is she still kicking her shoes off in the hall when she gets in and leaving them there for you to trip over?’

‘Actually, she’s gone to stay at Ada’s . . . our mother’s house. So I’ve got the place to myself again.’

Afterwards, I thought about Skye and how irritating it had been at times, having her sharing my space. But how, now that she’d gone, I was really missing her company . . .

After the call, I busied myself making dinner, although I only managed to eat half of the fish pie. It was one of my favourites but my appetite seemed to have vanished along with my certainty.

Who could I trust when all these weird things were happening to me?

I was at a loss to know and it wasn’t a good feeling.

When the buzzer sounded around seven, just as the light was fading, it was almost as if I had been expecting it. I sat there on the sofa, determined to ignore it, and whoever it was buzzed another three times in quick succession.

At the same time, though, I was desperate to know who it was.

And then I heard a rattling sound.

My heart in my mouth, I paused the TV and listened. And there it was again. A rattling, like stones being thrown at a window. My bedroom window. I crept next door and – leaving the lights off – went to the window and peered out over the back garden.

Fear surged into my chest, stopping my breath.

A dark figure was standing there, in the centre of the lawn, staring up at me.

Instinctively, I stepped back from the window and hid behind the curtain, peering through the narrowest of gaps. But I couldn’t see the face properly in the gloom.

I reached for my phone in my pocket. It was time to call the police for help . . . to report an intruder in my garden . . .

And then suddenly, the figure moved and the face came into view. He waved up at me.

It was Lance!

A feeling of sheer relief rushed through me.

I hurried to the door . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

‘Come up, Lance,’ I gasped into the handset, letting him in when he buzzed again. ‘Thank goodness it’s you. I just didn’t know . . .’

‘On my way up,’ came the reassuring reply. ‘Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine.’

My legs were shaking with relief as I heard him taking the stairs two at a time. It was all too much. But at least now I could tell Lance everything that had been happening to me . . . explain why I’d turned from a once reasonably grounded, logical person into a quivering wreck half the time. Was my traumatised mind seeing monsters that weren’t even there? I didn’t know what to think any more. When I tried to puzzle it out, my brain seemed to just go round and round in circles of confusion and fear.

If anyone could make sense of it all, calm me down and give me some perspective, I was certain it was Lance . . .

I pulled open the door and he was standing there already, barely out of breath. I remembered he was a regular gym-goer and how I used to enjoy our chats in passing when I’d been a member of the same Guildford leisure club for a while. When I was wrecked and in despair after another battle with Nash, Lance had always seemed such a calming presence.

‘Hi! Come in. Sorry, Lance, you must think I’m a total weirdo not answering the buzzer and then peering out into the garden at you so suspiciously, but honestly, I think I might be going mad!’

His eyes were gentle as he guided me back inside, his arm around my shoulders, and led me to the kitchen.

‘It’s okay. It’s going to be okay,’ he murmured. ‘I’m going to make you some tea and you can tell me all about it.’

I nodded gratefully and sank down on a chair. ‘I feel so stupid talking about it, but the weirdest things have been happening lately.’ I sat forward, elbows on the table, digging my hands despairingly into my hair. ‘It started when I arrived

here, in Sunnybrook. I kept getting the creepy feeling I was being followed . . . that someone was out there, watching me. And then one night I saw a dark figure in the back garden out there, staring up at my bedroom window. At least, I *thought* I did, but then I started to think that maybe it was my mind playing tricks on me – you know? After everything that happened with Nash?’

Lance clicked the kettle on, fetched two mugs from the cupboard and turned. ‘Rori, you’re not going mad. Believe me. You’ve obviously been through a terrible time with Nash and maybe that’s colouring how you see the world right now. That’s all.’ He smiled. ‘You definitely don’t need to worry about your sanity.’

‘You think not?’ It was a genuine question.

He reached over and laid a calming hand on my shoulder. ‘Definitely not,’ he said and went back to making the tea.

I sighed, only partly reassured. ‘But other things have been happening to me, Lance. Like someone left a flower on my doormat.’

‘Lucky you.’

‘No, but I don’t think it was a *romantic* gesture. It was creepy because it was a single hellebore.’ I shrugged. ‘Hellebores are flowers that bloom –’

‘At this time of year. Yes. Nowadays, they represent serenity and peace, although in Victorian times, they signified delirium and madness.’

I groaned, watching him remove the teabags. ‘Well, that would make sense, judging by how my grasp on reality seems to be eluding me these days.’

He placed a mug in front of me with a smile. ‘Tea with just a splash of milk and one and a half sugars.’

‘Thank you.’ I took a grateful sip. ‘Well remembered.’

He sat down opposite with his own tea. But instead of drinking, he leaned back in his chair and studied me with a sad

little smile. ‘You really have been through the mill, haven’t you?’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ I shrugged. ‘I just wish I knew who sent me the bouquet at the spa because it had to be someone who knew that hellebores were my favourite flowers. I’ve been painting them at my art class with Janey, and I was even worried it might have been Cal, our teacher.’

Lance frowned. ‘I can see why you might be worried. But maybe the hellebores were from a true admirer. Someone who’s liked you from afar?’

‘But if you like someone, surely you try to get to know them . . . talk to them. You don’t do things like leave a single hellebore on the doormat. That’s just plain creepy.’

‘Perhaps they just wanted to cheer you up?’ He shrugged. ‘It might be no more dark or complicated than that? Everyone knows you’ve been through a really bad time with Nash.’

‘That’s true.’ I smiled at him. His presence was calming me down. I was starting to feel better. And I liked that he understood and didn’t think I was actually going crazy with all my suspicions. ‘I didn’t know you were into gardening, by the way. I thought *I* was the only one who knew about hellebores!’

‘Ah, well, there’s a lot of things you don’t know about me that might surprise you.’

I smiled. ‘Janey always claims she’s the gardener in your house.’

‘Just because I hate cutting the lawn doesn’t mean I can’t be interested in plants. And I can really understand your fascination with hellebores. They . . . give the appearance of being shy and rather delicate. And yet they’re hardy enough to survive the harshest of winters.’ He smiled. ‘Like you.’

I laughed. ‘Like me? I wish that was true.’

‘It is.’

‘Well, I’ll take that!’ I grinned. ‘Although I’m not sure I’ve been surviving this particular winter very well.’ I frowned, something occurring to me. ‘Sorry, I’ve been rambling on

about my pathetic story, but I haven't even asked why you're here? Is Janey all right?' I asked in a sudden panic.

'Janey's fine. She mentioned that you . . . seemed a bit shaky the other day and could probably do with some company. So I thought I'd pop in as I was passing and make sure you were all right.'

'That's so thoughtful of you,' I said gratefully.

'Janey thinks you ought to get out a bit more instead of being alone with your thoughts. Which is why I'm here to tempt you to stray beyond these four walls. Staying in every night can be dangerous.'

I nodded sheepishly. 'Very dangerous. You start thinking all sorts of mad things. Like someone's stalking you!'

He frowned. '*Stalking* you?'

'Well, that's what it's felt like.' I stared at him, feeling suddenly unsure of myself. Hadn't he been listening to what I'd told him? But he was right, of course. Stalking was far too emotive a word to use when I didn't actually have a clue what was going on . . .

'Is that what you really think this is? *Stalking*?' He shook his head. Then he said abruptly, 'If that's the case, Rori, maybe you should phone the police.'

'I did think about it. But ...'

'But then you realised you were being a touch melodramatic?' He sat forward on the chair, studying my expression. He seemed suddenly tense.

My heart sank. It seemed like he was revising his opinion of my state of mind . . . and thinking that I was clearly crazy, after all!

I shook my head, trying to make light of it. 'I'm not being stalked. Of course I'm not. As I said, it sometimes . . . felt like that.'

He nodded slowly and relaxed back.

‘So . . . what have you and Janey got in mind for me?’ I asked cheerfully. ‘I must admit, I do like the idea of getting out of the flat more often in the evenings.’

He smiled broadly and slapped his thighs. ‘Excellent. Let’s go, then.’

‘Now?’

‘There’s no time like the present.’

‘I’d better get changed.’

He grinned. ‘Now you’re just making excuses.’

‘No, I’m not. I just feel . . . well, I’ve been wearing these things all day.’

‘Rori, you’re perfect as you are.’ He got up. ‘Come on. Let’s go.’ In the hall, he called back to me. ‘I’ve got something very special in mind for you.’

‘Ooh, nice. Okay, I’ll just grab my coat and I’ll be down in a minute.’

He was waiting for me outside, holding the passenger door of his car open like a chauffeur and we both laughed.

‘I thought we’d just be walking over to the Swan for a drink?’

He smiled mysteriously. ‘It’s somewhere more special than that.’

‘But what about Janey?’ I assumed we’d be picking her up on the way. ‘I’ll sit in the back seat, shall I?’

‘Janey’s at her mum’s tonight.’

‘Oh, of course she is. She told me she was staying over when I spoke to her earlier. I’d forgotten about that.’

‘So, Rori . . . your carriage awaits.’ He gave a formal bow, and I smiled and slid into the seat. I felt a twinge of uneasiness that Janey wasn’t with us. But I told myself not to be so ridiculous. Janey and Lance were *both* my friends.

I socialised with Janey on her own all the time at the art classes.

Why should having a drink with Lance be any different to that?

CHAPTER THIRTY

I'd assumed we'd be driving out to a different pub. Perhaps the one in Buntingford, where he and Janey lived.

But when we came to the high street, he turned in the opposite direction.

'So come on, tell me. The suspense is killing me. Where are we going?' I asked with a smile.

'Patience. You'll find out.' He glanced in his rear-view mirror, indicated, and turned into the petrol station. 'Back in a minute,' he said, getting out to fill up.

I smiled at him through the window, trying to ignore the uneasy feeling inside. Why was I being so ridiculous? He probably needed petrol anyway. It didn't mean we'd be driving a long distance, did it? All the same, I wished I knew where we were going . . .

Something caught my eye . . . a flash of pink in the side compartment of the driver's seat. *Was that my scarf?* I hadn't seen it for a while. I thought I'd left it at the house when I fled. But maybe Janey had one the same.

Lance got back into the car and we drove away in silence. I could feel a tension that hadn't been there, back at the flat, and the uneasy feeling increased.

'Is . . . that my scarf?' I asked, keeping my tone light.

'This?' He held it up. 'Yes, I was going to give it back to you. There you go.'

'You found it?'

'Yep.'

The scarf felt butter soft in my fingers. Maybe I was mistaken and I'd left it at Janey and Lance's when I was over there for dinner that time? 'So come on, then.' I pasted on a smile. 'Why be so mysterious? Tell me where we're going.'

He looked at me. 'You mean you still don't *know*?'

'Er, no. Why should I?'

‘It’s our special place, Rori. You surely can’t have forgotten?’ His expression was stern, almost angry, and a chill ran through me.

Our special place?

What on earth was he talking about?

‘No . . . I’m sorry, Lance, but I’ve no idea.’ I was frantically running through in my mind all the places I’d been to with him. There weren’t exactly many. The gym . . . the local pub when we were all living in Guildford . . . *where else?* ‘I mean, it could be one of a few places, couldn’t it?’

‘So you *have* forgotten!’ He thumped the steering wheel and accelerated hard, which jerked me right backwards in my seat.

The shock of his reaction was like a punch to the stomach.

Now I was scared.

Lance was clearly angry with me, for whatever reason, and all the old feelings of panic were surging up inside me. I needed desperately to get out of the car, but we were speeding along much too fast, and I knew instinctively that anything I said to try and calm him down would be useless. When Nash was angry, there was nothing I could say that would pacify him. If anything, it would actually intensify his fury. I’d learned that staying quiet was the quickest way to end the torment.

But my silence only seemed to be irritating Lance.

‘Christ, what *is* it about women?’ He made a growling sound deep in his throat. ‘I mean, you do your best for them. You treat them with kid gloves because the female sex are generally more sensitive than we are. You provide a shoulder to cry on, and you try to understand them when they start talking illogically and behaving in ways that quite frankly are sometimes bordering on hysterical. But you forgive them that because they’re different, so you listen and you sympathise and you reassure them that you’ll always be there for them. But is that enough to convince them that you’d be worthy of their devotion? Of course not. It’s still the bloody macho oaf that they fall for, even while knowing deep down that the

relationship is never in a million years going to give them what they really *need*.’

I swallowed hard. ‘And what *do* they need, Lance?’ I asked softly.

‘They need a man who’s going to treat them right,’ he yelled. ‘Not some arrogant bastard like Nash, who only uses women for his own dodgy purposes.’

‘Someone like you, then?’

He turned and looked at me. ‘Well, *yes!* Someone like me.’

He was still staring at me, his eyes full of fury. Suddenly realising we were about to plough onto the grass verge, I yelled, ‘Watch out!’ and grabbed the wheel, only just managing to steer us back on course.

The shock seemed to break the tension and he slowed right down.

He laughed. ‘Christ, sorry about that. Without your fast reaction, we’d probably have smashed through the fence and overturned in that field back there.’

‘Yes.’ I swallowed hard, thinking that was exactly what would have happened.

But I definitely wasn’t laughing.

He seemed calmer, though, so I tried once again. ‘Please tell me where we’re going, Lance.’

He turned with a smile. ‘Tumbling Dell Waterfall. Remember now?’

‘Oh. Yes, I do.’ My mind flashed back to the day after the fire . . . Janey suggesting I needed some fresh air and a new perspective on my relationship with Nash . . . walking with her and Lance up to the waterfall, which had seemed quite a therapeutic thing to do after the horrors of the night before . . .

I glanced out into the gloom of the evening. ‘But we can’t go there now. It’s getting dark and we won’t be able to see our feet in front of us by the time we get there.’

‘Rubbish,’ he chided me gently. ‘Honestly, Rori, you’re such a little worrier. It’s only ten minutes from here. We’ll be there in no time and then it’ll all be clear to you.’

Dread was turning my insides over and over. ‘*What* will be clear to me?’

He turned to me with a calm, knowing smile. ‘That you and I were always meant to be together, of course.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I kept my smile neutral and when he turned away, I felt in my pocket for my phone. It was there, thank goodness. I had to stay calm.

Lance was obviously under the illusion that our friendship was something more. Clearly, it was – on his side. But if I was going to convince him that I had no romantic feelings for him whatsoever, I was going to have to tread very carefully indeed. I shuddered. It was ironic that Lance had claimed women were more sensitive and ‘hysterical’ than men, when he was clearly both over-sensitive and bordering on hysterical himself in his views about the opposite sex . . .

Finally, we arrived at the famous beauty spot. It was starting to get dark now and the little car park at the foot of Tumbling Dell Waterfall was deserted.

He switched off the engine and a dead silence descended. I stared straight ahead, my heart beating fast, wondering where to begin . . . how to frame my words so that I wouldn’t make him angry again. He sat back in his seat and the silence went on. I could feel him studying my profile.

Then he spoke. ‘This has been my happy place ever since we were here that time, you, me and Janey. It was the first time we really connected, you and I, on a deeper level, and I’ve known since then that this day would come.’ He shifted in his seat. ‘Come on. Let’s climb to the top.’

I turned to look at him. ‘Lance, could we talk first?’

‘Talk?’ He looked mildly surprised. ‘Yes, talking is good. What would you like to talk about?’

‘Actually, I’m not kitted out for hiking up to the waterfall. Especially when it’s getting dark like this. I’d be afraid we’d lose our footing.’

He shook his head, smiling. ‘You’re worrying again, Rori. And I keep telling you, things are going to be absolutely fine now.’

‘But why don’t we come back tomorrow? When it’s light? I’d really *love* to do the climb with you then.’ I could feel panic rising in waves within as I tried my best to sound enthusiastic.

‘No,’ he said shortly. ‘We’re doing it now.’ He moved towards me and I flinched away.

‘What’s wrong?’ He looked hurt. ‘Did you think I was going to hurt you?’

‘No. Not at all.’

‘I was just reaching for my coat on the back seat.’

‘Right.’ I looked around and I caught sight of something familiar. ‘Hey, that’s my bag of stuff. The bag that Nash tried to bring me. He . . . said he’d left it with Janey.’

‘No. He came to the house but Janey wasn’t in, so I took it and I put it in the car to keep it safe.’

‘Right. So is that how you had my scarf? Did you take it out of the bag?’ This was getting creepier by the second.

‘I did, yes.’ He shrugged. ‘You can’t criticise a guy for wanting a keepsake, can you?’

‘No. I . . . suppose not.’

‘Come on, then,’ he ordered impatiently. ‘It’ll be pitch black by the time we get to the top if we don’t set off now. And we don’t want to be stumbling around in the dark up there, do we? It’s a long way down . . .’

Lance took my hand and started leading me along the path that would take us to the top of the waterfall.

The track led steeply uphill and soon I was gulping painfully for air because he was moving so fast, dragging me behind him, my hand locked firmly in his tight grip.

‘Can we slow down a bit?’ I gasped. ‘I don’t work out like you do.’

He laughed and mercifully slackened the pace. ‘That’s true. But now we can work out together, can’t we.’

He said it as a statement, not a question, and panic buzzed in my head.

In Lance’s mind, it seemed we were already a couple. What hope did I have of persuading him otherwise?

I wanted desperately to get away from him. The thought of what he’d do at the top of that waterfall was making me feel a level of fear I’d never experienced before. But he was holding my hand so tightly. I knew he wouldn’t let me go. And he had the car keys, so where would I run to, even if I could? How could I escape from this lonely place in the middle of nowhere? I could try, but if he chased after me, he’d probably find me and I dreaded to think how he’d react . . .

Finally, we reached the top. Even Lance was out of breath by this time, and he pulled me down beside him onto a rock to rest.

I needed to talk to him . . . to make his see that what he was doing was wrong.

‘Lance?’

‘Yes?’

‘Was it you I saw in my back garden that night, staring up at my window?’

‘Of course it was. I thought you knew that. You saw me, didn’t you?’

‘But why?’

‘Why do you think? I wanted to make sure you were okay.’

‘So . . . did you follow me sometimes, at a distance? To make sure I was okay?’

‘I did. I had to make sure Janey didn’t suspect where I was going. I didn’t think she’d understand that I just wanted to protect you from harm, the way that bastard Nash was never able to do.’ He laughed. ‘You’ve no idea how much persuasion it took for Janey to agree to move to Buntingford. She wanted

to stay in Guildford, but I eventually convinced her that country living would be much better for us.'

I stared at him. 'You moved to be closer to *me*?'

'Of course.'

'And Janey knows nothing of this, obviously.'

He shrugged. 'Well, she will when she gets back from her mum's. We'll be there waiting for her and we'll tell her together.'

In the silence that followed, my head was reeling. 'You left me the single flower on the doormat,' I said grimly. 'And you sent me the bouquet at the spa.'

'Yes. I just wanted you to know I was thinking about you.'

'But Lance, I didn't even know they *were* from you. This . . . this thing between us . . . it's all in your imagination.' I took his hand and squeezed it gently. 'You do see that, don't you?'

He snatched his hand away. 'Don't do that, Rori. Just don't do it.'

'Don't do what?'

'Try to pretend you don't return my feelings. Because I know you do. I felt the connection the day after the fire. I felt it when we were *here* and I can feel it again now. And I know you do, too.'

I swallowed hard. 'But, Lance, we're *friends*. That's all. That day you and Janey drove me here and we hiked up to the waterfall, I was just so grateful to you for caring. Grateful to you *both*.'

'You said you wished Nash was more like me.'

'Did I?'

'Yes!' Anger flashed in his eyes. 'Don't make out you don't remember, Rori, because I just don't believe you.' He made the frustrated growling sound in his throat and I froze. 'I've done so *much* for you, Rori. I've done things I never thought I would. I've put myself in *danger* for you. But I didn't care

about myself. I just did it so we could be together. Like we were always meant to be. And now you're telling me it was all for *nothing*?'

'In *danger*?' A feeling of dread was growing inside. 'What do you mean, Lance?'

He laughed. 'Well, I got rid of your sister for starters.'

'You got *rid* of her? What . . . what are you talking about?'

'Well, do you really think that photographer, Gerry somebody, would have found out where Skye had run to if it hadn't been for me tipping him off?'

'What? But *how* . . . oh, God, I mentioned his name to you and Janey after art class that time.'

'You did. And I knew it was a sign, that you wanted me to handle it. He was very easy to track down and you got your place to yourself again when Skye left to stay at Ada's.' He turned. 'You should be *thanking* me instead of making it seem like I'm some kind of villain.' His tone was suddenly loaded with resentment and I recoiled.

'Look, can we just go back to the car and talk?' I begged. 'Please? I'm getting really cold sitting here. And . . . and you're supposed to be my protector.'

'Are you cold?' His tone changed in an instant. He sounded anxious, shrugging off his jacket. 'Sorry. Here you are. That'll keep you warm.' He draped it over my shoulders and I just let him do it, knowing I had no choice. Whatever I said, Lance was in charge. He would do what he wanted and there wasn't a thing I could do, except wait to find out what he had planned for me . . .

I stared miserably into the darkness, listening to the water gushing down and wondering how I was ever going to get away from this man, who was clearly living life in his imagination. My phone was burning a hole in my pocket, but I'd never be able to use it while he was sitting so close.

'You know, I never meant to destroy your paintings.' He turned to me. 'Is that what you think? Is that why you're being

so cold and aloof with me? Because you think I did it deliberately?’

‘What paintings, Lance?’ I turned to him. ‘What paintings did you destroy?’

‘Your watercolours, of course. The ones you had hanging in the summerhouse. All up in flames. Poof!’

I stared at him, my mind reeling. What was he saying?

‘Nash didn’t deserve you. I always knew that. But I also knew you’d never have the strength to leave him, and that’s why I came up with a plan to split you up for good.’

‘A plan?’ I felt nauseous. *What had he done?*

‘Yes, the fire. Mind you, at first I thought it hadn’t worked because you actually *went back to him*, even though I know you suspected Nash had started the fire deliberately.’ He turned to me with a disapproving shake of the head. ‘You really were pathetically weak back then, weren’t you, Rori?’

‘But the fire, Lance?’ The feeling of nausea was intensifying. ‘I mean . . . are you actually telling me that *you started it?*’

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

He nodded and the pride I saw in his face – that he'd committed arson for me – sent shivers of horror down my spine.

'Oh my God, you wanted me to *think* it was Nash so that I'd end the relationship?'

'Yeah.' He shrugged. 'I thought if I set fire to your summerhouse with all your paintings inside, you'd think Nash had done it out of spite because you'd threatened to leave him that night. But pathetically, you actually *believed* him when he said he must have left a cigarette burning in there by mistake but he hadn't done it deliberately.'

'I wasn't sure what to believe at the time. But now I know I should have trusted that Nash was telling the truth. It was *you* who set fire to the place. Nash did nothing wrong.'

'Nothing wrong? You were *terrified* of him.'

'I was terrified of his angry outbursts, yes. But he's getting counselling now.'

'Hold on, are you saying you'd actually go back to him if he wanted you?' He gripped my arm. 'Is that what you're saying?'

'No!'

'Are you sure? Because I wouldn't put it past you.' He put on a high, girlish voice. '*Oh, Nash is having counselling, so he'll get better and we'll live happily ever after now!*'

'No, of course I'm not saying that!'

'Really? Because I think you just gave yourself away there, Rori.'

'Lance, please let go of my arm. You're hurting me.'

'You're all the same, really, aren't you? You women? Pathetic and predictable,' he fumed, dragging me to my feet. 'There's no point trying to be a nice guy. Because it's the scumbags of the earth that always get the girl.'

The thunder of the water was growing louder in my ears as he pulled me closer to the edge. ‘But that’s not true, Lance,’ I gasped, trying desperately to resist him and stand my ground.

‘Yeah, well, you can find your own way home now, Rori, because it turns out you’re just like all the rest.’ Without warning, he let go of my arm and I fell to the ground. My heart was thundering almost as loudly as the water, as I watched him storm away, the darkness swallowing him up in a second.

Immediately, I reached for my phone. My fingers felt like clumsy sausages, they were trembling so much, but at last I located Blossom’s mobile number.

I heard it ringing.

Answer, Blossom. Please. Quick, quick!

My heart sank as her recorded message clicked in – and at the same time, I recalled her saying she was going to visit friends in London for a few days.

No!

I left a mumbled message saying I’d gone to Tumbling Dell Waterfall with Lance but he was behaving oddly. Then I quickly ended the call, knowing she couldn’t get to me anyway, being miles away in London.

Who next?

Kurt!

Fumbling with my sausage fingers, I found King Kong in my contacts. Kurt would help me. He was a nippy driver. He could be here in less than twenty minutes . . .

As it rang, I heard a rustling nearby ... footsteps ... *Lance was coming back!*

Answer, Kurt!

Please answer! Please, please, please!

But Lance was back, panting, standing over me, and when he saw the phone pressed to my ear, he grabbed it and ran to the top of the waterfall.

‘Lance, no!’ I called, stumbling over to reach him.

But it was too late.

I watched in horror as my only means of contact was hurled over the edge, into the void below.

Now what?

Quick as a flash, I picked up a loose stone at my feet and threw it hard at a nearby tree, wanting to distract him. It barely made a sound above the noise of the water as it made contact with the trunk, but it bounced off the tree and hit Lance on the back, and he spun round, shocked.

Taking my chance, I ran blindly through the semi-darkness, to where I could see the shape of what looked like bushes.

A place to hide!

Somehow, I managed to ease myself through the thorny shrubbery until I found myself near a tree, at which point I crouched down, sliding to the ground, my back against the trunk. Then I waited, trying to control my breathing because I was panting hard, and praying I could remain hidden. Because I knew that if Lance tracked me down here, he’d be even angrier than he was before . . .

I could hear him calling my name from time to time – he was obviously hunting for me – but after a while, he stopped shouting, and I began to think that maybe he’d given up and gone back down to the car park. I strained my ears, hoping to hear the sound of a car starting up and driving away. I wasn’t sure what I’d do next, with no phone and no money (I’d left my bag in the car) but I’d figure something out.

At least now I could breathe easily.

And then I heard it. A shiver of branches. Someone was in the bushes, moving closer.

For one wild and wonderful and totally illogical moment, I thought it might be Kurt coming to rescue me.

But then I remembered, and panic made my head spin.

I hadn't even talked to Kurt before Lance grabbed my phone and hurled it into the water. Kurt had absolutely no idea I was here . . .

And then a light shone in my face, and Lance was there, panting and triumphant to have found me at last.

'I suppose you thought I'd gone when I stopped calling for you,' he said coldly, reaching for my arm and pulling me up. 'But I wasn't going to leave you in the dark in the middle of nowhere. I'm not that cruel. Not like you.'

'I'm not cruel, either. I'm really not. Look, Lance, we need to talk and work all this out.' My words came out in a rush, tumbling over each other in my desperation. He was dragging me in the direction of the waterfall again and I knew that this time, he wasn't going to let me escape.

My foot got caught in some brambles and I stumbled and fell down hard. And then I was being pulled on my bottom over rough grasses and thorns that tore at my hands. We were on a slope, moving down, and I panicked, thinking he was about to push me into the water.

But suddenly we stopped and Lance hauled me to my feet. The water was roaring so loudly in my ears now that I could barely hear what he was shouting. But I knew with a shock of realisation exactly where he'd brought us.

We were standing on the narrowest of ledges beneath the crest of the waterfall. The ground beneath my feet was treacherous here . . . wet and slippery with moss . . . and fear and panic buzzed loudly in my head like angry bees trapped in a honey jar.

There was no doubting it. One false move and we'd be over the edge, crashing onto the jagged-edged rocks way below us.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

He took my wrist in a vice-like grip. ‘You know, Rori, I’ve imagined what this moment would be like – you and me, alone together at last.’ He gave a harsh laugh. ‘I never thought it would be like this.’

‘Look, we’re cold and wet,’ I urged gently. ‘This isn’t the place for a proper chat. So why don’t we go back down to the car and drive to a cosy pub with a roaring fire and then we can –’

‘Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!’ he ordered, and I shrank back. ‘I need to think. And anyway, it’s too late for all that. Stop trying to pretend you think we could work, because I know for a fact you’re just lying to get away from me.’ His nails were digging painfully into my wrist. ‘Once I let you go, you’ll never want to see me again.’

I swallowed. ‘That’s not true, Lance. Really, it’s not.’

‘*Stop. Lying.*’ He yelled so loudly in my ear that I flinched, lost my balance and stumbled forwards. And for a horrifying few seconds, as the tumbling water crashed in my ears and my feet slid on the mossy ledge, I knew with terrible certainty that I was going to fall and pull Lance over with me.

My heart was pounding so hard, I thought it would burst out of my chest.

Then I felt him yank me back . . . back to safety . . . and I flattened myself against the wall of rock behind us, trying to steady my breathing.

‘We could do it, Rori,’ Lance shouted above the roar of the water. ‘We could do it together.’

‘Do what?’ I stared at him. His eyes, as he gazed at me, were burning with a conviction that seemed almost joyous, and terror shot through me.

‘We’ll go over the edge together,’ he said calmly, smiling now. ‘Then all the chaos in *here*’ – he knocked the side of his head hard with his knuckles – ‘will disappear.’

He took a firmer hold of my wrist and pulled me forward, forcing me to stand next to him, on the very edge. Gazing down into the darkness, I swayed a little, feeling dangerously light-headed. And the thought crossed my mind that if I were to faint, it would be a good thing. Because then I'd feel nothing as we were falling . . .

I heard a shout in the distance. But I knew I was just imagining it because Blossom was in London and no one knew I was here.

Then I heard it again, and this time I knew it was real because I could see a powerful beam of light off to my left. Lance's beatific smile had vanished. 'Who the *hell*?' he shouted angrily, letting go of my wrist as he stumbled to the side of the ledge, staring over at the light.

My legs were trembling so much, I wondered if I'd even be able to move. But adrenaline was pumping through my system and I knew this was my chance to escape, so with a superhuman effort, I followed Lance, pushing past him and clambering up the slope in the direction of the light which was coming closer all the time.

'Rori? Over here!' It was Ada and she was scrambling down the slope on her bottom to get to me. 'Quick! Take my hand!'

Relief at seeing her was surging through me. But when I tried to grab her hand, I missed and found myself sliding back down the slope.

'Rori!' Ada sounded terrified, and I realised why next moment when I was grabbed from behind. Lance had me firmly in his grip, his hands round my abdomen, pulling me back down to the ledge, and in those terrifying few seconds, I saw Ada's face – a picture of helpless fear – as I was dragged out of her reach, back down to the ledge.

'Oh, no, you don't!' screamed another voice.

Skye?

Her voice came from behind us, and she must have taken Lance completely by surprise because his grasp on me

loosened then fell away.

I turned and he was on the ground, apparently out cold, and my big sister was standing over him, in the pool of light from Ada's powerful torch, brandishing some kind of weapon.

'Oh, thank God!' I heard Ada cry out.

I looked at Skye and she looked at me, then we both looked down in horror at Lance.

'I can't have killed him, surely?' shouted Skye. 'All I did was whack him with a branch.'

I started to laugh hysterically at that, trembling legs and sheer relief rendering me incapable of anything else at that moment.

Skye was still clinging onto her weapon. In the spotlight of Ada's beam, she looked like the heroine in a play on stage, likely a dark thriller. Then she started to laugh herself, a little hysterically. 'Do you think we should sit on him in case he wakes up?'

'Good idea.' Ada joined us, uttering a heart-felt expletive as she peered over the ledge to the gushing water below. She pulled me into a hug. 'Thank God you're safe.'

I stood there, feeling weak as a new-born kitten, in the circle of Ada's comforting arms. We hadn't hugged like this since I was about five, if ever. Tears were pricking my eyes. It was relief. But it was also raw emotion.

Ada thought she'd lost me, and her desperation was evident in the way she was holding me so tightly, as if she'd never let me go.

'Over here!' I heard Skye shout, and when Ada and I parted, we saw two figures with torches making their way towards us.

'Kurt?' I muttered in disbelief, as he reached my side.

'Help! He's getting up!' yelled Skye, but even before Kurt could react, a burly figure was lumbering down the slope to her rescue.

Nash?

He grabbed a dazed-looking Lance and with Kurt's help, frog-marched him up the bank to the path.

'Come on, mate,' I heard Nash say. 'You don't want anything bad to happen to Rori.'

Lance shook his head wearily and we followed them scrambling upwards until, to my relief, I felt the solid earth of the track beneath my feet once more.

Far below us, we watched a police car glide into the little car park . . .

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

I lay on Ada's long, squashy sofa, half-propped up with cushions, shivering under a duvet and several blankets but feeling so grateful to the people milling around me.

I'd started to shake as Kurt, his arm around me, led me down to his car, and I hadn't been able to stop on the drive back to the house.

'Hot sweet tea,' announced Skye, kneeling at my side and presenting me with a mug. 'Sounds disgusting but Ada says it's really good for shock.'

'Where is she?'

'She was making up the bed for you in the spare room but worrying it wasn't warm enough in there, so now she's on a frantic search for a hot water bottle.'

'Oh, tell her not to worry. I'm warming up now. I'll be fine.'

Skye grinned. 'You'd better make the most of all this fuss. Ada really thought you were a goner. But now that you're clearly alive and well, no doubt things will drift back to normal.'

I chuckled. 'Protest marches and shouting at vape-sucking teens on the village green?'

'Something like that. Nice to see that she's human, though, when one of her brood is in danger.'

I nodded, feeling thoroughly cosseted and determined to enjoy it.

Nash and Kurt had followed us back to the house in their cars, and I'd managed to say a quick thank-you to Nash before he left, for his part in the rescue. I still had no idea how he ended up being there at the waterfall at the critical moment, but I was hugely grateful to him, anyway.

Kurt had gone to the car to collect my bag, and when he came back in, Skye murmured, 'Right, I'll leave you to it,' and

rose to her feet. At the door, she turned and gave me a big theatrical wink.

I struggled to sit up straighter, rearranging myself on the sofa so that Kurt could sit down next to me.

He smiled. 'I hope you realise you gave me a real shock back there.'

'Did I?'

'You certainly did. Promise you won't do it again.'

'I promise.' I smiled at him, my heart beating faster at his nearness.

'Thank goodness Blossom was worried enough by your phone message to locate where you were and call the police.'

'I know. I left such a brief, garbled message. But she must have sensed that something wasn't right.'

He nodded. 'She said you sounded panicky and that you were whispering, so she couldn't work out exactly what you were saying, but it seemed weird to her that you'd go on a walk with Lance when it was already dark. She was worried the police wouldn't take the situation seriously, though. There was nothing to tell them, really, except that she thought you might be in danger. Then she remembered the friends and family locator app on her phone, and she was able to pinpoint where you were. She phoned Ada and Skye, and then me, cursing herself for being miles away in London when you needed her help.'

'But that wasn't her fault.'

'Of course not. She did brilliantly, though.'

I nodded, blowing out my breath in agreement. 'I always thought that app was a bit of a gimmick. But I've changed my mind now! If Blossom hadn't been able to tell Ada and Skye exactly where I was, using the app, I dread to think what the outcome would have been.'

I shuddered and he reached for my hand. 'Hey, don't think about that. You're safe and that's all that matters now.'

‘Thank you.’ I smiled sheepishly.

‘Blossom’s been on the phone a few times, really anxious about you, but Ada’s managed to reassure her that you’ll be fine after a good sleep and you’ll give her a call tomorrow.’

‘Great. By the way, one thing’s been puzzling me. How on earth did Blossom manage to get your number to phone you?’

‘Ah, well, it was quite clever, actually. You must have mentioned to her that I was doing some work for Nash because she called him at Hardman Homes and explained the situation.’

‘Ah, right. Bright girl, my little sister.’

He nodded. ‘To give Nash his due, he was really concerned about you. He said he’d always thought there was something a bit odd about Lance but he could never quite put his finger on it. So anyway, with the directions Blossom had given us, we both hopped in our cars and drove over as fast as we could to try and find you.’

‘Thank goodness you did.’ I nodded, fighting a huge yawn of exhaustion then giving in to it. ‘Gosh, I’m so sorry. I feel as if I’ve been hit by a truck and I might just fall asleep any moment in mid-sentence.’

‘Hardly surprising, with what you’ve been through tonight. I . . . think I’m going to go now and let you get some sleep.’

‘Really?’ I was reluctant to let go of his hand, and it seemed he felt the same because he made no move to get up off the sofa.

We smiled goofily at each other.

‘Promise me one thing?’ he said.

‘What’s that?’

‘Well, two things, actually. First, that you’ll never let anyone lure you to the top of a waterfall and make me feel that level of panic again. And second, you’ll come out with me on a proper date.’

My heart gave a little swoop of joy. ‘You’ve got a deal. On both counts.’

‘When you’re feeling better, obviously. I mean, we don’t want you falling asleep in your fish and chips.’

I chuckled. ‘Fish and chips? Aren’t I worth something slightly more exotic than that?’

‘You are.’ He grinned. ‘Lobster, at least.’

‘Actually, I’d prefer fish and chips.’

Rising to his feet, he smiled down at me. ‘Well, the choice is yours. Wherever you want to go.’

‘A surprise would be good.’

‘Right, a surprise it is. I’ll just go and find Ada and Skye and say my goodbyes.’ He opened the door and started to laugh. ‘Apparently there’s a queue forming out here to have an audience with you.’

‘I hope you’re not accusing us of fussing,’ joked Skye, coming into the room with Ada.

‘Fuss all you like! I’m thoroughly enjoying it.’ I smiled and it turned into another huge yawn.

‘Bed for you, young lady,’ ordered Ada. ‘And don’t you dare think about getting up before I’ve brought you breakfast in bed after ten!’

I laughed. ‘That’s me told.’

Kurt blew me a kiss as he left, and I allowed Ada and Skye to fuss over me a little more as they ushered me upstairs. Then I fell asleep with a smile on my face, dreaming happily of my forthcoming date with Kurt . . .

EPILOGUE

It was our first proper date, a surprise as he'd promised, and Kurt had said he was taking me out for lunch.

He picked me up in his car and I settled back in the passenger seat. He smelled gorgeous. He was wearing black jeans I hadn't seen before and a cornflower blue shirt that matched his eyes. 'So . . . where are you taking me?'

'It's meant to be a surprise.' He gave me *that* smile, which instantly started a little beat of desire pulsing through my body.

I nodded, trying to calm my breathing. 'Of course. I like surprises.'

We drove from Surrey into the countryside of West Sussex, eventually pulling up outside a little brasserie on the edge of a pretty village green.

'They do really good pasta dishes here,' Kurt said, switching off the engine, and I knew he'd chosen it specially for me because I'd told him how much I loved Italian food.

I smiled at him. 'Wonderful. Let's go.'

All the tables were taken – it was clearly a popular place for lunch – so we sat on high stools at the bar, elbow to elbow, and while we waited for our food, we chatted about *that* night and how lucky it was that Blossom had had the good sense to realise something was wrong when I left my garbled message on her phone.

'Even Skye's been full of praise for Blossom, and that doesn't happen very often.'

'Poor Janey, though,' said Kurt.

'I know. She was in total shock for a while. But she's doing okay. We met for a drink last night and we had another good chat about everything. She's moved in with her mum for now, just until she works out what she's going to do.'

‘And she had no idea that Lance was harbouring all those feelings for you?’

I shook my head sadly. ‘Or that he’d suffered from mental health problems in the past, when he was much younger. He’s getting the treatment he needs now, though, which is great.’

‘It was nice of you not to press charges.’

‘Well, I didn’t come to any harm. And Lance . . . well, he wasn’t in his right mind, was he, when he did all those things?’

‘I suppose not. Still, it was a kind thing to do.’ He nudged my arm. ‘You’re pretty special, Aurora Sunshine.’

‘Ugh, don’t!’

‘What do you mean? You *are* special.’

I snuggled closer. ‘I don’t feel very special, but thank you. No, I meant don’t say my name like that in full. I don’t know what Ada was thinking, giving us such uncommon names. Aurora Sunshine. It makes me sound like the heroine in a kiddies’ storybook! And as for poor Blossom!’

He grinned. ‘I suppose it was inevitable she’d tend gardens for a living.’

‘Skye Sunshine isn’t much better, either.’

‘I’d make the most of being a Sunshine, if I were you. You never know, one day you might have to change it to something like Crapper or Higginbottom. And anyway, I think it suits you.’

‘Thank you. Hey, I’ve just realised I don’t know *your* surname.’

He grinned. ‘Well, it’s not Crapper or Higginbottom.’

‘That’s a relief.’ A second later, I realised how that sounded and I looked away, blushing.

‘It’s boring old Sinclair.’ He frowned. ‘Why are you blushing?’

I shrugged. ‘I didn’t want you to think I was doing that thing we all did at school, writing our name alongside the surname of the boy we fancied – to see how our signature would look when we were married.’

He gave a hearty laugh. ‘That would never have occurred to me. But thinking about it, Rori Sinclair sounds okay.’

‘It does. Although I won’t be picking out china patterns just yet.’

‘Sorry?’ He looked bemused.

‘Just a joke. Ignore me.’

The food, when it arrived, was heavenly, and we ate every morsel of our linguine pasta with garlicky prawns.

I was having such a lovely time, I didn’t want our day to end. So I was delighted when he suggested we call in to see his sister, who lived nearby. I remembered him telling me about Laura’s restaurant and the glamping pods. Being involved in the same sort of business with Milo and Ellie, I was excited to see what Laura and her husband had done.

So we drove over to Willowbank Farm, where – according to their colourful website – they offered overnight accommodation along with a barn-style restaurant specialising in home-grown, seasonal produce.

Kurt took me straight into the restaurant kitchen, where Laura and Tony were buzzing about, gearing up for the evening’s service, and I warmed to them instantly. They both spoke passionately about their commitment to growing their own fruit and vegetables, which they harvested daily, and which Laura turned into a delicious menu each evening.

Leaving them to get on, Kurt took me on a tour around the four-acre site, which – as well as the restaurant – included a small lake, backed by woods, and a dozen wooden glamping pods dotted around, some with views over the water and others nestling romantically among the trees.

He paused outside one of the pods, which overlooked the lake, checking the number. ‘Laura said this one’s empty at the moment. So I can show you inside if you like?’

‘Ooh, yes please.’ I smiled. ‘You do realise I’m making notes in my head to take back to Milo and Ellie.’

‘I thought you might. In fact, that’s kind of why I brought you here. I knew you’d be interested in the glamping side of the business.’

‘Thank you,’ I said shyly.

‘You’re welcome.’

From the outside, the pod looked like an enormous upturned rowing boat with an arched roof. Inside, the decor was simple but beautiful. A log burner, small sink and hob, and a two-seater sofa occupied the front, as we entered. And beyond, tucked at the far end, was a double bed dressed with fresh white linen and lots of pillows. A little pot filled with lavender sprigs sat on the little sill beneath the single window.

‘This is lovely,’ I murmured, looking around. ‘Milo and Ellie were thinking of electric panel heaters for the pods they’re planning to add to the site, but I have to say, the log burner looks stunning. I think people would pay a bit extra to have that kind of cosy comfort, don’t you?’

Kurt nodded. ‘I agree. It might be worth the initial outlay.’

‘Do you think Laura and Tony would mind if I took some photos to show Milo and Ellie?’

‘No, not at all. Snap away.’

So I did, and as we left the pod, a little sigh escaped.

‘You okay?’

‘Yes. It’s just so lovely here.’

‘You haven’t seen the kitchen garden yet. Come on.’

He took my hand and we walked by the lake and through the trees to the back of the restaurant.

‘This is the old walled garden,’ said Kurt, opening a wooden gate and ushering me inside. ‘It dates from the beginning of the last century. The original house is long gone, but Laura and Tony have restored the kitchen garden.’

‘Oh, this is lovely!’ I gasped, gazing around me.

A large square plot in the centre of the garden had been given over to spring vegetables, the green shoots unfurling through the soil in neat rows, and beside that, a series of wooden-sided raised beds held an abundant and colourful display of herbs and different varieties of salad leaves. On the far side, a row of fruit trees was bursting into life, the young leaves a vibrant green against the mellow orange-red bricks of the old wall surrounding the garden.

‘I bet the food Laura makes with all this fresh produce is fabulous.’

‘It’s pretty special,’ agreed Kurt. He smiled down at me and took my hand, and we wandered around the garden, enjoying the feeble warmth of the March sun on our faces and breathing in the fresh country air.

‘Lettuce,’ remarked Kurt, pointing at a raised bed.

‘Er, you’re right, it is. Lots of it.’

‘No, but I brought you here specially.’ He leaned closer, slipping his arm around me. ‘I thought it would be quite a romantic thing to do.’

I laughed, loving the feel of his hand on my waist. ‘Okay, so you think *lettuce* is *romantic*?’

He grinned. ‘It was how we met, remember?’

‘We met when I knocked over your bin.’

‘And you ended up with lettuce in your hair.’

‘Ah, yes! Lodged behind my left ear, if my memory serves me correctly.’

‘Wasn’t it your right ear?’

‘No. I’m sure it was the left.’

‘Need to get the story straight in case we end up having to tell the grandchildren.’ His eyes sparkled with mischief. ‘Like you do.’

‘Grandchildren! Heavens, Kurt, have you ever heard of taking things slowly?’

He smiled. ‘Happy to take things slowly. Or at any pace you like, really.’

‘Nice.’ I turned to him, reaching up on tip-toe to plant a kiss on his extremely kissable mouth. ‘Slowly. But not *too* slowly,’ I murmured with a cheeky smile.

‘Interesting.’ He moved closer, our bodies together, and a shiver of desire rippled all the way through me. ‘So would it fit with your timescale,’ he said, ‘if I were to kiss you properly, right here, right now?’

‘You’re saying my kiss wasn’t proper?’

His mouth curved into a smile. ‘It was a good kiss. But I think we could improve on it, don’t you?’

‘We could give it a try.’ I shrugged, feigning nonchalance on the outside, while on the inside my heart was beating a frantic rhythm at the feel of his body next to me. ‘I mean, with all this lettuce here as a reminder of that very first leaf we shared . . .’

‘Behind your right ear.’

‘Left. It was most definitely the –’

He silenced me then with a long, soft, lingering kiss, and when we pulled apart, I started to laugh.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Nothing. I’m just . . . happy,’ I said truthfully.

‘Me, too.’ He glanced away at the horizon, a funny little smile on his lips. ‘So . . .’ He turned back to me. ‘How happy would it make you to find out that we’re dining here tonight?’

‘What?’ I stared at him. ‘Tonight? Dinner in the restaurant?’

‘Yup. It’s all booked. The food’s fabulous and the wine list is amazing.’

‘Wow. That would be wonderful.’ Then I thought of something. ‘You won’t be able to sample the wine, though.’

You're driving. Unless you trust me to drive your car back?'

'No need. I've booked a glamping pod as well – if you don't mind sharing?'

I stared at him, my heart racing with excitement. 'You kept all this a secret?'

'I told you. I wanted to surprise you.'

'Well, you've done that, all right. And I definitely don't mind sharing. As long as it's you I'm sharing with, of course.'

'Ha ha.'

'So which pod is ours?'

'You've already inspected the inside of it.'

'*That one?* Overlooking the lake? But it's gorgeous.'

'I know. Just like you.' He grinned sheepishly. 'At the risk of turning you off me with the corniest line in history.'

Laughing and feeling myself practically bubbling over with joy, I shook my head. 'Never. So . . . dinner in the restaurant? How lovely.'

He nodded. 'Eight o'clock. Actually, I'm still full from lunch. How about some exercise to work up an appetite? There's some glorious walks around here.'

'Sounds good. Or . . . we could get acquainted with our glamping pod a little more?' I murmured, feeling unusually daring for me.

He narrowed his eyes at me. 'We could,' he said carefully.

I shrugged. 'I mean, there are *other* things we could do to get some exercise, apart from a country walk.'

'True. You mean like jogging around the grounds?' He grinned. 'Haven't brought my running gear, though, have you?'

'Nope. Thank goodness. No, I was thinking I should probably check out the furniture in the pod while I'm here . . . so that I can report back, you know?'

He nodded seriously. 'Would that be beds in particular?'

‘Well, yes. Beds can be tricky. They need casters, really, so they can be moved around easily.’

‘I see. And some people like a hard mattress . . . some prefer a softer one.’

‘Exactly.’

‘I guess we could head over there now. Try the facilities out for size?’

‘You read my mind.’

‘Good,’ he said huskily, smiling down at me . . . the smile that always, without fail, turned my knees to jelly.

We moved together and he pulled me hard against him, his mouth claiming mine hungrily. My hands stole beneath his coat and I felt the hard muscles of his back through the thin fabric of his shirt, and stars seemed to be exploding overhead as we kissed with all the longing and pent-up desire we’d been feeling since our first kiss at the fair that night.

He was nuzzling my neck, murmuring my name, then returning to my mouth for the hard, bruising kisses I wanted . . . the kisses I’d so longed for. Wrapped in Kurt’s strong arms, I lost all sense of space and time . . .

At last, we pulled apart, breathless and smiling.

Kurt looped his arm around me and I snuggled into his chest, and we walked slowly through the walled garden and made our way back to the delightful pod with our names on it . . .

Coming Soon

THE SUNSHINE SISTERS: SKYE

Skye Sunshine has a theory that workmen should be seen and not heard. It's just a shame Saul, the irritatingly sexy handyman, didn't get the memo . . .

Prepare for lots of laughs and possibly a happy-ever-after!

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0CNFTKMS4>

THE SUNSHINE SISTERS: BLOSSOM

The third and final heart-warming book in the dramatic trilogy about three sisters . . .

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0CNYJZ9X1>

Dear Reader

I really hope you enjoyed Aurora's story, the first in a trilogy about the three Sunshine sisters. I loved writing it – especially the creepy bits! – and I'm hoping you'll be eager to discover more about Skye and Blossom. Their stories are just as fascinating. In fact, there are lots more shocks in store and mysteries to solve as we discover more about this rather unique family...

In the meantime, happy reading!

Lots of love

Rosie xxx

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